Exploring Sikh Punjabi Canadian Women's Experiences of Navigating Salient Familial and

Cultural Expectations

by

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Abstract

Several South Asian women in Western contexts navigate significantly challenging gendered expectations from their families and cultural communities pertaining to academics, career (Baggulay & Hussain, 2014), domestic responsibilities (Mustafa et al., 2020), family management, cultural preservation, marriageability, marriage, and children (Mehrotra, 2016; Somerville, 2019). The expectations can be significantly distressing (Grewal et al., 2005; Mafura & Charura, 2021; Mehrotra, 2016; Somerville, 2019), yet there is limited research specifically exploring the experience of navigating them. Sikh Punjabi Canadian women are one such South Asian cultural group that navigates challenging familial and cultural expectations. Through an interpretative phenomenological analysis of semi-structured interviews, the present study explored five Sikh Punjabi Canadian women's strengths and coping strategies in navigating salient familial and cultural expectations. Findings revealed participant experiences of expectations to be consistent with existing literature and identified four group experiential themes capturing participant strengths in navigating gendered expectations. Strengths included (1) recognizing expectations as unfair and harmful, (2) gaining the courage to resist expectations, (3) engaging in strategies to alleviate distress and enhance emotional wellbeing, and (4) balancing care for self and care for family. These strengths and coping strategies provide several potential avenues for exploring culturally aligned interventions that draw on the existing resilience of Sikh Punjabi Canadian women, and thus, support the self-empowerment of the Sikh Punjabi Canadian community.

Keywords: familial/cultural expectations, gendered expectations, gender roles, Sikh Punjabi Canadian women, strengths-based approach

Preface

This thesis is an original work by Harnaaz Kaur Hundal. The research project, of which this thesis is a part, received research ethics approval from the University of Alberta Research Ethics Board 1, Project Name "Punjabi Canadian Women's Strengths in Navigating Familial and Cultural Expectations," No. 00131231, 2023.

Dedication

I dedicate my work to my two grandmothers, my late Dadi Ma, Rajinder Kaur Hundal and my Nani Ma, Jagir Kaur Khehra. Both women deeply value education and were not provided the opportunity to fulfill their academic potential because of the expectation that they sacrifice their own hopes and dreams for their families. Their sacrifices in navigating their familial and cultural expectations provided me with the privilege and means to pursue a higher education and career that supports the self-empowerment of Sikh Punjabi women. I love them both dearly, and know they are proud of their academic legacy in the form of my current and future works.

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I want to thank my friend and colleague, Tarleen, for acting as a peer reviewer during the analysis process. Her insights and ideas improved the quality of my work and inspired me to continue with research that supports the self-empowerment of cultural communities. I also want to thank my friends and family, Jaya, Raman, Peeta, and Ahad, for their constant loving presence and unwavering support.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

In this chapter, I provide background information on the research topic, present the research purpose, provide definitions of key terms, discuss my positionality as the researcher, and provide an overview of the thesis.

Background

South Asian women in Western contexts navigate significant expectations from their family and culture pertaining to academics, career (Baggulay & Hussain, 2014; Chaudhary, 2024), domestic responsibilities (Mustafa et al., 2020), family management, cultural preservation, marriageability, marriage, and children (Mehrotra, 2016; Somerville, 2019). As a part of this community, Sikh Punjabi immigrant women also experience such gendered expectations, however, there is limited research that specifically explores Sikh Punjabi women's experiences of such expectations. The Sikh Punjabi community's cultural identity is defined by a unique history of oppression and marginalization within South Asian and broader global contexts (Ahluwalia & Alimchandani, 2013; Aujla-Bhullar, 2021). However, research involving the Sikh Punjabi community tends to focus more broadly on South Asian culture, which is wrongfully perceived as homogenous within Western contexts (George & Chaze, 2016; Ghosh, 2013). The Sikh Punjabi diaspora is largely represented in Canada, making up 2.1% of the Canadian population (Statistics Canada, 2022a). Thus, this study aims to explore Punjabi Canadian women's unique cultural experiences of gendered expectations, building on pre-existing literature on South Asian immigrant women's experiences.

It is generally understood that gendered expectations are a source of intense stress for many South Asian immigrant women (Chaudhary, 2024; Grewal et al., 2005; Mafura & Charura, 2021; Mahapatra & Marugan, 2024; Mehrotra, 2016; Somerville, 2019). