

BETWEEN CULTURE AND PROFESSION: SOUTH ASIAN IMMIGRANT STUDENTS'
EXPERIENCES OF IDENTITY, RACISM, AND BELONGING IN ONTARIO'S BSW
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for the Degree of Master of Social Work

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TITLE: Between Culture and Profession: South Asian Immigrant Students' Experiences of Identity, Racism, and Belonging in Ontario's BSW Programs

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LAY ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the experiences of South Asian immigrant students in Ontario who are studying social work. These students face the challenge of balancing their cultural backgrounds with the expectations of the social work profession, which is often shaped by Eurocentric and Western values. Through in-depth interviews, the study shows how students negotiate these tensions, sometimes feeling excluded or pressured to “fit in,” but also finding creative ways to resist and bring their cultural knowledge into their education. By sharing these stories, the research highlights how social work programs can become more inclusive, culturally responsive, and accountable to the diverse communities they serve. This work contributes to ongoing conversations about equity in education, the need to challenge colonial and racist structures, and the importance of recognizing immigrant voices in shaping the future of social work in Canada.

ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the cultural and professional identity formation of South Asian immigrant students in Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) programs in Ontario, Canada. Grounded in Critical Race Theory, Intersectionality, Acculturation Theory, and Professional Identity Formation, the study interrogates how Eurocentric and settler-colonial structures of social work education shape the experiences of racialized immigrant students. While existing literature highlights systemic racism and the dominance of Western epistemologies in social work curricula and practice, few studies explicitly center the voices of South Asian students navigating these tensions in Canadian contexts.

Through qualitative interviews with six South Asian immigrant BSW students, this study employs thematic analysis to explore how participants negotiate cultural expectations, institutional demands, and professional legitimacy. Findings reveal five interconnected themes: Eurocentrism in curriculum and professionalism; cultural conflict and identity fragmentation; systemic racism and institutional neglect; identity negotiation and survival strategies; and colonial residue and epistemological conflict. These themes demonstrate that professional identity formation is not merely an academic or technical process, but a deeply cultural and political negotiation shaped by race, migration, and power.

The analysis highlights both exclusionary dynamics and participants' creative strategies of resistance and reimagination. Students drew upon cultural knowledge, community accountability, and acts of refusal to contest assimilationist pressures, thereby generating possibilities for more pluralistic and decolonial approaches to social work education.

This thesis contributes to social work scholarship by amplifying the underrepresented voices of South Asian immigrant students and by situating professional identity formation within

broader structures of colonialism and systemic racism. It calls for curricular reform, equity-oriented field education, and institutional accountability that recognize and value diverse epistemologies. In doing so, it advances the conversation on how social work education can become more inclusive, culturally responsive, and socially just.

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Chapter One: Introduction

Statement of Topic and Focus

This thesis explores how South Asian immigrant students in Ontario's Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) programs negotiate the formation of their cultural and professional identities within a Eurocentric, settler-colonial academic structure. Drawing on critical, decolonial, and intersectional theories, this study examines how dominant norms around professionalism and legitimacy shape, constrain, and are at times resisted by South Asian immigrant students navigating these programs. The research focuses on the lived experiences of South Asian immigrant students (and recent graduates) as they encounter curriculum, field placements, and institutional cultures that often marginalize their ways of knowing, being, and belonging. It considers how identity is formed not only at the individual level but also within systems that privilege whiteness, individualism, and neutrality under the guise of professionalism. Professional identity formation (PIF) matters in social work because it directly shapes practice readiness, the quality of client-worker relationships, and students' capacity to navigate supervision, ethics, and institutional cultures. For racialized practitioners in particular, misrecognition during PIF is not merely an academic concern; it has implications for confidence, career persistence and retention, and for the profession's ability to deliver culturally grounded, accountable care. While this study centers South Asian immigrant students, the mechanisms it traces (whiteness-coded professionalism, epistemic marginalization, and settler-colonial logics) also shape the educational trajectories of other racialized and immigrant cohorts in professional programs, suggesting cautious transferability of insights across contexts.

In this thesis, I use 'professionalism' as a provisional, contested construct denoting the explicit and tacit norms of communication, affect, comportment, and epistemic authority that

regulate belonging and legitimacy in social work education and practice. The analysis interrogates how these norms are historically and institutionally racialized, rendering particular ways of knowing and being more intelligible, and therefore more ‘professional’ than others. In practice, adjacent notions of ‘fit’ and ‘competence’ often function as proxies for assimilation by rewarding conformity to dominant communicative and epistemic norms rather than ethical judgment, community accountability, or culturally grounded skill (Sakamoto & Pitner, 2005; Pon, 2009; Ahmed, 2012).

Vision and Motivation for the Research

This research is rooted in both scholarly inquiry and lived experience. As a South Asian immigrant and scholar-practitioner in social work, I have personally witnessed and experienced the cultural dissonance, epistemic marginalization, and emotional labour that many racialized students must navigate in professional education. This thesis emerges from a desire to create space for the voices and stories of South Asian immigrant students – voices that remain vastly underrepresented in social work scholarship and curricular discourse. The motivation behind this work lies in the urgent need to examine not just whether students feel included, but on what terms they are asked to participate, adapt, or silence aspects of themselves to succeed in a profession that often claims neutrality while upholding deeply racialized and colonial norms.

While there is a growing body of literature on racialized student experiences in higher education, there remains a notable gap in research that centers South Asian immigrant students’ identity formation within Canadian BSW programs, particularly in relation to how professionalism, race, and cultural belonging intersect in Eurocentric and settler-colonial institutional settings. Situated within a broader movement toward decolonizing and diversifying social work education in Canada, this research responds to calls for epistemic justice and

transformation (de Bie et al., 2021; George & LeBlanc, 2021). It challenges the normative standards that define professionalism and critically questions whose identities, knowledge systems, and emotional realities are centered or excluded. By engaging with participants' counter-stories and strategies of resistance, this study offers both a critique of existing structures and a vision for more relational, culturally grounded, and accountable approaches to professional identity formation in social work. This study enters, and extends, an ongoing scholarly conversation that has critiqued Eurocentrism and racialized exclusion in social work education (e.g., Sakamoto & Pitner, 2005; Pon, 2009; Razack, 2009) and documented the affective and epistemic harms experienced by students (de Bie et al., 2020; de Bie et al., 2021). By centering South Asian immigrant students' identity work in BSW programs, the thesis contributes novel empirical specificity to debates on professionalism's racialized and colonial contours.

My positionality as a South Asian immigrant scholar-practitioner shaped the study's inquiry: to ask how South Asian students negotiate belonging and legitimacy within Eurocentric programs; and to examine which curricular, supervisory, and institutional arrangements enable or obstruct that work. This standpoint also grounded a commitment to relational accountability in design, data collection, and analysis.

Research Setting and Data Collection Strategy

The study was conducted within the context of Ontario's social work education system, focusing specifically on BSW programs. This setting is significant due to Ontario's large and diverse immigrant population, where South Asians made up 10.8 % of the province's population in 2021 (Statistics Canada, 2023), and the increasing presence of South Asian students in higher education, where racialized students rose to account for 44 % of domestic enrollments in Ontario by 2021–22, with South Asian students representing 32 % of that group (Lanthier et al., 2025).

Despite this demographic reality, social work curricula and professional norms have remained largely grounded in Eurocentric and settler-colonial frameworks.

To explore the research question, I conducted semi-structured interviews with six participants who self-identified as South Asian immigrants (first-, second-, or hybrid-generation) and were currently enrolled in or had graduated from a BSW program within the past five years. These interviews invited participants to reflect on their educational journeys, field placements, and the ways they navigated tensions between cultural authenticity and professional legitimacy. Semi-structured interviews were selected for their flexibility and relational orientation, allowing participants to set the language, pace, and depth needed to articulate complex, sometimes affect-laden negotiations of identity. A sample of six participants was appropriate to the study's scope and analytic aims in this focused inquiry (which allowed for fine-grain analysis) because the group offered heterogeneous generational positioning (first-, second-, and hybrid-generation) within a shared programmatic context, enabling rich patterning across accounts without collapsing divergent experiences. The data were analyzed thematically, informed by Intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989), Critical Race Theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017), Acculturation Theory (Berry, 1997), and Professional Identity Formation literature (Trede et al., 2012). This theoretical scaffolding enabled a layered analysis of both institutional power and personal identity negotiation, illuminating the complex realities of racialized students within professional programs.

Structure of the Thesis

This thesis is organized into six chapters. Following this introduction, Chapter Two presents a critical literature review that grounds the study in existing scholarship on cultural identity, professional formation, field education, and systemic exclusion in social work. Chapter

Three outlines the methodology, including the study's theoretical positioning, sampling strategy, data collection, and analytic process. Chapter Four presents the core findings, organized around five interrelated themes: (1) Eurocentrism in Curriculum and Professionalism; (2) Cultural Conflict and Identity Fragmentation; (3) Systemic Racism and Institutional Neglect; (4) Identity Negotiation and Survival Strategies; and (5) Colonial Residue and Epistemological Conflict. These themes collectively reveal how racialized South Asian immigrant students encounter both exclusion and erasure, while simultaneously engaging in complex forms of resistance, cultural negotiation, and epistemic survival within the profession. Chapter Five offers a critical discussion of these themes, interpreting the data through the study's theoretical frameworks and returning to the research question's implications for social work education, practice, and policy. Finally, Chapter Six concludes the thesis by summarizing the key findings, offering reflections on limitations, and proposing directions for future research, practice, and policy.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Introduction

This chapter critically reviews the literature relevant to the experiences of South Asian immigrant students in Ontario's Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) programs, focusing on how cultural and professional identities are formed, negotiated, and at times, placed in tension. Drawing on interdisciplinary and social work-specific scholarship, this chapter is organized into six sections: (1) theoretical frameworks, (2) cultural identity and acculturation in immigrant student experiences, (3) professional identity formation in social work, (4) field education and curriculum barriers, and (5) gaps in the literature. By foregrounding critical perspectives such as Critical Race Theory, postcolonial theory, and anti-oppressive frameworks, this review challenges universalizing assumptions about identity development and professionalization. It highlights how whiteness, Eurocentrism, and settler colonial logics are embedded in the structures of social work education, shaping the everyday experiences of racialized and immigrant students. This review lays the groundwork for understanding how South Asian immigrant BSW students navigate complex and often conflicting identity expectations across familial, cultural, academic, and institutional spaces.

This review draws from peer-reviewed journal articles, books, and reports published primarily between 1990 and 2025. Searches were conducted through McMaster University's library databases (i.e. ProQuest, Sociological Abstracts, Social Work Abstracts, Social Science Abstracts) as well as Google Scholar. Search terms included combinations of "South Asian immigrant students," "social work education," "professional identity formation," "acculturation," "critical race theory," and "Eurocentrism in curriculum." Sources were included if they addressed immigrant or racialized student experiences in higher education or social work,

theoretical frameworks of identity negotiation, or critiques of Eurocentrism and colonialism in pedagogy. Some key gray literature such as policy reports and community-based publications was also considered where relevant to contextualize academic findings in lived realities.

Theoretical Frameworks

Understanding how South Asian immigrant students navigate both cultural and professional identity formation within Canadian social work education requires a multifaceted theoretical lens. This study draws on four intersecting frameworks: Intersectionality Theory, Critical Race Theory (CRT), Acculturation Theory, and Professional Identity Formation Theory. Together, these theories offer an integrated approach to examine how structural, cultural, and institutional forces shape students' experiences and sense of self.

Intersectionality Theory

Coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), intersectionality highlights how social identities such as race, gender, class, immigration status, and religion, interact to create unique forms of oppression and privilege. Within social work education, an intersectional approach exposes how South Asian immigrant students may not only be racialized but also positioned through overlapping identities as newcomers, women, or first-generation students navigating unfamiliar institutional and cultural terrains. This theoretical grounding resists one-dimensional explanations and allows for a more nuanced understanding of identity negotiation and marginalization (Collins, 2000; Carastathis, 2014).

In this context, intersectionality helps explore how South Asian students experience exclusion within curriculum, field education, and professional norms that implicitly prioritize whiteness and Western (specifically Eurocentric) social work epistemologies (Pon, 2009). It also enables a reading of how institutional norms fail to accommodate identities shaped by

collectivist values, intergenerational expectations, or religious commitments, which do not neatly align with individualistic professional models.

Critical Race Theory (CRT)

Emerging from legal scholarship and later adopted in education and social work, a central tenet of CRT is that racism is ordinary in that it is deeply entrenched in everyday social structures and the normal functioning of systems and institutions, rather than being unconventional (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). CRT challenges the presumed neutrality of educational structures and exposes how social work education, despite its emphasis on anti-oppression, often reproduces dominant frameworks and upholds whiteness as the invisible standard (Razack, 2009).

CRT is particularly useful in analyzing how racialized immigrant students navigate field education and classroom spaces where their knowledge, language, and cultural worldviews are often undervalued or pathologized. It brings into focus issues of epistemic injustice – where dominant norms define what counts as ‘legitimate knowledge’ – and helps interrogate how institutional responses to diversity are often superficial or performative (Ahmed, 2012). Racialized immigrant students bring a wealth of cultural and experiential expertise, which is often marginalized in dominant academic settings – furthering a form of epistemic injustice. In particular, De Bie et al. (2021) name this form of injustice as epistemic and ontological harm, when knowledge and cultural experiences are excluded from pedagogical spaces, thus reinforcing CRT’s critique of dominant institutional norms. The theory also complements intersectionality by highlighting how systemic racism intersects with professional gatekeeping practices to shape South Asian students’ educational and career trajectories.

Acculturation Theory

Whereas Intersectionality and CRT emphasize structural inequities, Acculturation Theory (Berry, 1997) focuses on the internal, psychological dimension of identity negotiation.

Acculturation refers to the process by which individuals navigate between their heritage culture and the dominant culture of their new society. Berry (1997) outlines four acculturation strategies, assimilation, integration, separation, and marginalization, each with implications for how immigrants adapt and maintain cultural continuity.

Acculturation theory is useful in understanding how South Asian students experience cultural dissonance, identity tension, or bicultural stress as they negotiate between family/community expectations and the values promoted in social work education. For example, collectivist ideals around caregiving, interdependence, and authority may come into conflict with individualistic professional norms like boundary-setting, neutrality, or self-determination. While Acculturation Theory has been critiqued for its psychological individualism, its relevance here lies in illustrating the invisible affective burden immigrant students often carry in educational institutions that assume cultural homogeneity.

Professional Identity Formation

Professional identity formation refers to the process by which individuals internalize the values, roles, and standards of a given profession (Trede et al., 2012). In social work, this often entails learning to embody competencies related to ethical practice, critical self-reflection, and anti-oppressive frameworks. However, this formation is not a neutral or universal process, it is shaped by who gets to define ‘professionalism’, whose voices are centered in curricula, and whose ways of knowing are validated or excluded (Sakamoto & Pitner, 2005).

For South Asian immigrant BSW students, professional identity formation may involve moments of conflict, adaptation, or resistance. This process is further complicated by insider-

outsider dynamics in field placements and the prevalence of dominant assumptions in case studies and pedagogy. As de Bie et al. (2021) argue, racialized and disabled students in social work education often experience not only academic but epistemic, affective, and ontological harm, raising questions about whose identities are seen as fit for the profession and under what conditions.

While Intersectionality and CRT foreground structural racism and systemic inequities, Acculturation and Professional Identity Formation often emphasize individual-level adaptation. This creates epistemological tensions: one set highlights systemic oppression, while the other risks psychologizing challenges as personal adjustment. Reflexively, my use of these frameworks acknowledges both the structural conditions and the lived, affective negotiations of South Asian immigrant students. Yet, it is important to note the limits of applying theories developed in Western contexts to diasporic realities. This study therefore engages these frameworks critically, using them as heuristic tools rather than prescriptive models, while remaining attentive to the risk of reinforcing the very Eurocentrism the project critiques.

Taken together, these four frameworks allow for a holistic analysis of South Asian immigrant students' experiences. They recognize that identity formation is shaped not only by internal processes of adaptation but also by broader systems of power, exclusion, and resistance. In centering students' narratives, this study draws on these theories to unpack how culture, race, and profession intersect to create both challenges and strategies of survival in Canadian social work education.

Cultural Identity and Acculturation in Immigrant Student Experiences

For South Asian immigrant students enrolled in Canadian BSW programs, cultural identity is not a fixed attribute, but rather an ongoing negotiation shaped by migration histories,

diasporic experiences, and the institutional norms of higher education. Cultural identity encompasses an individual's sense of belonging to particular traditions, languages, familial and community practices, and value systems (Hall, 1990). Within immigrant contexts, this identity is often challenged and reshaped in relation to dominant cultural expectations and institutions that may fail to recognize or validate non-Western ways of being.

Cultural Identity in the South Asian Diaspora

South Asian communities in Canada are marked by rich cultural, linguistic, and religious diversity, shaped by histories of colonization, partition, and transnational migration. While often grouped as a monolithic category, "South Asian" encompasses a range of intersecting identities including ethnic (e.g., Tamil, Punjabi, Bengali), religious (e.g., Hindu, Sikh, Muslim), and national (e.g., Indian, Pakistani, Sri Lankan), each carrying specific sociopolitical meanings. These distinctions are crucial for understanding the experiences of students who may navigate intra-group pressures around respectability, gender roles, and education, as well as external racialization within predominantly white institutions (Thobani, 2007).

For many South Asian immigrant students, cultural identity negotiation is shaped by intergenerational understandings of education, success, and professional respectability. These values often rooted in migration histories shaped by economic precarity and racialized labour markets may influence how students interpret their academic and career choices. However, to frame these dynamics as cultural barriers risks obscuring the structural realities that South Asian students face within social work education itself. The profession's historically white, European foundations (coupled with a persistent lack of racialized faculty, culturally relevant curriculum, and meaningful engagement with diasporic knowledge systems) can render immigrant students hyper-visible as different, yet invisible in terms of representation and epistemic recognition.

These processes of hyper-visibility and epistemic invisibility align with broader critiques of social work curriculum, which will be discussed in detail later in this chapter. Thus, identity negotiation is not simply about balancing cultural expectations, but about resisting assimilation into a professional identity that too often excludes or erases racialized subjectivities (Hall, 1990). These struggles are echoed beyond academic research. For instance, Chandrika Ghosh, in her TEDx Talk *Code-Switching: The Art of Adapting* (2025), reflects on how individuals from diasporic communities continually adjust their identity and communication to align with professional expectations in predominantly white spaces showing that identity negotiation through “code-switching” is a genuine lived reality, not only a theoretical concept. Such narratives reinforce what scholars like Hall (1990) and Bhabha (1994) theorize about hybridity and identity negotiation, showing that these dynamics are articulated not only in theory but in public community discourse.

Acculturation and Cultural Dissonance

Acculturation Theory (Berry, 1997) provides a conceptual framework to examine how immigrant students negotiate between their heritage culture and the dominant cultural values of Canadian society. Berry (1997) outlines four acculturation strategies, assimilation, integration, separation, and marginalization, each reflecting different modes of adapting to cultural difference. While integration is often viewed as the most adaptive strategy, its feasibility depends largely on institutional receptivity and the extent to which students feel their cultural background is respected.

In the context of social work education, students may face cultural dissonance when program values conflict with deeply held cultural norms. For example, the emphasis on individualism and client self-determination may sit uneasily with collectivist orientations

common in South Asian cultures, where family decision-making and interdependence are valued (Seth, 2006; Ghuman, 1991). Gendered expectations also shape how South Asian immigrant students experience identity negotiation in social work programs. Female students, in particular, may navigate multiple (and sometimes conflicting) sets of norms regarding autonomy, expression, and responsibility. While classroom participation and professional assertiveness are often encouraged as indicators of engagement and competence, these values may not align with familial or community frameworks that emphasize modesty, relational accountability, or deference to elders. Importantly, these tensions are not rooted in cultural deficiency, but in the profession's tendency to privilege Western norms of gendered behavior, often without reflection on their racialized and classed assumptions (Das & Kemp, 1997; Sakamoto & Pitner, 2005). As a result, immigrant women may find themselves negotiating layered expectations in ways that require both strategic adaptation and resilience. In other words, these students aren't just juggling home and school, they're trying to fit into a system that doesn't always recognize or respect where they come from.

These tensions are not merely theoretical but manifest in embodied and emotional ways – students may feel like outsiders in both academic and cultural spheres, leading to a sense of "in-betweenness" or hybridity (Bhabha, 1994). These tensions are not simply internal or emotional; they are often the result of systemic exclusion, where racialized immigrant students are asked to navigate programs that rarely reflect their realities in course content, pedagogy, or faculty representation. When institutions fail to affirm their experiences and knowledges, students may internalize feelings of alienation, invisibility, or self-doubt, not because they lack belonging, but because the spaces they enter were not built with them in mind (Henry et al., 2017; Ahmed, 2012).

Racialization and the Politics of Belonging

Beyond navigating cultural values, South Asian immigrant students also contend with the realities of external racialization, the process by which dominant institutions and social actors assign racial meanings to their bodies, accents, clothing, religious practices, or family structures. This process constructs them as perpetual outsiders, often flattening their cultural complexity and positioning them as uniformly “Brown” or ethnic within white-dominant academic spaces. As a result, their differences are made hyper-visible, yet their knowledge systems and lived experiences are rendered invisible or illegitimate within the institutional norms of higher education (Henry et al., 2017; Pon, 2009).

While South Asian immigrant students are racialized and marginalized within predominantly white academic and professional spaces, they are also simultaneously positioned as settlers within the Canadian nation-state. Their racialization does not negate the ways in which they may participate in and benefit from settler colonial structures, including access to land, institutions, and discourses of professional legitimacy that have historically excluded Indigenous peoples (Baskin, 2016; Tuck & Yang, 2012). This dual positioning reflects what scholars have called settler complicity, a form of participation in colonial power structures by non-Indigenous people, even when they themselves experience oppression. For South Asian students, this complicity may manifest as silence around Indigenous sovereignty, internalization of deficit narratives, or uncritical alignment with institutional norms that perpetuate colonial harm (Thobani, 2007; Tuck & Yang, 2012). However, it is important to recognize that this complicity does not always stem from willful disregard or apathy. Many immigrant students may lack the immediate capacity to engage in such critical reflexivity while navigating their own processes of survival, adaptation, and integration into unfamiliar systems (Mehra, 2020). Drawing from

Maslow's hierarchy of needs, critical engagement with structural power and decolonial responsibility often requires a degree of mental, emotional, and social security that may not be accessible to students managing precarious housing, financial instability, or familial expectations (Maslow, 1943). These contradictions are especially salient in a profession like social work, which has been deeply implicated in settler colonialism through practices such as child apprehension, welfare surveillance, and the enforcement of white professional standards (Baskin, 2016).

In addition to settler complicity, South Asian students often navigate other layered racial dynamics. Post-9/11 Islamophobia continues to shape how visibly Muslim, or “Muslim-presenting” students are read and surveilled in academic and public spaces (Nagra, 2017). Within communities themselves, internalized racism may reproduce anti-Blackness or colorism, further complicating solidarity-building and identity development (Thobani, 2007). These intersecting dynamics impact not only students' sense of belonging, but also their ability to speak freely in classroom discussions, to build reciprocal relationships with peers and faculty, and to feel confident claiming space within professional settings.

Importantly, these challenges are not purely interpersonal, they are structured by the absence of racially diverse faculty, the mainstream curriculum, and professional standards that privilege whiteness as the unspoken norm (Henry et al., 2017; Pon, 2009). When students do not see their identities, knowledges, or histories reflected or respected, they may internalize feelings of alienation or invisibility, not due to personal failure, but because the institutional space itself was not designed with their realities in mind. At the same time, many South Asian students engage in acts of quiet or overt resistance drawing on community-based knowledge, blending cultural and professional values, and building cross-racial solidarities that challenge dominant

norms. These everyday strategies complicate deficit narratives and underscore the agency students bring to their educational journeys, even within spaces that marginalize them.

Professional Identity Formation in Social Work

Professional identity formation is a central developmental process in social work education, as students move from lay understandings of helping toward embodying the values, ethics, and practices of the profession. However, this formation is neither neutral nor universally experienced; it is deeply shaped by sociocultural context, institutional norms, and the positionality of the student (Bogo, 2010). For South Asian immigrant students in Ontario's BSW programs, the process of becoming a social worker is often layered with tension, as they negotiate not only what it means to be a competent practitioner, but also whose ways of knowing, being, and helping are legitimized within that vision (Sharma, 2019; George & LeBlanc, 2021).

In Canadian social work education, professional identity is implicitly aligned with white, middle-class, Western epistemologies, often framed as objective, rational, and evidence based. These standards are rooted in historical efforts to professionalize social work through alignment with clinical psychology, social science, and state institutions, many of which have colonial legacies and continue to serve disciplinary functions in the lives of racialized and Indigenous communities (Razack, 2009; Sinclair, 2004). As a result, immigrant and racialized students may experience a disjuncture between their personal values and the dominant professional norms, particularly when relational, spiritual, or collective approaches to care are sidelined in favor of individualistic, bureaucratic, or procedural models (Sakamoto & Pitner, 2005; Pon, 2009).

For South Asian students specifically, this disjuncture can be intensified by the absence of culturally relevant frameworks within the curriculum. While social work claims to value

diversity and inclusion, in practice, this is often reduced to surface-level cultural competency training that fails to engage with structural power, colonial history, or diasporic worldviews (Pon, 2009; George & LeBlanc, 2021). Students may find themselves pressured to adopt a professional persona that requires the bracketing of culture, language, or spirituality, an expectation that aligns professionalism with whiteness and distances students from their communities and sense of self. This bracketing refers to the implicit demand that racialized students suspend or suppress aspects of their cultural identity in order to conform to dominant institutional norms, often framed as neutral, rational, or objective – standards historically rooted in white, Western epistemologies (Pon, 2009; Sharma, 2019). This process of conforming to dominant norms may be internalized as professionalism, even as it produces feelings of fragmentation, self-censorship, and role conflict.

Moreover, immigrant students are often navigating compounded identity negotiations: becoming social workers while also becoming Canadian, speaking in academic discourse while translating ideas across languages and contexts, and seeking mentorship in spaces where few racialized faculty exist. The lack of racially diverse role models and affirming mentorship can leave students without a clear sense of how to authentically integrate their cultural values with the profession's expectations (de Bie et al., 2023; George & LeBlanc, 2021). In this context, professional identity formation becomes not a straightforward process of socialization, but a contested terrain marked by assimilation pressures, epistemic erasure, and resistance (Pon, 2009; Sharma, 2019).

Yet, despite these challenges, many South Asian immigrant students engage in what Shah (2021) calls “critical hybridity”, the practice of selectively integrating aspects of dominant social work discourse while holding onto culturally rooted understandings of care, justice, and

responsibility. These students develop professional identities that are not simply oppositional or assimilative, but strategically negotiated, shaped by both institutional demands and community-based wisdom. This reworking of identity is often subtle, involving acts of translation, re-signification, or quiet resistance, forms of agency that remain underrecognized in dominant narratives of social work professionalism (Sharma, 2019; Shah, 2021).

In sum, professional identity formation for South Asian immigrant BSW students cannot be understood solely through developmental or skills-based models. It must be theorized as a process shaped by racialization, colonial history, and institutional norms, as well as by students' creative and political efforts to reconcile these forces with their own values and lived experiences. Recognizing these complexities not only challenges the universality of professional socialization models, but also opens space to imagine more inclusive, reflexive, and justice-oriented pathways into the profession (Razack, 2009; Sharma, 2019).

Field Education and Curriculum Barriers

Field education is often referred to as the signature pedagogy of social work, intended to bridge theory and practice by immersing students in real-world settings under guided supervision (Bogo, 2010). However, for South Asian immigrant students, field education can be a site not of integration, but of dislocation and epistemic dissonance. These students often encounter supervisory relationships, agency cultures, and practice expectations that reflect dominant Euro-Western models of care – models that may not align with their cultural worldviews, familial ethics, or community-based understandings of support (Sharma, 2019; George & LeBlanc, 2021).

While some schools of social work have made efforts to address these concerns (such as increasing access to diverse placement settings, providing cultural competence training for

supervisors, or integrating anti-oppressive principles) these initiatives are often inconsistent, tokenistic, or insufficiently resourced (George & LeBlanc, 2021; Pon, 2009). As discussed earlier, whiteness is often constructed as the normative professional standard, a dynamic that is reinforced in placement expectations and supervisory relationships. This is reflected in expectations around verbal assertiveness, boundary-based models of care, and narrow definitions of professionalism that privilege individual autonomy over collectivist or relational values (de Bie et al., 2023; Pon, 2009; Sinclair, 2004).

The absence of racialized field instructors or culturally responsive agencies further compounds this problem. Students may feel pressure to assimilate, minimize their cultural identity, or suppress discomfort in order to meet placement expectations and be seen as competent (Sharma, 2019; Shah, 2021). At the same time, many engage in subtle acts of negotiation such as translating cultural values into dominant discourse, educating supervisors about alternative approaches to care, or forming informal peer support systems. These strategies reflect a capacity not just to survive, but to actively reconfigure the learning environment from within, even in the face of institutional inertia (Shah, 2021; de Bie et al., 2023).

The structural constraints of field placements, particularly their unpaid nature and rigid scheduling, further marginalize racialized and immigrant students. Many South Asian students must navigate precarious housing, employment obligations, or caregiving responsibilities while meeting demanding practicum requirements. Yet these systemic barriers are frequently framed as individual time-management or commitment issues, reinforcing a neoliberal logic that places the burden of adaptation on the student rather than the institution (Drolet & McKay, 2019; O'Neill et al., 2022). This framing obscures how exclusion is baked into field education models that fail to accommodate the realities of racialized and working-class students.

In the classroom, the formal curriculum often fails to meaningfully engage with South Asian diasporic histories, epistemologies, or community struggles. Diversity is frequently addressed through tokenistic case studies, elective courses or marginal readings, while core courses remain grounded in Eurocentric perspectives presented as universal (Pon, 2009; George & LeBlanc, 2021; Sharma, 2019). This creates an epistemic hierarchy that privileges dominant narratives (around whiteness) as universal, and positions racialized perspectives as add-ons or special interest topics, peripheral to the profession's intellectual foundations. The effect is not merely academic, it is deeply personal, reinforcing feelings of invisibility and illegitimacy among students whose lived experiences are excluded from the curriculum (Sharma, 2019; de Bie et al., 2023).

Field education and curriculum also operate as key sites through which colonial logics are reproduced. Whether through the erasure of Indigenous knowledges, the valorization of Western social work models, the absence of anti-racist pedagogy, or the uncritical framing of the state as a neutral site of social good, the design of social work education often functions to prepare students to operate within state-sanctioned systems that have long been complicit in the regulation, control, and dispossession of marginalized communities (Razack, 2009; Sinclair, 2004; Tuck & Yang, 2012). For South Asian students who may have entered social work programs with altruistic or justice-oriented intentions, the realization that the profession itself can be site of harm can be destabilizing, particularly when such contradictions are left unspoken in both classroom and placement environments (Sharma, 2019; Shah, 2021).

Despite these challenges, many South Asian immigrant students find ways to resist marginalization and assert their professional and cultural identities. Some form peer support networks, advocate for more inclusive placements, or reinterpret professional values through the

lens of their own cultural frameworks. These everyday acts of resistance, though often informal and institutionally unacknowledged, represent powerful interventions into dominant modes of social work education. They reflect not only a rejection of assimilation, but also a reimagining of what social work could be – pluralistic, culturally grounded, and accountable to those it claims to serve (Shah, 2021; de Bie et al., 2023). These critiques resonate with gray literature produced outside of the academy. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's (2015) Calls to Action, particularly Call to Action #62, stress the need for post-secondary institutions to integrate Indigenous knowledge and address colonial legacies within education. For professional programs such as social work, this entails restructuring curricula to be accountable to Indigenous sovereignty and positioning educators as knowledge facilitators and co-creators rather than gatekeepers. Connecting these calls to South Asian students' experiences underscores how dominant pedagogy marginalizes diverse communities while perpetuating colonial harm.

Gaps in the Literature

Although scholarship on racialized and immigrant student experiences in higher education has grown in recent years, there remains a significant gap in literature that meaningfully attends to the nuanced identity negotiations of South Asian immigrant students in Canadian Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) programs. Existing studies often group racialized students into broad categories, such as “students of color” or “visible minorities”, without disaggregating by cultural background, migration history, or generational status (George & LeBlanc, 2021; Shah, 2021). This homogenization obscures the specific cultural, familial, and diasporic pressures that shape how South Asian students navigate their educational and professional identities and limits the development of contextually grounded supports and pedagogies (Mehra, 2020).

Research on professional identity formation in social work often assumes a linear and universal developmental trajectory, wherein students gradually internalize professional values and ethics through curriculum and field education (Bogo, 2010). However, such models rarely account for how racialized and immigrant students experience this process as one marked by contradiction and resistance, particularly when dominant definitions of professionalism are embedded in whiteness, Western epistemologies, and settler colonial values (Pon, 2009; Razack, 2009; Sharma, 2019). The literature tends to emphasize competency frameworks and skill acquisition, with limited engagement with how systemic power, cultural dissonance, and exclusion shape students' professional development (Sakamoto & Pitner, 2005).

Similarly, while the role of field education is well-documented as central to professional development, few studies critically examine it as a site of assimilation, marginalization, and epistemic tension for racialized and immigrant students. Structural barriers, such as unpaid placements, limited access to culturally relevant agencies, and a lack of racially matched supervisors, are often discussed only in logistical terms, without sufficient analysis of their racialized, classed, and colonial underpinnings (Drolet & McKay, 2019; O'Neill et al., 2022). The emotional and psychological toll of navigating these environments, manifesting as imposter syndrome, identity conflict, or self-silencing, is frequently overlooked or framed as an individual coping issue rather than a structural phenomenon (de Bie et al., 2023; Sharma, 2019).

Furthermore, much of the diversity-related discourse in social work education continues to rely on liberal multiculturalism, which emphasizes representation, inclusion, and cultural awareness without interrogating the deeper structural reproduction of whiteness, Eurocentrism, and settler colonialism within social work pedagogy (Thobani, 2007; Tuck & Yang, 2012). While frameworks such as cultural competency may offer starting points, they are often operationalized

in ways that frame racialized students and clients as “other”, rather than challenging the foundational assumptions of the profession itself (Pon, 2009; Sakamoto & Pitner, 2005). Critical theories such as Critical Race Theory, decolonial thought, and postcolonial theory, remain underrepresented in social work curricula, despite their relevance in dismantling normative logics and centering marginalized knowledges (Razack, 2009; Sharma, 2019; de Bie et al., 2023).

Finally, while South Asian students have been examined in other fields such as education, psychology, and diaspora studies (e.g., Mehra, 2020; Ghosh & Abdi, 2013), there is very limited research that explores how this group specifically navigates professional identity formation within Canadian social work programs. Given the demographic significance of the South Asian population in Canada and its increasing presence in helping professions (Statistics Canada, 2022), this absence is striking. Without targeted inquiry, the profession lacks adequate insight into how migration histories, family expectations, cultural values, and racialization shape the pathways and tensions involved in becoming a social worker.

This thesis responds to these gaps by centering the lived experiences of South Asian immigrant students in Ontario’s BSW programs. Through qualitative interviews and thematic analysis, the study examines how participants reconcile their cultural and professional identities, navigate moments of dissonance, and carve out space for alternative ways of being a social worker. By attending to both the structural conditions and the everyday acts of resistance that shape these journeys, this research contributes to a more complex and situated understanding of identity formation in social work education. In doing so, it challenges universalizing models of professional development and calls for a more inclusive, reflexive, and decolonial approach to social work pedagogy.

Conclusion

The literature reviewed in this chapter demonstrates that Eurocentrism and colonial legacies shape social work education across the curriculum, field education, and professional identity formation. These structures often position South Asian immigrant students at the margins of legitimacy, while simultaneously demanding assimilation into professional norms coded through whiteness. Yet, alongside these exclusions, scholars highlight students' creative strategies of negotiation and resistance, which open space for reimagining social work education as pluralistic, culturally grounded, and accountable to communities. Despite these insights, research that specifically centers South Asian students in Canadian BSW programs remains limited, underscoring the need for further inquiry into their experiences of professional identity formation and epistemic dissonance.

This study responds to these gaps by amplifying the voices of South Asian immigrant BSW students in Ontario. Through qualitative interviews and a critical thematic analysis, it explores how participants navigate the tensions between cultural and professional identity, and how they resist or rework dominant discourses within social work education. The following chapter outlines the methodological approach that guides this inquiry, including the theoretical foundations, data collection processes, and ethical considerations that shape the research design.

Chapter Three: Methodology

Introduction

This chapter outlines the methodological approach used in this research design. Guided by a constructivist epistemology and interpretivist framework, this qualitative study prioritizes the lived experiences and meaning-making processes of South Asian immigrant students within the context of a predominantly Eurocentric social work education. The following sections detail the research paradigm, design, sampling strategy, data collection procedures, data analysis, ethical considerations, and limitations.

Research Paradigm and Theoretical Positioning

This research is situated within a constructivist-interpretivist paradigm, which views knowledge as socially constructed and reality as multiple and subjective (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This approach aligns with the goal of understanding how South Asian immigrant students interpret and reconcile tensions between cultural and professional identities. The interpretivist framework enables a nuanced exploration of participants' perspectives, acknowledging that identity is shaped by historical, social, and institutional forces.

Informed by critical social work theory, this study draws upon intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989), Critical Race Theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017), anti-racist and decolonial frameworks (Pon, 2009; Dei, 2012), and theories of professional identity formation (Adams et al., 2006). Intersectionality provides a framework for understanding how overlapping identities (such as race, gender, class, and immigrant status) shape the lived experiences of South Asian students in BSW programs. Critical Race Theory contributes an essential lens to this study by foregrounding how racism is structurally embedded within educational systems and professional norms. CRT's emphasis on experiential knowledge and counter-storytelling supports the

centering of racialized students' narratives as a form of resistance and truth-telling. Alongside CRT, anti-racist and decolonial approaches are essential for critiquing how institutional structures, including social work education, reproduce whiteness and Eurocentric norms that alienate or silence racialized students (Badwall, 2016; Razack, 2002).

Furthermore, the concept of professional identity formation in social work offers a lens for exploring how students internalize and negotiate the normative standards of the profession – standards that may be incongruent with their cultural backgrounds or personal values. These theoretical perspectives enable a critical analysis of identity negotiation as both an internal process and one shaped by external, institutionalized discourses of professionalism and belonging.

Research Design

A qualitative research design was chosen to facilitate in-depth, contextually grounded exploration of participants' lived experiences. Semi-structured interviews were selected for their flexibility and capacity to elicit rich, detailed narratives (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). This design supports a dialogic process where participants are positioned as knowledge holders and are encouraged to reflect on their journeys through social work education and professional identity formation. While focus groups could have supported dialogic interaction among participants, one-on-one interviews were selected to allow for privacy and depth, particularly given the emotionally charged nature of identity negotiation and potential power dynamics within racialized peer groups.

Sampling Method and Participant Recruitment

This study employed a convenience sampling strategy with purposive elements. While the primary method was based on accessibility and availability, given the limited time and

resources of a master's thesis, the study also ensured participants met specific criteria central to the research focus (Palinkas et al., 2015). Participants were recruited through university-based student associations and social media platforms. A brief screening survey collected demographic information and verified eligibility. Inclusion criteria required participants to self-identify as South Asian immigrants (first-, second-, or third-generation) who were currently enrolled in or had graduated from a BSW program in Ontario within the last three to four years.

Participants

A total of six participants were selected for one-on-one interviews. Efforts were made to ensure diversity across age, gender, generation status, and institutional context to capture a range of experiences. This sample size is consistent with qualitative research aimed at depth rather than breadth, particularly within the scope of identity-focused inquiry (Guest et al., 2006). The study was situated within the context of Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) programs in Ontario, Canada. All participants attended social work programs whose curricula have been accredited by the standards of the Canadian Association for Social Work Education (CASWE-ACFTS) and provincial regulatory bodies such as the Ontario College of Social Workers and Social Services Workers (OCSWSSW). To enhance accessibility and to manage for geographic dispersion, all interviews were conducted remotely via McMaster's Zoom platform.

Data Collection

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews conducted via McMaster's Zoom platform, each scheduled for approximately sixty minutes (however lasting approximately ninety minutes). These interviews focused on how participants understood and navigated identity tensions in their social work education. The interview guide comprised of fifteen open-ended questions was designed to elicit participant stories, reflections on cultural dissonance, insider-

outsider dynamics, and moments of reconciliation or resistance. Audio recordings were made with participant consent, and the transcripts were manually reviewed and corrected to ensure accuracy. Field notes and post-interview memos were also used to document initial impressions and emerging ideas. A post-interview talk-back session was offered to participants in the form of an anonymized webinar-style presentation. While attendance was voluntary, this space was intended to share emerging findings and invite reflections. This gesture also reflected a commitment to transparency and shared meaning-making.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), was employed to analyze the interview data. This process began with familiarization with the data, followed by the generation of initial codes. The next steps included searching for themes, reviewing those themes, defining and naming them, and finally producing the report. Coding was conducted manually. Reflexive journaling and memo-writing supported analytical rigor by allowing the researcher to track evolving interpretations and remain attentive to their own positionality.

Themes were identified through both inductive approaches, which allowed patterns to emerge from the data, and deductive approaches, which were informed by the theoretical frameworks underpinning the study. Themes were developed through a recursive process of coding and reviewing data across transcripts and were named in a way that reflected both the emotional and political weight of participants' experiences. Wherever possible, themes were grounded in participant language to preserve the integrity of their narratives, for example, terms like "identity fragmentation" and "resistance" were directly drawn from recurring phrases used by participants themselves. Thematic labels were thus not only analytically informed but also participant-evocative, capturing the affective and epistemological dimensions of their stories.

Attention was also paid to disconfirming data – instances where participant narratives diverged from the dominant patterns or themes. Rather than excluding these accounts, such deviations were used to refine theme boundaries, complicate interpretations, and acknowledge internal heterogeneity within the participant group. This strategy enhanced the analytic depth and credibility of the findings by ensuring that less frequent but significant insights were not overlooked.

Guided by Intersectionality and CRT, the analysis emphasized how race, migration, and professionalism intersected in participants' narratives, focusing on silences, exclusions, and resistance strategies. These frameworks shaped the questions I asked of the data, such as: What identities or knowledges are rendered invisible in social work education? What narratives signal adaptation, erasure, or defiance? Intersectionality helped interpret how overlapping identities shaped specific student experiences, for example, when gendered expectations within family structures intersected with the pressures of professional socialization in field placements. Critical Race Theory guided the analysis of structural exclusions and discursive silences, such as when participants described needing to 'code-switch' or conceal aspects of their cultural identity to be perceived as professional, reflecting CRT's attention to whiteness as property and the pervasiveness of racism in institutional spaces (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Theories of professional identity formation were applied to trace how students internalized, resisted, or negotiated professional norms, particularly when these conflicted with their cultural or familial obligations. Anti-racist and decolonial perspectives illuminated critiques of curriculum content and pedagogical practices, particularly when participants reflected on how Eurocentric models of social work excluded non-Western ways of knowing and being. Special attention was given to

patterns related to identity negotiation, cultural dissonance, imposter syndrome, and experiences of inclusion or marginalization within academic and practicum settings.

Rigour and Trustworthiness

To enhance the credibility, dependability, and confirmability of the study, several strategies were employed. Reflexivity was maintained throughout data collection and analysis through journaling and memo-writing. An audit trail was developed to document key decisions and analytical shifts during the research process. Additionally, the researcher engaged in ongoing supervision and peer debriefing with their thesis supervisor to critically examine emerging interpretations. These practices collectively aimed to increase transparency and methodological integrity, aligning with Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria for trustworthiness in qualitative research.

Ethical Considerations

Ethics approval was obtained from the McMaster Research Ethics Board (MREB). Participants received detailed information about the study's purpose, their rights as participants, and the measures taken to ensure confidentiality and anonymity. Informed consent was obtained prior to each interview. All data was anonymized and securely stored on encrypted, password-protected devices.

Given the shared ethnic and immigrant background between the researcher and participants, potential power dynamics were carefully considered. Holding an insider-researcher position can foster trust and deeper disclosure (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009), but it also carries the risk of over-identification or assumptions of shared experience. The researcher implemented a number of safeguards to address ethical concerns, including clearly defining the scope of the study, role separation, use of pseudonyms, and participant-led member-checking.

Participants were also informed that they could withdraw at any time without consequence, and a list of community-based mental health resources was made available to support emotional well-being. Potential psychological risks were mitigated by informing participants of the nature of the questions in advance, reminding them of their right to skip any question, and offering a follow-up opportunity to review and retract any information prior to analysis. Additionally, a webinar-style debrief session was planned to anonymize participant visibility while reviewing emerging findings, thereby supporting both ethical transparency and participant safety.

Insider-Researcher Reflexivity

As a South Asian immigrant and emerging social work scholar, my own identity was intimately connected to the research topic. Navigating academic spaces in Canada while holding on to cultural values from my upbringing provided me with insights into the tensions and negotiations that the participants in this study might also encounter. This dual positionality enabled me to approach interviews with a sense of cultural familiarity, linguistic nuance, and shared social reference points. These commonalities often fostered rapport and trust, encouraging participants to speak freely and openly.

At the same time, I recognized the ethical and analytical complexities that came with being an insider-researcher. There was a risk of projecting my experiences onto participants or overlooking the uniqueness of their stories. To manage these challenges, I engaged in continuous reflexive practice such as journaling before and after interviews, discussing biases and interpretations with my supervisor, and treating participant narratives as distinct and authoritative rather than representative of my own. I made a deliberate effort to listen deeply and let the

participants' words guide the direction of analysis, rather than seeking out pre-existing narratives that aligned with my expectations.

I also made use of generative AI (ChatGPT and CoPilot) to support revision and structural clarity during the writing process. A full description of its use is provided in Appendix X in accordance with institutional policy. By acknowledging my positionality, I aimed to uphold the ethical imperative of transparency while embracing the strengths of culturally connected research. My hope is that this study reflects both the diversity and richness of South Asian immigrant students' experiences and contributes to more inclusive and reflective social work education practices.

Limitations

As a small-scale qualitative study using non-probability sampling, the findings are not generalizable to all South Asian immigrant BSW students. The use of convenience sampling may introduce bias, as individuals who chose to participate might have particularly strong or atypical experiences. Additionally, the dual positionality of the researcher as both an insider and academic may influence the interpretation of data, though reflexive practices and supervision were employed to ensure transparency and critical distance throughout the research process.

Conclusion

This chapter outlined the methodological framework guiding this thesis, including the research paradigm, design, sampling strategy, data collection, and data analysis. Anchored in a critical, constructivist paradigm, and informed by intersectional and decolonial theories, this methodology aims to elevate the voices of South Asian immigrant students in social work education. Through practices that enhance rigour, ethical safeguards, and reflexivity, the research design ensures that participant narratives are treated with integrity and analyzed with cultural

sensitivity. The findings drawn from this approach will inform a nuanced understanding of identity formation within a context that often positions Eurocentric professionalism in tension with cultural belonging.

Chapter Four: Findings

This chapter presents the core findings of this study, derived from a thematic analysis of interviews conducted with South Asian immigrant students in Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) programs across Ontario. Six participants took part in this study, each identifying as South Asian immigrants or individuals of South Asian ancestry with lived experiences navigating Ontario's BSW programs. Participants ranged in age from 21 to 50 and represented a range of immigration statuses, including first-generation, second-generation, and hybrid first-/second-generation identities. This fluidity in immigration status reflects how participants' self-understandings often exceed fixed categories, challenging binary classifications in institutional contexts. Participants also varied in educational status: while two were currently enrolled in a BSW program at the time of interview, the remaining four had graduated within the past five years. Five out of six participants had completed at least one field placement. Each participant shared their lived experiences navigating social work education, professional identity formation, and cultural negotiation. Their reflections reveal a nuanced and deeply layered account of how race, culture, colonial legacies, and professional norms shape their educational and fieldwork journeys. Table 1 below provides a summary of key demographic characteristics.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Pseudonym	Age	Immigration Status*	Ethnicity	Educational Status
Amina	28	First-generation	South Asian	Currently in BSW
Rani	47	Second-generation	South Asian	Graduated from BSW
Samira	22	Second-generation	South Asian	Graduated from BSW
Priya	23	Second-generation	Mixed South Asian	Graduated from BSW
Nisha	21	Hybrid (First-/second-generation)	South Asian	Currently in BSW
Raj	50	Second-generation	Mixed South Asian	Graduated from BSW

**Note:* Immigration status reflects participants’ self-identification and may not align with institutional categories.

The findings that follow are organized around five interrelated themes: (1) Eurocentrism in Curriculum and Professionalism; (2) Cultural Conflict and Identity Fragmentation; (3) Systemic Racism and Institutional Neglect; (4) Identity Negotiation and Survival Strategies; and (5) Colonial Residue and Epistemological Conflict. Together, these themes illuminate the tensions, dissonances, and acts of resistance that participants navigate as they negotiate their cultural and professional identities within the dominant norms of Canadian social work education. The chapter foregrounds not only the exclusion and epistemic violence embedded in institutional structures but also the ways in which participants actively reframe, resist, and reimagine what it means to be a professional within, and beyond, these confines.

Eurocentrism in Curriculum and Professionalism

Guided by critical race theory and thematic analysis, this theme highlights how Eurocentrism structures both classroom content and professional norms, shaping how legitimacy is defined. This theme captures how participants experienced both the curriculum and dominant definitions of professionalism as deeply shaped by whiteness-coded, Eurocentric norms. Concepts such as emotional detachment and individualism were consistently positioned as universal (professional) standards within social work education. As a result, participants’ own cultural practices and values were often excluded or deemed unprofessional, making it unsafe to show up in culturally authentic ways – whether in the classroom or field placements. This theme emerged from reflections on curriculum design, field placement evaluations, and participants’ understanding of what it means to “act professional”.

Participants consistently described their programs as rooted in Western frameworks, often devoid of meaningful inclusion of non-Western knowledge systems. This sentiment was especially strong when discussing curriculum content and classroom discussions, which were perceived as reinforcing dominant settler-colonial norms that marginalize culturally grounded ways of knowing and being. For example, Samira noted:

...a lot of the times discussions in class would come from a strictly European white or colonial perspective, and a lot of the frameworks are kind of rooted in whiteness or ... standard of whiteness, which I feel like personally I initially had a lot of like hard time resonating with because that's not my personal cultural background or identity.

Amina also echoed this sentiment when they spoke about the concepts of privilege and power being taught in-class, however these concepts were deeply rooted in and shaped by whiteness such that it marginalized ‘non-white’ students from being able to engage with these fundamental discussion and topics in meaningful ways, who also have their own lived experiences with power, privilege, marginalization and oppression. All participants also echoed that there is an apparent stereotypical mold of what a social worker ‘should’ look like. This notion of an ‘ideal’ social worker was reinforced by the classroom materials and discussions, as Amina reflected:

...sometimes with the materials, I found that it was speaking to a very specific ... social identity of what a social worker should kind of look like in terms of, you know, like their class, their race, the way that they, you know dressed and presented themselves. ... [while] historically [this] ... looked ... [like] a white female, middle to upper class ... those [sorts] of molds were still present I felt like in some of the readings and the work material that was being presented to us.

Together, these reflections highlight how whiteness functions as an abstract, unspoken organizing principle in social work education (as a lived barrier) that shapes access to knowledge and belonging. Yet, participants differed in how they engaged this barrier: while Samira emphasized alienation from curriculum rooted in whiteness, Amina stressed erasure of non-white narratives. These variations underscore both the consistency of Eurocentric dominance, and the multiplicity of ways students experienced it. This pattern aligns with critiques of cultural competence as assimilationist and Eurocentric (Sakamoto & Pitner, 2005). Additionally, several participants also noted that much of the case studies and practice models presented in class were heavily entrenched in dominant frameworks. Priya, for instance, highlighted that talk therapy was central to her social work curriculum while Indigenous worldviews, cultural humility, and specific courses around Asian and Caribbean heritage remained peripheral. This emphasis on Western modes of practice also extended into how wellness and emotional processing were addressed in the classroom. Participants were often expected to individually manage the emotional weight of course content, without culturally responsive support or integration of collective care models. As Rani noted, *“even though they say, make sure you take time and self-care ... Self-care is not built into my lifestyle. ... I need you to guide me through this”*. This reflects a broader misalignment between individualistic notions of self-care embedded in the curriculum and collectivist, interdependent approaches to wellness that many participants were accustomed to in their cultural contexts.

Beyond the structural dominance of these frameworks, participants also critiqued the tokenistic representation of cultural backgrounds and racialized peoples within the curriculum – often limited to brief, generalized moments rather than meaningful, sustained engagement. Participants felt that for the most part their cultural backgrounds were either vastly under- or not

represented in the BSW curriculum. Even if there was racialized representation in the curriculum it seemed perfunctory and was homogenized or generalized (i.e. one week of readings and discussions on Asian heritage). This superficial engagement with culture was not limited to the classroom; participants noted that similar patterns of tokenism extended into field education settings, where expressions of diversity were often performative rather than meaningful. Rani reflected on the discomfort of being asked to perform cultural identity during “culture days”, describing the experience as reductive and alienating:

I don't know how to handle things like culture days. ... I find it difficult to acknowledge my culture with comfort in places that are using it almost as ... an event. So, I don't like culture days. I don't like my clothing to be like an outfit to be like something you would wear on Halloween. ... I don't like it to act like it's a costume. ... Because if it wasn't appropriate for me to wear on a daily basis, I don't want to wear it on culture day.

This quote underscores the tension between institutional efforts to “celebrate” diversity and the deeper structural unwillingness to integrate cultural authenticity into the everyday norms of professional practice. While these events may be framed as inclusive, as Rani revealed, it can often feel dehumanizing, reducing cultural identity to spectacle and fail to support meaningful cultural inclusion or safety. Such sentiments echo the broader critique voiced by several participants that expressions of culture only feel welcomed when compartmentalized, minimized or flattened, sanitized, or packaged for dominant comfort.

Participants repeatedly described how dominant notions of professionalism privileged emotional neutrality, individualism, and intellectual abstraction over more relational, embodied, or culturally grounded approaches. These values were embedded not only in classroom discussions and curriculum content, but also in the professional expectations modeled and

reinforced through field education. Emotional restraint, in particular, was often framed as a marker of professionalism. Nisha described feeling compelled to suppress emotional vulnerability, recognizing this as both a cultural survival strategy and a reflection of the profession's demand for stoicism. They recalled being encouraged to "*practice being the white social worker*", highlighting how expectations of emotional neutrality reflected whiteness-coded standards of professionalism that devalued culturally rooted expressions of emotion. Visible emotional responses, such as crying alongside a grieving client, were implicitly viewed as unprofessional, reinforcing a model of emotional regulation that prioritized detachment over relational authenticity. Similarly, participants noted that individual autonomy was often emphasized in practice models, sometimes in conflict with their own collectivist values or community-based approaches to care. Priya recalled navigating this conflict in her field placement and feeling pushed to suppress communal values in favor of individualistic, Western norms.

Collectively, these accounts illuminate how whiteness operates as an unspoken professional norm within social work education – shaping what is taught, who is centered, and how students are evaluated. Curriculum content, field placement practices, and definitions of professionalism were all experienced as constructed through a whiteness-coded lens. Emotional neutrality and individualism were privileged over relational, embodied, or culturally grounded ways of knowing. Meanwhile, culture was either erased or rendered palatable through tokenized representation. This not only delegitimized participants' own cultural identities but also forced them to navigate profound tensions between who they are and who they were expected to become as 'professional' social workers through frameworks that are starkly different to their

cultural values. Building on the ways Eurocentrism shapes professionalism, the following theme explores how these standards fracture students' cultural and professional identities.

Cultural Conflict and Identity Fragmentation

This theme draws on intersectionality and acculturation theory to show how participants navigated conflicting cultural and professional expectations, often resulting in identity fragmentation. This theme addresses the internal and interpersonal tensions that arise when students feel compelled to separate or conceal aspects of their cultural identity to meet professional expectations. As students moved between home, school, and field placement, many felt fragmented, uncertain which part of themselves they could safely present. Participants described a process of fragmentation where cultural values, behaviors, and ways of relating had to be suppressed or hidden in professional settings. This theme emerged through narratives about field placement encounters, classroom dynamics, and the emotional toll of performing a constrained version of the self.

Participants expressed that prioritizing their professional identity often came at the cost of cultural authenticity. They feared being judged or devalued if they engaged in cultural practices or expressions that did not align with dominant expectations of professionalism. This is not to suggest that participants should disregard the importance of professionalism or abandon field standards in order to remain culturally authentic. Rather, they recalled not feeling safe to incorporate elements or key aspects of their cultural identity – such as language, emotional expression, or relational ways of engaging – into their practice, even when these were central to their sense of self. As Nisha notes:

I've noticed I'm basically unable to be the white social worker and ... emulate [my cultural self] ... [when] I start speaking to [clients] in our native languages, I like realize that I suddenly lose a lot of my like go-to script that I have.

Priya echoed this tension by speaking to their cultural upbringing, which emphasized community care, spirituality, and relational ways of knowing and being. These values were central to their sense of identity as an individual but felt unwelcome in professional spaces. Similarly, Amina reflected on how professional boundaries can be interpreted differently across cultures by adding, “I get why [extending hospitality to clients can be seen as unprofessional] ... But I just think what one community thinks is professional [or] what boundaries look like might be different than another community”. These reflections demonstrate the disorientation many participants felt while trying to reconcile and balance their cultural and professional selves.

Due in part to this lack of cultural safety, participants often adapted by fragmenting and compartmentalizing their identities to meet external expectations. Raj describes this as a self-protective strategy:

It's important ... for me to have that separation, just to have that like [Raj] at work is different from [Raj] at home, and it just protects you. ... [Because] when I'm at work, during my day job ... that's where the pressure is right, to fit this mold of what the [professional] expectation is.

Nisha also described maintaining a bifurcated identity; one that consists of their cultural self who speaks the native language, knows how to communicate with family, and takes up culture in a meaningful way, and another as the “white social worker” – the working professional/social worker who demonstrates knowledge and application of social work skills. Such fragmented or compartmentalized identities were viewed as a direct response to needing to have their

professional identities, knowledges, and lived experiences validated by both colleagues and clients. Nisha added that while they recognize how inherently problematic this identity fragmentation is, they do not feel they are able to “*authentically be a person of colour while practicing social work*” within the current iteration of social work curriculum. Instead, Nisha felt compelled to feel as though they are “*...an outsider who's just very good at acting and therefore gets across as an insider*”. In addition, Amina expressed a profound sense of dislocation and fragmentation in how they understood and articulated their cultural identities. Rather than aligning fully with either their heritage culture or the dominant (Canadian) culture, they described existing in a suspended space of in-betweenness (cultural limbo), “*I didn't grow up very traditional per se. ... I also wasn't really accepted into Anglo-Canadian culture, so I don't really find that there's a fit. I don't know how I would describe my cultural identity, something in limbo*”. This experience of limbo captures more than individual uncertainty – it reflects the structural disconnect between cultural ways of being and institutional definitions of professional legitimacy. Altogether these accounts demonstrate how identity fragmentation was not a purely individual failing but a structural outcome of navigating whiteness-coded professionalism. While Raj emphasized strategic compartmentalization as a form of protection, Nisha and Amina described it as a painful dissonance that undermined cultural authenticity and belongingness. These divergent strategies underscore both the necessity and the emotional cost of fragmenting the self to survive within professional contexts.

The tension between external expectations and internal realities contributes to a state of identity dissonance, in which students are left without clear anchors or frameworks to name and claim who they are within the context of social work education. This tension echoes Das and Kemp's (1997) argument that professional norms in social work often privilege Eurocentric

values of neutrality and individualism, leaving racialized students to suppress culturally grounded practices. Further compounding this dislocation were in-class discussions on settler colonialism and the complexities of being a racialized settler. Both Samira and Nisha articulated the tension of holding settler responsibilities on Indigenous lands while also carrying a history of colonization from their home country. They distinguished their positionality from that of white settlers yet acknowledged their own ongoing responsibilities to Indigenous communities. This tension reveals how professional identity development is not only shaped by classroom norms, but also by broader colonial histories and power relations.

Several participants also expressed that expressions of professionalism informed by their cultural identity were perceived as unprofessional, simply because they did not align with the dominant frameworks taught in social work education. As a result, South Asian immigrant-identified students often had to engage in racialized burden – additional learning and unlearning that their non-racialized peers did not. Participants also pointed to how certain social work professional values such as emotional neutrality, limited physical touch, or using first names, clashed with their cultural practices and their own culturally informed notions of professionalism. For instance, as Priya, Nisha, and Raj noted, using first names to address a client, asking needs-assessment questions (i.e. questions around marital status, income, age, etc.), and maintaining extended eye contact and physical boundaries were seen in some cultures as disrespectful or intrusive. Additionally, participants noted that in many South Asian cultures, building trust with clients involves a degree of relational reciprocity. The absence of even minimal personal disclosure from practitioners, as encouraged by mainstream professionalism, was sometimes perceived as cold or dismissive. In these moments, the expectation to withhold personal information as a means of maintaining professional boundaries created internal tension

for participants, who felt that such detachment clashed with their cultural norms around relationship-building – deepening feelings of disconnection and contributing to a fragmented sense of professional and cultural identity.

Collectively, these experiences reveal how professional spaces, rather than fostering inclusion, often require students to compartmentalize their identities. It also illuminated the fundamental disconnect between dominant expectations of professionalism and culturally grounded ways of knowing and being. Cultural expressions of care and relational engagement, central to many participants' upbringing, were perceived as unprofessional or inappropriate. This contradiction prompted students to not only withhold, silence, or strategically suppress parts of themselves to maintain perceived legitimacy in professional settings, but to also navigate this gap without guidance or institutional support, often at the cost of their own cultural integrity and confidence. Despite these challenges, a few participants framed fragmentation not only as loss but also as a skill that enabled them to navigate multiple cultural worlds. For example, some described being able to adjust language across settings as a resource that later enhanced their ability to build rapport with clients, suggesting that even painful identity negotiations carried seeds of resilience. These internal struggles are compounded by external systems of racism and institutional neglect, as described in the next theme.

Systemic Racism and Institutional Neglect

Critical Race Theory guides the interpretation here, as participants described how racism and institutional silence reinforced broader structures of inequity. This theme reflects participants' encounters with racism and institutional inaction across multiple levels of their social work education. Building on the first theme, these included the lack of South Asian (and racialized) representation in curriculum, as well as classrooms, peers and faculty; tokenistic

approaches to diversity, inclusion, and cultural competency; failure to address discriminatory incidents in field placements; and the emotional toll of navigating whiteness-dominant spaces without adequate support. The theme emerged from participant accounts that connected interpersonal racism to broader institutional neglect, exposing how social work education often falls short of its stated equity commitments.

Participants also reiterated earlier frustrations with the lack of racialized voices in curriculum design, which they felt contributed to broader institutional neglect. One participant reflected on how the absence of culturally representative faculty and materials shaped their learning experience:

... There was like a lack of narrative or personal experience, which I felt could have been more effective to my personal development and learning... the potential readings that we chose could have been more inclusive ... to add more nuance. – Samira

Other participants echoed this sentiment, explaining that classroom discussions around anti-oppressive practice (AOP), cultural competency, and diversity and inclusion often felt superficial and surface-level. These accounts underscore how underrepresentation in both people and pedagogy restricted students' opportunities for meaningful engagement with the curriculum and literature and limited their professional development. Even when instructors were perceived as supportive, the structural absence of diverse narratives created a persistent sense of exclusion, flattening the complexity of classroom discourses, which also prevented the creation of culturally safe spaces. Participants noted that when materials and class discussions were not reflective of their identities, they often felt the need to shut down or remain silent. Taking extra steps to contextualize whiteness-coded materials to better align with their cultural frameworks often reinforced feelings of inadequacy. Some participants actively resisted this underrepresentation by

reframing dominant lenses and frameworks and integrating cultural values into their learning process – an effort to assert that their knowledge systems and ways of being were equally legitimate.

Several participants also emphasized that the curriculum did not adequately prepare them to confront racism or microaggressions in the field. They noted that their programs rarely addressed the prevalence of these experiences or offered guidance on how to navigate and respond to them in practice. While some professional protections may exist through their respective agencies and/or the regulatory body like the Ontario College of Social Workers and Social Services Workers, participants felt that these structures do little to mitigate the actual marginalization faced by racialized practitioners. Rather, they often reinforced a sense of being outsiders within the profession. A few participants recalled reading works by racialized scholars or practitioners and noted how these resources provided validation, allowing for more nuanced and contextualized understandings of course content.

The absence of racialized faculty and peers contributed to participants' sense of alienation and hypervisibility, further compounding experiences of imposter syndrome and professional inadequacy. Some participants noted that these feelings not only undermined participants' confidence but also acted as a form of gatekeeping that discouraged them from pursuing additional professional opportunities within the field. Nisha reflected on feeling hyper-aware of their racial identity within the classroom, noting that social work education was one of the few spaces in Canada where their "*Brownness*" felt starkly visible. This was echoed by Raj who added:

...nobody looked like me culturally. There [were] no other Indo-Caribbean folks. There [were] no other South Asian professors. ... So, I felt I couldn't be my authentic self at school, because there was nobody there that I could relate to.

These reflections illustrate that the absence of representation wasn't just about visibility – it shaped how participants perceived their place and legitimacy within the profession. A lack of racialized faculty mirrored the curriculum's limitations in failing to create safer, more inclusive classroom spaces. While some white faculty were aware that content like AOP could affect racialized students differently, participants noted a lack of tools or foundational understanding of how to support students through that learning. As Rani shared, “*...there was almost a [lack of] foundation of how to support students through that learning*”. One participant described how these systemic gaps shaped not only their academic experiences but also their confidence and preparedness in practice settings:

I do occasionally feel imposter syndrome for various reasons in the field or during my education ... I do feel like an outsider due to my specific cultural background... there is that fear of being judged or devalued in the workplace by like colleagues or even clients. And I feel like the education that I had didn't necessarily teach me how to navigate the field as a woman of color, specifically that of South Asian descent. – Samira

Several participants also reflected on how they were made to feel like outsiders not only to their communities when working as a professional, but also within their own programs for not fitting the stereotypical mold of what a social worker ‘should’ look like (as outlined in Theme 1). Rani shared how these dynamics played out in their field placement: “*when my supervisors are with me in a room or field instructors, there are times when I'm not being acknowledged. Even though I'm the one that's taking the lead. So, there's this definite, very deliberate ... ignoring my*

presence”. Across accounts, the recurring absence of racialized representation created both hypervisibility and invisibility. Participants were simultaneously marked as racial outsiders and erased within institutional discourses. While some emphasized feelings of imposter syndrome, others described outright professional erasure in field placements. These differences highlight the multiple, intersecting ways systemic neglect manifests in the day-to-day experiences of racialized students. These examples also highlight how microaggressions in field settings compounded by inadequate institutional preparation left participants unsupported in navigating racism, isolation, and professional erasure. Many emphasized that even a basic acknowledgment of these realities from faculty, such as the risks racialized practitioners may face, would have been validating and helped to mitigate some of the emotional burden. The absence of such recognition reveals a deeper pattern of institutional neglect that overlooks the lived realities and professional vulnerabilities of racialized students. Such institutional neglect aligns with Dei’s (1996) analysis of systemic exclusion in education, where equity commitments are voiced but rarely realized in practice.

All participants agreed that having peers, faculty and mentors who shared a cultural or racial background would have supported their personal and professional development. Such representation, they noted, would have helped provide language and frameworks to better understand and articulate their experiences. Although most accounts emphasized exclusion, many found allies and moments of validation and community when connecting with Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour (BIPOC) faculty and students. Samira reflected on the early sense of safety that came from connecting with other faculty and students of color who understood the underrepresentation of South Asian and racialized identities. However, they also emphasized that true safety was created not merely through shared identity, and that faculty –

including white instructors – who took accountability, acknowledged representational gaps, and engaged critically with these omissions, helped co-create such safety. This highlights the importance of accountability and responsiveness from faculty, beyond identity alone, in resisting institutional neglect. Such transformative moments, while limited, were experienced as powerful reminders that accountability and critical engagement, even from those in positions of privilege, can create conditions of safety and recognition.

While cultural matching in field placement was important for some participants, and at times helpful, participants noted that intentionality was key. Nisha described being matched with a South Asian supervisor but found the experience deeply alienating: *“it felt a little bit like... ‘hey, brown person, brown person, good match’... [but] I think I would have gotten a lot more of a rich experience with [someone of a different background who was navigating their own tensions]”*. They went on to describe how this dynamic, despite surface-level cultural similarity, obscured power dynamics and reinforced the need to perform agreement with problematic ideas from the supervisor, *“...I’d find myself having to like agree with and go along with a lot of her problematic ideas because of the power dynamic”*. This experience illustrates how superficial identity matching can fall short when deeper attention to power, critical engagement, and relational safety is missing. While less common in the data, a few participants described moments of strong support that disrupted these dominant patterns. A few participants highlighted supportive supervisors and peers who validated their experiences and created space for reflexivity. These moments, though rare, point to the unevenness of institutional racism – reminding us that while structures are patterned by exclusion, individual actors can sometimes disrupt those patterns in meaningful ways (Henry & Tator, 2009).

Taken together, these accounts reveal how structural inequities within social work education continue to undermine racialized students' learning and development. Despite the field's stated commitments to equity and inclusion, participants were often left to self-manage racism, emotional labour, and professional navigation in systems not designed with them in mind. Institutional neglect manifested through the absence of racialized mentors and faculty, the lack of culturally grounded support systems, and curricular gaps that render students' experiences invisible. These gaps gave rise to epistemic erasure, imposter syndrome, and burnout – barriers that racialized students were forced to navigate without adequate institutional support. Despite these barriers, participants employed various survival strategies to maintain cultural integrity while navigating professional spaces.

Identity Negotiation and Survival Strategies

Informed by Professional Identity Formation theory, this theme illuminates how students deployed strategies of survival, adaptation, and resistance to assert cultural integrity. This theme captures the intentional strategies South Asian immigrant students employed to preserve and assert their cultural identities while navigating the norms and expectations of social work professionalism. Rather than representing passive assimilation, participants' responses reflected agency, creativity, and resistance. They engaged in reflexive practices such as journaling, seeking culturally resonant support networks, and partial self-disclosure to selectively code-switch across settings. These adaptive strategies allowed participants to reconcile internal tensions between cultural and professional identities – tensions that were often exacerbated by the nature of the curriculum, field placements, and institutional environments. Identity negotiation was not experienced as a linear or easily defined process; for many, it was layered, ongoing, and at times confusing. Participants described both conscious and unconscious ways of navigating

professional spaces in order to preserve a sense of self and remain aligned with their values, while also meeting the expectations of the profession.

Several participants described how their cultural identity was central to their sense of self and social work practice, and not something they were willing to abandon. Rather than viewing it as a barrier to professionalism, some participants identified their cultural background as a unique strength – an asset they carried into their practice. For example, participants used critical self-reflexivity to integrate both cultural and professional frameworks in a way that felt authentic to them. This did not mean disregarding professional expectations but rather learning to adapt and align them with cultural values where appropriate. Journaling and documentation were described as important tools to not only remain critically grounded and accountable to both personal and professional identities, but also crucial to growth. This strategy offered a private space where students could integrate, rather than fragment, their professional and cultural selves. Others, however, described moments when they filtered or adjusted their identities to meet professional expectations, especially in field placements. Priya reflected that they had to adapt their communication style and tone to be perceived as more professional, which for them meant softening aspects of their cultural expression: “...it really did feel like I kind of had to like filter my identity a bit or like adapt my identity to be perceived as a professional”. Raj similarly described a process of selective self-disclosure, choosing when and how to share parts of their cultural or religious background based on how psychologically and culturally safe a space felt. This strategic withholding was not simply about fitting in but also about protecting oneself from judgment or misinterpretation in spaces where identity was hypervisibilized. Masking or suppressing cultural identity became a coping mechanism, especially when participants feared their cultural expressions might be misconstrued as unprofessional or lead to unwanted attention.

Rani also reflected on the importance of discernment in critical dialogue. They described a personal strategy of only engaging in deeper conversations about race, identity, and cultural values with those who demonstrated open-mindedness and a willingness to consider different perspectives. For Rani, avoiding confrontation was not about silencing oneself, but rather a conscious act of self-protection – to ensure that conversations occurred in spaces where their voice would be respected, rather than dismissed.

Amina's reflections further revealed that identity negotiation was not always fully conscious. They expressed a sense of uncertainty about how to interpret or respond to certain situations, admitting they often lacked clear strategies to reconcile professional and cultural tensions. This emotional ambiguity and confusion, yet still sensing a difference or dissonance, reflect the complex, evolving nature of identity work in the context of social work education. Several participants also noted that negotiating multiple expectations, such as those of their families, their cultural communities, their peers, and the profession, complicated their identity formation. For first-generation participants, this was particularly layered. One participant described how parental expectations, peer culture, Canadian norms, and their own understandings of their immigration experience all contributed to a sense of fragmented identity. This often made it difficult to find community, relevant resources, or services that acknowledged the nuance of their lived experience. Together, these narratives show that identity negotiation was rarely passive. While Priya, Raj, and Rani highlighted conscious strategies of filtering or self-disclosure, Amina described a more uncertain and affective process of grappling with ambiguity. These variations reflect both the unevenness of institutional supports and the creativity of students in navigating them. The diversity of strategies demonstrates how identity negotiation was simultaneously exhausting and empowering. These strategies resonate with scholarship on

Professional Identity Formation, which emphasizes that identity is not merely adopted but actively negotiated through reflexivity and practice (Trede et al., 2012).

Despite these challenges, participants actively sought out spaces of validation and belonging. Building peer networks with others who shared similar cultural values became a key adaptive practice. These informal networks served as counterspaces that not only allowed participants to challenge dominant norms while remaining connected to their values, but they also fostered emotional support systems where people could share insights, best practices, and learn how to navigate difficult professional dilemmas. Some participants described seeking therapy or supervision, though they noted these supports did not always adequately account for the intersectional challenges of being a South Asian immigrant. In the absence of culturally attuned formal supports, participants turned to external validation as a way to resist internalizing feelings of inadequacy, recognizing instead that their struggles reflected broader systemic and systematic failures, not individual deficits. This reframing allowed them to redirect their self-doubt toward a critique of institutional design and fostered a sense of solidarity and resilience. When cultural resonance was missing, participants found greater clarity and solidarity in informal communities of practice with other BIPOC students and faculty. Validation also came from connecting with clients or peers who shared similar cultural identities. Priya reflected that working with culturally similar clients helped them feel recognized and valued in ways the classroom did not. These moments allowed them to connect more deeply and authentically, affirming parts of their identity that were otherwise invisible in formal learning environments. Participants who engaged in this negotiation process described it as ‘code-switching’, at times choosing one identity over another out of necessity. Yet this was not a full disavowal of either self; instead, it was a strategic, sometimes temporary reorientation to preserve safety or

credibility within a given (professional) context. Taken together, these strategies can be read as both protective mechanisms and active forms of professional identity work. They allowed participants to manage exclusion while simultaneously performing competence in ways that were legible to Eurocentric professional norms. This dual function highlights the creativity embedded in adaptation, but also the cost of having to constantly negotiate legitimacy.

These narratives collectively highlight that identity negotiation is an active and evolving process marked by both conflict and agency. For many, these acts of negotiation were reframed as forms of resistance rather than assimilation. Some participants described selective disclosure as a way of protecting cultural integrity rather than abandoning it, and others emphasized that peer networks were not only coping mechanisms but also spaces of joy, affirmation, and solidarity – moments where their professional and cultural selves could co-exist without contradiction. Participants resisted assimilation by creating personal systems of integration and support, allowing them to navigate institutions not built with them in mind. Their strategies were not only reactive forms of coping, but also conscious acts of self-preservation, professional integrity, and cultural continuity. This theme underscores the importance of creating institutional spaces that make such negotiation less necessary, not by flattening differences, but by legitimizing and honouring them within professional practice. While the previous themes have explored the institutional, interpersonal, and intrapersonal challenges students face, the final theme foregrounds a deeper tension: the epistemological conflict at the heart of social work education – what counts as knowledge, and whose knowledge is legitimized.

Colonial Residue and Epistemological Conflict

Interpreted through decolonial perspectives, this theme helps to foreground epistemic violence and the ways colonial residues shape what counts as legitimate knowledge. This theme

highlights a less visible but deeply felt layer of participant experience: the internal conflict that arises when dominant ways of knowing in social work, rooted in dominant, individualistic, and colonial logics, clash with participants' culturally grounded epistemologies. While earlier themes explore exclusion and identity negotiation, this theme centers on the epistemological violence that occurs when participants' worldviews are dismissed as irrelevant, incompatible, or unprofessional. Participants did not simply feel excluded; they felt misunderstood at the level of knowledge itself. This dissonance emerged most acutely in discussions around family, power, respect, and emotion, where participants described being expected to suppress or retranslate their ways of knowing into Western frameworks. For many, this was not just frustrating, it was disorienting, alienating, and at times, deeply invalidating.

Priya described a mismatch between their cultural understanding of relational decision-making and the emphasis on client autonomy within social work education. This sentiment was echoed by all participants, who identified a stark difference between their collectivist cultural backgrounds and the individualistic values embedded in social work training. Samira described how, even when students are encouraged to critique whiteness, the critical tools themselves remain confined to Eurocentric paradigms:

... when it came to like writing like papers ... [it revealed] how a lot of the frameworks that our social work education is rooted [in] and is coming from a Eurocentric colonial whiteness perspective ... [because] even when we are supposed to be critical of like how whiteness is rooted in social work, it's still kind of coming from a perspective of whiteness.

This quote reflects the epistemological tension at the heart of the theme – even spaces that claim to support critical engagement remain bounded by dominant colonial logics, limiting how

students can meaningfully bring their cultural knowledge into academic work. Nisha echoed this dilemma when grappling with competing ways of making sense of trauma, family dynamics, and respect:

I don't know how to balance our cultural understandings of respect and family dynamics and ... the way that trauma is so different for us than it seems to be for other people. Like, I don't know how to balance that and also be a social worker ...

Here, the inability to reconcile these worldviews signals not only curricular limitations but also the emotional toll of epistemological dissonance.

Extending critiques from earlier themes, participants reflected on how even well-intentioned curricular structures failed to meaningfully engage non-dominant epistemologies. Raj reflected that students were expected to fragment and compartmentalize their identities without being offered the tools to balance or integrate them meaningfully. Nisha described the challenge of translating social work concepts taught in English into Urdu, and how classroom teachings (particularly around family dynamics) reflected European nuclear models that didn't align with their lived experience. This reflects how dominant knowledge frameworks often fail to accommodate linguistic and cultural realities that differ from Euro-Western norms. Nisha also reflected on the difficulties of applying these frameworks in South Asian family contexts where elders are highly respected, and younger individuals may have limited authority, making certain forms of social work communication feel inappropriate or even disrespectful. These tensions became especially pronounced when trying to apply social work knowledge in their own cultural or linguistic contexts, where key values and hierarchies diverged significantly from existing norms. Nisha added that translating colonial topics especially for those who come from colonized contexts themselves without inflicting further harm felt especially fraught. This insight

highlights how social work education often fails to account for not only the complexities of colonial legacies outside of the Western world, but also their mere existence, which was echoed by Samira who noted “...*talking about ... colonization [in-class] was impactful. However, I felt like there was a lack of discussion surrounding colonization in Asia...*”. The absence of broader anti-colonial frameworks left participants without a conceptual language to locate their own histories or cultural understandings within the profession. These reflections reveal that epistemological conflict was experienced as both cognitive and emotional dissonance. While Samira highlighted the limitations of critical tools that remained Eurocentric, Nisha emphasized the cultural impossibility of translating certain social work concepts into their own languages. Collectively, these accounts point to a deeper ontological tension – not only what is taught, but whose knowledge is legitimized. This resonates with Smith’s (2012) critique of research and pedagogy as colonial projects that privilege mainstream epistemologies while marginalizing Indigenous and diasporic ways of knowing.

This dissonance was not only cognitive but also emotional. Participants described the emotional weight of confronting oppression for the first time within social work education, particularly given its absence from their prior learning and broader social context. Rani shared, “...*learning about oppression was very difficult for me because it's not really talked about in school prior to this, and it's not a part of Canadian culture and structure.*” Here, social work education becomes both a site of revelation and discomfort, as students come face to face with sanitized or surface-level conversations about systemic injustice. Despite these tensions, some participants found affirmation in courses or frameworks that engaged non-Western worldviews and critically challenged dominant narratives. Several participants noted that Indigenous Studies courses offered opportunities to engage with worldviews aligned more

closely with their own collectivist, relational, and rooted in histories of systemic oppression.

These moments allowed participants to feel validated in ways the core curriculum often failed to provide, *“it ... helped me to kind of understand a bit more that like culture is important and it is something that can be discussed within the BSW program but maybe is not fully there yet”* – Priya.

In contrast to the heavy critique of social work curriculum and its pedagogies, some participants did note that aspects of the (Eurocentric) program, particularly those emphasizing positionality, intersectionality, and cultural humility, as well as self-reflection tools such as reflexive journaling and documentation (as discussed in the previous theme), offered valuable venues for critical reflection and growth. As Rani explained:

So come into social work and being very aware of your positionality and what your power is and what your own intersections in life are and how that impacts your work is something that I found not only challenging but also eye-opening and something that I was like I was very keen to put into practice. It felt better to practice that way.

This illustrates how some participants engage with the curriculum selectively, embracing what aligned with their lived realities and critiquing what did not. In this way, participants engaged not in passive adaptations but acts of epistemic resistance. This also highlights that even within hegemonic frameworks, tools may be re-appropriated in ways that support student resilience and growth.

Rather than assimilate, many participants cultivated a critical awareness of whose voices were missing and used this awareness to actively reframe their professional learning. Samira and Priya both described becoming more attuned to pedagogical gaps, while also resisting the idea that they must erase parts of themselves to succeed. Rather than seeing their identities as barriers,

participants expressed a growing sense of epistemic agency by recognizing their cultural knowledge as epistemic assets, and that their lived experiences offered important counterpoints to dominant social work paradigms. As Samira noted:

... [I recognize] that yes, there are these frameworks and ... social work does have this history ... that's rooted in Eurocentric [values] and like colonialism and whiteness. However, ... [I also recognize] that ... I bring a different nuanced perspective and it's not necessarily that I lack anything ... it's just more narrative to the existing frameworks. ... I feel like my cultural background has also helped me be more open-minded and accepting and critical of the knowledge and experiences I've gained alongside my other intersecting identities too.

Priya also reclaims epistemic agency by embracing their cultural identity within their social work practice to enhance their connection with clients – framing cultural knowledge as additive, not deficient. These reflexive stances illustrate an emergent resistance to epistemic dominance. It shows how participants are not only navigating conflict but also interrogating the limitations of their professional training – a process that begins to unsettle the very foundations of what counts as legitimate knowledge in social work. Rather than assimilating or resisting from the margins, they begin to position themselves as contributors to a more expansive, pluralistic social work paradigm.

These accounts reveal not only a gap in curriculum or representation, but a deeper ontological tension: what counts as knowledge, and who gets to decide. Participants described a sense of epistemological dissonance – a discomfort rooted in the feeling that their culturally grounded ways of knowing were incompatible with the knowledge systems upheld in social work education. This colonial residue often left them feeling unmoored, forced to translate or

suppress their worldviews to succeed. Yet, within this tension, participants carved out space for epistemic resistance: building community, engaging in critical reflection, and connecting with clients who affirmed their values. Rather than reject their cultural knowledge, they reframed it as a vital contribution to the field, one that challenges the dominance of colonial paradigms and calls for a more pluralistic, inclusive social work education. Importantly, participants also identified courses and frameworks that affirmed their knowledge systems. For instance, engagement with Indigenous Studies courses, intersectionality, or cultural humility allowed some to see their cultural epistemologies as assets rather than deficits. Some described these moments as transformative experiences that affirmed their capacity to not only critique dominant paradigms but also imagine more pluralistic futures for the profession.

Conclusion

The findings in this chapter offer a layered and nuanced understanding of how South Asian immigrant students experience social work education as both a site of constraint and a space for negotiation and resistance. Across the five interrelated themes, participants described the weight of navigating the exclusionary nature of Eurocentric, whiteness-coded professionalism, the fragmentation of identity, institutional failures to address racism, and the emotional and epistemological toll of existing and navigating within systems not designed with them in mind. Yet, these same narratives also reveal critical agency. Participants re-authored their identities by engaging in reflective strategies to preserve cultural integrity, challenged dominant discourses, and found pockets of affirmation – whether through culturally aligned courses, community connections, or critical pedagogical tools. Their experiences reflect not only individual acts of survival but broader calls to reimagine social work education as a pluralistic, anti-colonial, and culturally grounded field. These findings surface urgent questions about what

constitutes valid knowledge, the legitimacy of dominant knowledge systems, who defines professionalism, and how systems of power shape identity formation. The findings serve as the foundation for the next chapter, which will critically analyze how these insights align with broader theoretical frameworks and pedagogical reform.

Chapter Five: Discussion

Introduction

This chapter critically interprets and synthesizes the findings presented in the previous chapter in relation to the study's theoretical framework and existing literature. Drawing from Intersectionality Theory, Critical Race Theory (CRT), Acculturation Theory, and Professional Identity Formation Theory, the discussion offers a nuanced exploration of how South Asian immigrant students in Ontario's BSW programs navigate the complexities of cultural and professional identity formation within a settler-colonial, Eurocentric academic and institutional landscape. Rather than simply restating the themes, this chapter focuses on making meaning of participants' experiences, situating them within broader structures of power, systemic exclusion, and acts of resistance. Through this analysis, the chapter responds directly to the central research question and highlights key implications for social work education and practice.

The chapter unfolds in four key sections. The first, Interrogating the Findings, offers a critical examination of the major themes that emerged in the study, contextualized within the literature and theoretical frameworks. The second, Implications for Social Work Education and Practice, explores how the findings challenge current pedagogical and institutional norms and offers directions for reform. The third section, Reimagining Professionalism and Identity, synthesizes insights across the findings to propose a more inclusive, relational, and culturally grounded model of social work professionalism. The chapter concludes by reflecting on the broader significance of these findings for theory, identity, and pedagogy, setting the stage for the final chapter's synthesis of the study's overall contributions and future directions.

Interrogating the Findings: A Critical Engagement with Emerging Themes

Eurocentrism in Curriculum and Professionalism

Participants' narratives reveal a deeply entrenched Eurocentrism that shapes both the curriculum and the profession's normative standards of conduct. As the findings illustrate, dominant notions of professionalism are closely aligned with white, Western/European, middle-class ideals (i.e. individualism, emotional neutrality, and detachment), which marginalize culturally grounded ways of knowing and being. This mirrors literature that critiques the profession's complicity in upholding colonial norms (Pon, 2009; Razack, 2002). The performance of professionalism, as described by participants, often required South Asian immigrant students to adopt behaviors and values that were not only alien to their cultural backgrounds, but were also fundamentally at odds with their relational and collectivist orientations. The privileging of whiteness-coded professionalism and erasure of cultural knowledge within social work education reflects what CRT identifies as the normalization of whiteness as the invisible standard (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). This is not simply a matter of exclusion but one of structural domination, where whiteness operates as the default lens through which knowledge, professionalism, and legitimacy are defined. As one participant (Priya) noted, they had to “...*filter my identity a bit or like adapt my identity to be perceived as a professional*”. This underscores the ways in which Eurocentric curricula reproduce what Ladson-Billings (2000) identifies as whiteness as property, where access to legitimacy is bound to particular forms of knowledge. The white, middle-class, gendered legacy of social work (rooted in its early formation as a profession dominated by white women) continues to shape what is considered normative knowledge and conduct. Fricker's (2007) theory of epistemic injustice complements this by showing how racialized students are not just denied voice but are positioned as less credible knowers within the institution. This dynamic is compounded by the implicit expectation that racialized students educate others on their own cultural contexts, a form of

epistemic extraction that further marginalizes them and reinforces the asymmetrical burden of explanation. When read alongside Ahmed's (2012) critique of diversity as institutional performance, these frameworks reveal that multicultural gestures, like 'culture days', are not neutral acts of inclusion but symbolic performances that allow institutions to appear inclusive while maintaining epistemic hierarchies. Intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) further complicates this analysis by highlighting how race, class, gender, and migration status intersect to shape how South Asian immigrant students experience curricular exclusion not as a flat omission, but as layered, embodied, and cumulative harm. This interwoven framework demonstrates that the marginalization of racialized epistemologies in social work education is not accidental or occasional; it is structurally embedded. This is central to the research question, as it illustrates that South Asian immigrant students' professional identity formation is fundamentally constrained by whose knowledge is allowed to matter in the first place.

While most participants emphasized these exclusions, a few shared moments of connection and care within their programs. For example, Samira noted that particular instructors were willing to engage critically with topics of race and identity, even if the broader curriculum lacked depth. These counter-narratives suggest that although the dominant structure remains Eurocentric, individual educators may act as sites of disruption or support. This complicates a totalizing narrative and affirms that meaningful transformation is possible within micro-contexts, even when macro-structures fall short.

Cultural Conflict and Identity Fragmentation

In grappling with this exclusion, participants consistently described a felt tension between who they are culturally and who they are expected to become professionally – a dissonance that manifested as fragmentation, suppression, or adaptation. While Acculturation Theory (Berry,

1997) helps frame this negotiation of competing cultural logics, its emphasis on individual adaptation risks overlooking how these negotiations are shaped by structurally embedded expectations of whiteness. In this context, identity dissonance is not merely a personal or psychological challenge, but a response to the institutional demand for cultural conformity. Intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) strengthens this analysis by revealing how race, gender, and immigration status interact to produce unique identity pressures for South Asian immigrant students. For example, relationality and emotional expressiveness, hallmarks of many South Asian cultures as outlined by participants, are often misread in academic or field contexts as unprofessional or overly emotional, further marginalizing students whose professional identities do not align with dominant norms. Participants like Nisha and Priya described suppressing emotional vulnerability and relational forms of care in field placements in order to perform as the “*white social worker*”. As Nisha noted, “...*I’m basically unable to be the white social worker and ... emulate [my cultural self]*”, highlighting the incongruency felt by participants between their cultural and professional self. Amina described feeling suspended in a ‘cultural limbo’, excluded from both their heritage community and the Canadian dominant community. These narratives demonstrate that identity formation is not simply shaped by internal acculturation, but by institutional structures that fail to recognize hybrid, communal, and culturally grounded models of professional being. When read through the lens of CRT (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017), these stories reveal how whiteness is maintained not only through exclusion, but also through the conditional terms of inclusion – where racialized students are welcomed only to the extent that they conform to dominant norms.

The significance of this insight is central to the research question: professional identity for South Asian immigrant students is not developed in isolation but emerges through constant

negotiation with systems that render their cultural identities unintelligible or unprofessional.

Rather than sites of transformation, academic and field settings often become arenas of cultural loss or compromise. Understanding identity formation in this way moves the conversation beyond individual resilience and toward institutional accountability.

Navigating Settler Colonial Contexts

Participants' accounts of settler colonialism further complexify the process of professional identity formation. Several students articulated a developing awareness of their presence on Indigenous lands and the complicated duality of being both racialized subjects and beneficiaries of settler-colonial structures. Due to the constraints of this thesis, these critical reflections could not be explored in fuller depth. However, this emerging reflexivity reflects a form of critical consciousness rarely examined in literature on racialized immigrants, particularly in how it intersects with settler colonial responsibilities. Their narratives suggest an emergent ethic of self-location and accountability that exists alongside cultural negotiation, exceeding the curriculum and likely emerging from personal experience, peer dialogue, and/or external learning.

This layered identity work resists neat categorization within traditional theories of acculturation or professional socialization, which tend to treat cultural adaptation as an individualized and linear process (Berry, 1997), without attending to structural power relations. Instead, it invites a more critical and relational analysis through the lenses of Intersectionality and Critical Race Theory (CRT). CRT offers tools to interrogate how racialized immigrants are incorporated into settler institutions not as neutral actors but within systems designed to reinforce whiteness as normative, and national narratives that erase Indigenous presence, sovereignty, and dispossession (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Tuck & Yang, 2012). Racial inclusion, as CRT would

suggest, often comes at the cost of complicity in broader colonial logics, what some scholars refer to as "settler moves to innocence" (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 10). The following reflections from Samira provide crucial evidence to this: *"...even when we are supposed to be critical of like how whiteness is rooted in social work, it's still kind of coming from a perspective of whiteness"* and *"...talking about ... colonization [in-class] was impactful. However, I felt like there was a lack of discussion surrounding colonization in Asia..."*. In addition, Intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) enables an examination of how overlapping systems of power (including race, migration status, gender, and class) interact in complex ways to shape the conditions of belonging, recognition, and exclusion. It allows for an analysis that recognizes South Asian immigrant students not only as racialized subjects, but also as migrants navigating layered colonial hierarchies within the academy and the profession. Together, these frameworks reveal that professional identity is not simply a matter of internalizing normative roles but involves negotiating, and at times resisting, institutional forces that determine whose identities and knowledges are rendered legitimate.

Despite their insights, these frameworks have limitations. CRT and Intersectionality aptly expose structural and historical inequities, but they may under-emphasize the affective, spiritual, and relational dimensions of identity work. Participants like Amina described moments of dissonance and emotional ambiguity, which suggest that identity work often exceeds the explanatory capacity of critical theories focused primarily on power and structure. These insights underscore the need for social work to expand its theoretical frameworks to incorporate both anti-racist and decolonial approaches that can account for the layered realities of racialized settlers who are navigating power, belonging, and responsibility within a colonial context.

The institutional silencing of Indigenous sovereignty and racialized settlerhood often leaves immigrant students to navigate these intricate realities without adequate frameworks for ethical engagement or solidarity. These complexities align with Chung's (2021) literature review, which outlines how racialized immigrants in Canada often occupy a paradoxical space: structurally marginalized yet positioned as contributors to settler colonial projects. The author's work argues that racialized peoples, while not the architects of settler colonialism, are nonetheless implicated in its continuation through unexamined complicity or silence (Chung, 2021). Participants in this study expressed a similar emergent awareness of their roles as racialized settlers. However, this awareness was self-initiated rather than institutionally cultivated, further highlighting the absence of structured support. Chung's (2021) framing reinforces the necessity of not only anti-racist education, but also decolonial learning that equips racialized immigrant students with tools to reflect on their responsibilities to Indigenous nations as well as lays the groundwork to begin building solidarity. As participants' stories show, this reflexivity is an ethical labour that racialized immigrant students must often carry themselves without guidance, community, or space for reflection. This lack of institutional engagement reflects what Shore and Wright (2015) critique as neoliberal responsibilization in higher education, where structural issues are offloaded onto individuals under the guise of professional development. The affective weight of this awareness, expressed through guilt, confusion, or isolation, points to a broader failure of social work education to meaningfully engage with decolonial thought, Indigenous sovereignty, or settler accountability beyond superficial gestures like land acknowledgments. Moreover, the internal labour required to unpack and reconcile layered cultural identities within a settler colonial state is emotionally taxing, especially when students are left without mentorship or culturally grounded institutional support. This reflexive

burden, often undertaken in isolation, reflects how identity work is not only epistemic but also deeply affective and political.

As Smith (2012) reminds us, decolonial work requires relational accountability, where pedagogy and research are measured by responsibility to community rather than adherence to abstract neutrality. Battiste (2013) similarly calls for decolonial pedagogy that restores Indigenous knowledge systems displaced by colonial schooling. Integrating these insights alongside CRT extends the critique of whiteness by foregrounding relational and land-based responsibilities, offering a richer account of what decolonial transformation in social work education might entail. As echoed by the findings, this aligns with participants' own frustrations with curricula that erased or tokenized their cultural knowledge, suggesting that their critiques are not only about symbolic inclusion but about the deeper epistemic restructuring that Smith (2012) and Battiste (2013) envision. Together, these insights push social work education to move beyond simply diversifying content and toward fundamentally re-centering relational, land-based, and community-grounded ways of knowing in program structures.

The significance of this theme lies in what it reveals about the limits of existing curricular and professional models: they are ill-equipped to support students in navigating their complex social locations, especially in relation to Indigenous peoples. Answering the research question, then, requires recognizing that professional identity formation for South Asian immigrant students is shaped not only by whiteness and exclusion, but also by their entanglement in broader colonial power relations. Without explicit, critical, and supportive institutional frameworks that address these entanglements, students are left to navigate these realities alone – potentially reproducing, rather than disrupting, settler colonial dynamics.

Systemic Racism and Institutional Neglect

This theme reveals how systemic racism and institutional neglect are not peripheral failures but integral features of social work education's structure, shaping the professional identity formation of South Asian immigrant students from within. Participants recounted frequent microaggressions in classroom and field contexts. The significance of these accounts lies in how they not only reinforce racialized boundaries of belonging (marking immigrant students as perpetual outsiders within the profession) but also normalize silence as a condition of persistence. As discussed under *Eurocentrism in Curriculum and Professionalism*, social work's stated alignment with anti-oppressive commitments often coexists with routinized exclusions; here I extend that critique to placement structures and everyday supervisory practices that normalize these harms. This is echoed in Rani's reflection where they stated, "*when my supervisors are with me in a room or field instructors, there are times when I'm not being acknowledged. Even though I'm the one that's taking the lead*". Critical Race Theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017) is especially salient here, as it foregrounds how claims of color-blindness, neutrality, and meritocracy obscure the ways racial hierarchies are embedded in institutional structures.

Participants' stories also align with de Bie et al.'s (2021) work on affective, epistemic, and ontological harm, which identifies how social work education can undermine marginalized students' sense of self, value, and voice. Shared accounts of feeling invisible in classrooms and field placements, yet simultaneously hypervisible as racialized bodies tasked with performing difference and feeling as though the program failed to prepare them to navigate the field as racialized practitioners align with de Bie et al.'s (2020) critique that dominant pedagogical and supervisory approaches produce affective and ontological harm. This builds on earlier concerns about tokenism, shifting here from institutional structures to students' lived identity strategies.

This is echoed in participant voice wherein both Nisha and Raj explicitly stated feeling hypervisibilized within their respective programs; where Nisha felt her “*Brownness*” was starkly visible, and Raj was the only Indo-Caribbean identified person in their program/classroom. The expectation that students undertake this internal labour without guided institutional frameworks can deepen affective harm. As participants described, this work, while necessary, can also lead to emotional exhaustion, alienation, or even retraumatization, especially when undertaken without support or community. Intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) underscores how even when students hold perceived professional authority in field placements, their experiences of racism, gendered expectations, or migration status complicate that power, revealing a persistent vulnerability beneath the surface of their roles. The compounded impact of these intersecting forces is not just emotional, but professional, shaping how students come to see themselves within (or outside) the field of social work. Additionally, Fricker’s (2007) concept of epistemic injustice provides a powerful lens to understand how racialized students’ knowledge, affect, and experiences are routinely devalued. Participants described instances where their contributions were dismissed or treated as overly subjective or emotional, implicitly contrasted with an unmarked white objectivity. This not only undermines their academic and professional confidence but sends a broader message about who qualifies as a legitimate knower and practitioner within social work.

These findings are central to the research question because they demonstrate that professional identity is not cultivated in a vacuum, but is forged through students’ navigation of exclusion, misrecognition, and epistemic erasure. The institution’s failure to acknowledge or interrupt these dynamics leaves South Asian immigrant students, and racialized students more broadly, to bear the burden of adaptation alone. This neglect is not incidental but formative; it instills in students a sense that success requires erasure, conformity to dominant norms, or

strategic silence. Without intentional and structural disruption of these dynamics, social work education risks reproducing the very oppressions it claims to dismantle. Participants' accounts of institutional abandonment therefore highlight not just an urgent need for structural accountability (i.e. through more resources or representation), but a deeper re-evaluation of how the profession conceptualizes knowledge, support, and belonging.

Yet even within these broader patterns of neglect, participants' narratives also revealed moments of care and disruption that challenge a totalizing view of the institution. Some white instructors, for example, were described as thoughtful and responsive, able to hold space for student discomfort even without lived experience of racialization. These narratives complicate the assumption that shared identity guarantees safety, pointing instead to the deeper importance of relational accountability, critical engagement, and institutional reflexivity.

Identity Negotiation and Survival Strategies

In response to these challenges, participants employed culturally rooted resilience strategies and demonstrated agency in reclaiming belonging and self-definition. The theme of survival strategies reveals how students draw on culturally grounded strengths to assert belonging, seek validation, and maintain integrity. Journaling, selective self-disclosure, critical dialogue, and peer support emerged as important tools of navigation. These practices echo Sakamoto and Pitner's (2005) work on 'critical hybridity' wherein they discuss how racialized individuals navigate and negotiate between dominant cultural norms and their own cultural frameworks, often engaging in a critical and strategic process of hybridity rather than assimilation. These strategies complicate dominant narratives of professionalization as a unidirectional process. Instead, they demonstrate that South Asian immigrant students actively reconfigure their identities, often in opposition to institutional expectations. This has significant

implications for the research question: it reveals that professional identity is not formed in isolation but emerges from a dynamic interplay between resistance, adaptation, and structural constraint. The significance lies in recognizing student agency not as assimilation, but as creative survival in oppressive contexts. For instance, participants like Raj and Priya described strategically filtering aspects of their identity in field settings to preserve safety while asserting professionalism. Rani, in contrast, spoke about only engaging in difficult conversations with those who showed openness and accountability. These tactics reflect both an ethic of self-protection and a resistance to assimilation. Participants' pursuit of spaces that affirm their cultural identity, whether through peers, therapy, or community, demonstrates a deliberate act of resistance to epistemic erasure.

Professional identity formation, therefore, is not a linear internalization of normative values, but an ongoing negotiation shaped by exclusion, resistance, and strategic adaptation. Importantly, the capacity to engage in critical self-reflection and integrate professional and cultural values was uneven across participants. Those with a strong sense of cultural identity, such as second-generation students with rooted intergenerational awareness, reported greater confidence in resisting dominant norms. First-generation participants, often in survival mode, described more fragmented and complex negotiations. Additionally, first-generation participants often emphasized survival strategies rooted in protecting cultural integrity, while second-generation students more frequently described negotiating belonging through selective assimilation. These generational contrasts complicate the idea of a uniform South Asian immigrant experience and underscore the layered intersections of migration history and professional identity. While gender identity was not explicitly collected for this study, future research could delve further into this and examine the kinds of patterns produced from it.

Altogether, these create a rich layer of analysis and discussion that can be built upon by future research into this topic. The themes examined above reveal how identity formation among South Asian immigrant students is deeply shaped by structural violence, institutional norms, and resistant agency. These insights compel a re-evaluation of how social work education is structured, delivered, and imagined.

Implications for Social Work Education and Practice

The insights from this study also point to an urgent need for social work education to move beyond superficial multiculturalism, and toward intentional cultural humility and structural accountability. The accounts shared by participants challenge educators and institutions to rethink what is considered ‘professional’ and to interrogate the whiteness embedded in curricular and field education design. However, efforts toward reform must guard against superficial inclusion that leaves foundational power structures intact. More than diverse content, this calls for a critical re-evaluation of pedagogical practices, faculty hiring and training, and field placement models to create truly inclusive and reflexive learning environments. Recommendations from participants suggest a multi-layered reform agenda that can be considered across short-, medium-, and long-term horizons.

Short-Term and High-Impact Actions

In the immediate term, participants emphasized the urgency of faculty diversification and accountability. Intentional hiring, developing, and retaining of racialized and immigrant faculty members who reflect the diversity of the student body and bring lived experience into pedagogical and supervisory spaces, as well as faculty training rooted in cultural humility rather than cultural competence, were identified as critical first steps. Faculty development and training must also be reimagined to equip educators with the tools to navigate identity-based dynamics in

the classroom. However, as participants also emphasized, identity alone is not enough. True safety was often co-created through critical engagement, acknowledgment of institutional gaps, and relational accountability. While participants noted moments of care and allyship from individual instructors, these were often described as the exception rather than the norm. In addition to faculty training, participants also identified a need for responsive mentorship that is attuned to the unique challenges faced by racialized and immigrant students – mentorship that not only affirms their cultural identities but also supports critical navigation of institutional norms and professional expectations. Alongside faculty reform, institutions can implement anti-racism training and conduct curriculum audits to identify Eurocentrism and tokenistic inclusion. These audits, coupled with intentional faculty development and mentorship programs that support racialized and immigrant students, represent some of the most immediate and high-impact reforms.

Medium-Term Structural Shifts

Beyond immediate interventions, participants highlighted the need for deeper structural change in curriculum and field education. Rather than limiting racialized content to elective courses or singular diversity weeks, programs must embed diasporic, Indigenous, and anti-colonial knowledge systems into the core curriculum. De Bie et al. (2021) emphasize that inclusion without shared epistemic authority often reproduces harm, as racialized students' knowledge is positioned as supplementary rather than foundational. The authors' work on pedagogical partnership urges institutions to move beyond representational inclusion and instead engage students in co-creating curricula and pedagogical practices that center their lived knowledge. Participants' experiences suggest that when cultural content is merely additive or tokenistic, it fails to challenge the epistemic foundations of the profession. Integrating diverse

epistemologies into foundational courses, case studies, and readings can help de-center whiteness and validate the lived experiences of immigrant and racialized students. This curricular shift must also be accompanied by a critical pedagogical stance that creates space for discomfort, dialogue, and shared meaning-making around issues of race, power, and colonial legacies.

Similarly, participants called for a fundamental restructuring of field education to better support racialized and immigrant students. This includes developing placement partnerships with agencies that center community-based, culturally grounded, and anti-oppressive approaches to practice. The work of de Bie et al. (2022) offers a compelling model of what a more just field education could look like. Drawing on participatory, student-led research at McMaster University, the authors argue that meaningful transformation must be rooted in relational accountability, reflexive pedagogy, and co-governance. Their research outlines initiatives such as the creation of placement opportunities that reflect students' cultural and social justice orientations, and purposeful equity/identity-focused placement matching (led by students' preferences) to reduce the burden of emotional labour and support identity affirmation. They further emphasize embedding equity-focused field instructor training (with an emphasis on teaching, supervision, and mediation) co-created with equity-deserving student groups and establishing participatory feedback loops to enable continuous student influence on field policy. These strategies resonate with participants' calls for supervision that is culturally affirming and structurally aware. It also means preparing field instructors to understand and respond to the unique challenges that students may face when their cultural identities are misrecognized, devalued, or seen as incompatible with professional norms. Participants' stories underscore the need for field education to move away from one-size-fits-all models of supervision and instead adopt frameworks that recognize multiple ways of knowing, helping, and being professional.

This may involve training supervisors to recognize how professionalism itself can be coded through whiteness, and to foster environments where students can feel both validated in their experiences of institutional exclusion and empowered to integrate their cultural identities into practice.

Long-Term Transformational Change

Finally, participants' narratives demand reforms that reimagine the very foundations of social work education. Long-term transformation requires embedding decolonial epistemologies and Indigenous partnership models into accreditation standards, ensuring that cultural and anti-colonial knowledges are not supplementary but constitutive of professional legitimacy. This also involves an institutional re-examination of how success, competency, and fitness for the profession are defined and assessed. Participants repeatedly spoke about the emotional and cognitive dissonance they experienced in trying to meet dominant expectations that were misaligned with their cultural values. Evaluative frameworks should be revisited to ensure they do not inadvertently reward assimilation or penalize difference. Building assessment tools that value reflexivity, relational engagement, and cultural insight, as opposed to neutrality, abstraction, or rigid professionalism, can better reflect the multiplicity of student strengths. At the institutional level, accountability must move beyond symbolic diversity initiatives. Participants' experiences reveal that systemic issues cannot be addressed through individual accommodations or one-time diversity initiatives. Institutions must commit to ongoing equity audits, community-engaged curriculum design, and participatory decision-making structures that center the voices of racialized students and faculty. Without systemic accountability, the burden of transformation continues to fall on those most impacted by exclusion. These changes do not suggest a reformist add-on to existing structures; rather, they call for a rethinking of the

profession's foundations. Only through such sustained structural change can social work education become a space of true belonging, integrity, and possibility for South Asian immigrant students and other historically marginalized communities.

In sum, meaningful transformation cannot rest on representation alone. It requires discomfort and institutional willingness to confront how social work, as a profession, has historically and continues to uphold systems of colonial and racial dominance. This includes a deeper engagement with decolonial and diasporic perspectives that can better hold the spiritual, emotional, and relational dimensions of identity work. While structural reforms in curriculum, pedagogy, and field education are critical, participants' narratives also demand a deeper transformation in how the profession conceptualizes identity, belonging, and legitimacy. What is needed is not just inclusion within existing frameworks, but a reimagining of the frameworks themselves.

Reimagining Professionalism and Identity

This section synthesizes key insights across the themes, offering a reimagined framework for professional identity rooted in cultural integrity, relationality, and justice. The findings challenge dominant paradigms of professional identity formation by illuminating how South Asian immigrant students resist, reinterpret, and reshape professional and institutional norms from the margins. South Asian immigrant students are not passive recipients of socialization into the profession; they are active negotiators, constantly navigating the friction between institutional norms and cultural values. Their stories reveal the limits of current professional models and call for a reimagining of social work education that is grounded in justice, cultural pluralism, and epistemic equity. As such, this study contributes to the growing body of

scholarship that centers racialized voices and challenges the field to confront its complicity in systems of exclusion.

Reimagining professionalism requires not only conceptual reframing but also tangible shifts in teaching and supervision. For instance, in classroom settings, professionalism might be assessed through reflexivity, collaboration, and accountability to community, rather than attendance, punctuality or dress codes. In field supervision, a student's use of cultural frameworks with clients could be validated as a professional strength, rather than redirected toward Eurocentric notions of objectivity. Similarly, assessments of professional identity could prioritize ethical navigation of power relations over conformity to whiteness-coded demeanor. These scenarios illustrate how a redefined professionalism could transform everyday teaching, supervision, and evaluation practices.

Crucially, this reimagining also invites attention to the ethics of knowledge production, including the positionality of the researcher. As a South Asian immigrant researcher, I was both insider and observer – sharing aspects of cultural background with participants while also occupying a distinct interpretive role. This cultural proximity allowed for deeper resonance, rapport-building, and empathetic understanding. Yet, it also presented challenges around interpretive distance. I remained vigilant throughout the analysis to ensure that my own experiences did not overshadow those of participants, continually returning to their words to foreground their meanings and truths. This reflexive process was essential to holding space for both convergence and divergence in our narratives, and to ensuring that the reimagined framework presented here remained rooted in participant voices, not researcher assumptions. By embracing this reflexivity and centering participant strategies of resistance and redefinition, this section once again affirms that professional identity formation is not a linear process of

assimilation but a dynamic, contested, and deeply personal negotiation. The findings demand that social work education be reconceptualized to honour this complexity, creating space for multiple, culturally resonant pathways to professional legitimacy.

Conclusion

Taken together, this chapter has critically examined the core themes that emerged from participants' experiences, contextualized within broader institutional structures and theoretical frameworks. It has highlighted the affective, cultural, and structural tensions South Asian immigrant students navigate while forming professional identities in social work education. These findings suggest that students are not passive recipients of professional norms, but active negotiators and resisters of dominant ideologies. By tracing the epistemic exclusions and acts of resistance embedded in their narratives, the chapter has underscored the urgent need to reimagine social work professionalism and pedagogy. In the concluding chapter that follows, the thesis will synthesize these insights to articulate the study's overall contributions, reflect on its limitations, and consider possibilities for future research and transformative practice.

Chapter Six: Conclusion

Revisiting the Research Purpose and Question

This study set out to explore how South Asian immigrant students in Ontario's Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) programs navigate the complex processes of cultural and professional identity formation within an educational system steeped in Eurocentrism and settler-colonial norms. Grounded in critical, constructivist, and decolonial paradigms, this research interrogated the ways institutional structures shape, constrain, and sometimes enable the identity work of South Asian immigrant students. Through thematic analysis of six in-depth interviews, this thesis sought to understand how South Asian immigrant students negotiate belonging, legitimacy, and professionalism in an academic and field landscape that often fails to see or support them.

Summary of Key Findings and Theoretical Contributions

The five themes cohere as a single process rather than discrete findings. Eurocentrism in curriculum and professionalism set the normative horizon within which students were required to perform legitimacy; under those conditions, cultural conflict and identity fragmentation emerged not as private dilemmas but as patterned responses to institutional design. Systemic racism and institutional neglect amplified this burden by normalizing silence, hypervisibility, and erasure across classroom and placement contexts. In turn, students' identity negotiation and survival strategies – code-switching, selective disclosure, peer solidarity, and reframing – functioned as both coping and professional identity work, enabling participation while evidencing the costs of constant boundary management. Finally, the theme of colonial residue and epistemological conflict names the knowledge politics underwriting these dynamics: whose knowledges count as 'professional', and on what terms.

These findings both draw on and extend Intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989), Critical Race Theory (CRT) (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017), Acculturation Theory (Berry, 1997), and Professional Identity Formation literature (Trede et al., 2012). Read together through Intersectionality and CRT, these dynamics illuminate how race, gender, class, and migration histories shape access to legitimacy in social work education; Acculturation and Professional Identity Formation help specify the interior labour and affective toll of navigating such terrains. Yet the findings also surface the limits of these frameworks when settler-colonial entanglements and the spiritual/relational dimensions of identity work are left implicit. The thesis therefore advances an integrated, relational account of professional identity formation – one that links everyday performances of ‘professionalism’ to broader epistemic and colonial orders, and that centers multiplicity, contradiction, and survival as constitutive of formation rather than deviations from it.

Contributions to Social Work Knowledge

The most significant conceptual contribution of this thesis is to re-theorize professional identity formation as a relational and politicized process embedded in Eurocentric and settler-colonial institutions and shaped by systemic exclusion, cultural dissonance, and the need for strategic survival. By demonstrating how ‘professionalism’ operates as a racialized, classed, and gendered regulatory regime, the study reframes identity formation from individual adaptation to a site of structural contestation and epistemic struggle. For example, participants consistently described feeling compelled to suppress emotional expressiveness, relational approaches to care, or collectivist values in order to align with the profession’s white, middle-class, individualistic expectations of professionalism. By tracing these tensions across both classroom and field

settings, the thesis concretely shows how social work's normative standards, frequently taken as neutral or universal, are in fact deeply racialized, gendered, and classed.

Second, the thesis makes a significant contribution simply by centering the voices and lived experiences of South Asian immigrant students as knowledge producers. By foregrounding their perspectives, this thesis disrupts the academic tendency to study racialized populations from the outside and instead positions them as knowledge holders and producers with valuable insights into the conditions of social work education. This is a crucial contribution as it responds to a longstanding gap in the field and affirms the necessity of building a body of scholarship that reflects both the diversity of students and the pluralism of student identities and experiences. In doing so, it not only diversifies who is heard within academic spaces but also begins to reshape what counts as knowledge in social work.

Third, the study provides a grounded critique of curricular and field education models that pursue inclusion without redistributing epistemic authority. Participants, for instance, highlighted how social work curricula rarely engaged meaningfully with South Asian or diasporic knowledge systems, and when racialized perspectives were included, they were often tokenized, flattened, brief, or treated as supplementary rather than foundational. By documenting the persistent gaps in representation, pedagogy, and mentorship, the study shows how current models of inclusion often serve institutional optics rather than student transformation. It shows that additive diversity reproduces harm when underlying hierarchies remain intact, and it identifies concrete levers – course design, placement matching, and supervisor preparation – through which institutions can shift practice.

Finally, the thesis contributes a positive re-imagining of professionalism from the margins: culturally situated, emotionally attuned, and accountable to communities and to the

realities of racialized settlerhood. Participants offered counter-narratives that reframed professionalism not as the bracketing of culture or emotion, but as a practice rooted in relationality, humility, and community accountability. These stories signal a powerful reimagining of what it means to be a ‘professional’ in social work, resisting the dominant paradigm that equates competence with detachment, neutrality, or whiteness. This redefinition aligns with epistemic justice projects in social work and offers a vocabulary for assessment and supervision that values reflexivity, relationality, and community accountability over assimilation. This reimagining of professionalism is especially urgent in the current moment, as social work programs across Canada grapple with calls for anti-racist, decolonial, and equity-oriented transformation. Centering the voices and knowledges of racialized students is not a symbolic gesture, but a necessary shift toward rebuilding the profession in ways that are relational, just, and accountable.

Implications for Practice and Policy

Practice

As discussed, at the practice level, these findings underscore the urgent need to revise curriculum and field education models. Programs must move beyond tokenistic gestures and toward embedding diasporic, Indigenous, and anti-colonial knowledge systems into core courses. Culturally grounded mentorship, peer support systems, and faculty development initiatives must be prioritized to ensure that racialized students are not left to navigate these challenges in isolation. Field education, too, requires a reimagining. Participants emphasized the need for intentional matching with supervisors, not solely based on shared identity, but on critical engagement, accountability, and mentorship practices that affirm diverse identities. Social work education must also recognize emotional and epistemic labour performed by racialized students

as real and valid components of professional formation and actively create spaces that support the affective aspects of student learning. When students' emotional and epistemic labour is unacknowledged, it can shape how they are evaluated in field placements, discourage full classroom participation, and contribute to internalized doubt about their legitimacy in the profession. Recognizing and resourcing this labour is essential not only for student wellbeing, but for fostering more just and reflective professional environments. Institutions should therefore make these forms of labour visible in learning outcomes and grading criteria. These practice-level shifts are unlikely to sustain without policy scaffolding. In particular, accreditation standards that recognize relational, community-accountable competencies would legitimate the proposed changes to teaching, supervision, and assessment, reducing the burden on individual faculty or field instructors to 'bend the rules' case by case.

Policy

At the policy level, accrediting bodies and institutions must revisit field placement standards, curriculum benchmarks, and faculty hiring practices. Accrediting bodies such as the Canadian Association for Social Work Education (CASWE) and regulatory organizations like the Ontario College of Social Workers and Social Service Workers (OCSWSSW) must be pushed to embed anti-racist and decolonial commitments into the very frameworks that govern curriculum, field education, and institutional accountability. Policies should be shaped by equity audits, structured student voice mechanisms, and transparent accountability to racialized students and faculty, with timelines and public reporting. Institutions must also consider their responsibility to facilitate decolonial learning for all students. This includes integrating Indigenous sovereignty, settler accountability, and racialized settlerhood and responsibilities into foundational coursework. Furthermore, social work education should be understood in relation to broader

newcomer integration and anti-racist policy work by recognizing that post-secondary institutions are often key sites in the reproduction (or disruption) of racialized power.

Policy realignment is not an end in itself; it is the mechanism that makes practice transformation non-negotiable. When anti-racist and decolonial competencies are written into accreditation outcomes, programs must map them across required courses, revise syllabi, and adopt assessment rubrics that weight reflexivity, relational accountability, and community engagement. When field standards tie site approval to equity-oriented placement matching and supervisor preparation, field offices can implement matching protocols, require pre-placement training, and protect time for reflective supervision (Bogo, 2010; CASWE-ACFTS, 2021). When standards mandate equity audits and public reporting, faculties run regular curriculum reviews, track placement demographics and outcomes, and publish time-bound action plans. Embedding these requirements in accreditation and regulatory instruments shifts the classroom and field reforms outlined above from ‘nice to have’ to conditions of program legitimacy.

Directions for Future Research

While this study is a step toward addressing longstanding silences in the literature, numerous gaps remain that must be addressed to build a more inclusive and critically engaged body of social work research. This study focused exclusively on South Asian immigrant students; future research must explore how other racialized and immigrant groups experience similar or different patterns of inclusion, exclusion, and identity negotiation. Comparative studies across racialized immigrant cohorts (e.g., Black, Arab, Latin, East/Southeast Asian to name a few) would deepen the profession’s understanding of how race, migration, diasporic identities, and professional socialization intersect in different ways. Further research is also needed on the long-term implications of identity fragmentation and institutional erasure, especially in the early

career phases of social work practice. As well, there is a critical need for further inquiry into how racialized immigrant students navigate their complicity within settler colonial structures, and what possibilities exist for cultivating decolonial, solidaristic learning in these spaces.

Participatory, community-engaged research on racialized settlerhood should examine how solidarity, relational accountability, and land-centered learning can be cultivated within professional education. This study also invites longitudinal research that follows graduates into practice to trace how identity work, masking, and epistemic labour evolve, and explores implications for wellbeing, retention, and client care. Institutional case studies should evaluate culturally grounded pedagogies, mentorship models, and equity-oriented placement matching, including how faculty and field instructors understand and enact race, culture, and professionalism. Finally, mixed methods designs that link qualitative accounts to structural outcomes (retention, licensing, mental health indicators) would provide a fuller picture of how institutional climate and educational design shape the long-term trajectories of racialized social work students across Canadian institutions. Addressing these gaps is essential not only for deepening academic understanding but for informing institutional practices that can better support the academic and emotional wellbeing of racialized students. As the profession continues to reckon with its complicity in upholding exclusionary structures, research that foregrounds lived experience must be central to its transformation.

Limitations and Critical Reflections

This study, while rich in depth, is not without limitations. The small sample size, though consistent with qualitative research, limits the transferability of findings to broader populations. While the goal of this research was not generalizability, the narratives represent a specific set of lived experiences and should be interpreted within that context. Participants self-selected into the

study, meaning they chose to take part based on their own interest and availability. While this approach is consistent with qualitative methodologies that center lived experience, it may introduce bias toward those with particularly strong or complex perspectives on cultural and professional identity formation. As a result, voices of students who may have had more neutral or affirming experiences, or who felt less confident speaking about exclusion, may be underrepresented.

Methodologically, the study relied on one-time, semi-structured interviews, which limited the opportunity to follow up on emerging ideas or observe longitudinal shifts in identity formation. Additionally, while thematic analysis enabled a deep and nuanced engagement with participants' narratives, my interpretation of the data was inevitably shaped by my positionality as both a researcher and a member of the South Asian diaspora. This interpretive lens influenced how I made sense of the themes, which underscores the importance of reflexivity in ensuring that participants' voices were represented with care and integrity. The time and resource constraints typical of a Master's thesis also limited the possibility of incorporating more diverse institutional perspectives or cross-comparative groupings within the South Asian diaspora (e.g., generational status, religious identity, national background). As an insider-researcher, myself a South Asian immigrant navigating Canadian social work academia, I brought both strengths and challenges to the research. My shared cultural background facilitated rapport, trust, and deeper dialogue, creating a sense of familiarity that encouraged participants to speak openly. At the same time, this proximity required sustained reflexivity to avoid assuming shared experience or projecting my own interpretations onto participants' narratives. Through journaling and supervision, I worked to remain accountable to participants' stories as distinct and not merely reflective of my

own, and to ensure that counter-narratives were incorporated thoughtfully to avoid over-identification, misrepresentation, confirmation bias, or the inadvertent erasure of nuance.

Additionally, the study's engagement with settler colonialism was necessarily limited in scope. While the theme of racialized settlerhood emerged strongly, a more sustained and community-based participatory approach would be required to fully do justice to this terrain. Engaging with Indigenous scholars, frameworks, and co-researchers in future work would support a more relational and ethically grounded examination of settler colonial complicity and decolonial possibilities within immigrant identity formation.

Final Reflection

At its core, this study is a testament to the resilience, complexity, and brilliance of South Asian immigrant students who navigate a profession not always built with them in mind. Despite facing systemic exclusion, identity fragmentation, and institutional neglect, participants found ways to assert belonging, resist erasure, and imagine new ways of being professional. Their narratives demand more than curricular adjustments or performative diversity statements. They call for a transformation in how we understand professionalism in social work, how we build community in the classroom, and how we teach social work on stolen land. As a scholar-practitioner, I carry this work forward with deep humility and renewed commitment to epistemic justice, to decolonial learning, and to building a social work profession that does not ask students to leave parts of themselves behind in order to belong.

Reckoning with these findings also requires naming the location from which social work education proceeds: programs operate on stolen land and within a settler state whose institutions continue to dispossess Indigenous peoples. Participants' reflections on racialized settlerhood underscore that transformation cannot be reduced to diversification of content or personnel; it

demands relational accountability to Indigenous communities, epistemologies, and lands. For social work education, this entails re-centering land- and community-based forms of learning, building partnerships with Indigenous scholars and organizations, and teaching professionalism as responsibility to relationships rather than conformity to dominant comportment.

The path ahead is complex, but the stories shared here remind us that transformation is not only necessary, it is already underway in participant resistance and in the spaces where educators, researchers, and students begin to challenge dominant paradigms together. Grounded in the insights of Intersectionality, Critical Race Theory, Acculturation Theory, and Professional Identity Formation, this research affirms that identity work in social work education is not only cultural and personal, but deeply structural and political. These frameworks offer tools not only to diagnose systemic harm, but to envision more relational, pluralistic, and just futures in social work.

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Appendix A: Use of Generative AI

In accordance with McMaster University's policy, I used generative AI tools (specifically Microsoft 365 Copilot and ChatGPT by OpenAI) throughout the writing process of this thesis, limited to the purposes of brainstorming, outlining, editing, and revising text. The following outlines how AI was used and how I ensured academic integrity:

- Tools Used: Microsoft 365 Copilot and ChatGPT
- Scope of Use:
 - Brainstorming: To explore ideas for theme naming during thematic analysis and to clarify the scope of literature review sections.
 - Outlining: For support structuring major chapters (e.g., Literature Review, Discussion) and refining logical flow.
 - Editing: For feedback on grammar, clarity, and sentence-level refinement, especially for transitions, repetition reduction, and conciseness.
- Prompts Used: I asked for support with:
 - Rewording academic text for clarity
 - Improving flow and transitions between themes
 - Ensuring theoretical consistency in the Discussion Chapter
 - Identifying redundancies, tense consistency, and passive phrasing
- Evaluation of Content: All AI-generated suggestions were critically evaluated by me for accuracy, tone, relevance, and alignment with my research. I did not use any AI-generated content without reviewing and revising it.
- Fact-Checking and Citations: I verified all theoretical references and quotes by consulting original sources. I ensured all references included in the thesis were cited in accordance

with APA guidelines. ChatGPT was not used to produce content or analysis, only to support revision and refinement.

- All analysis, theoretical engagement, and interpretation of data remain entirely my own.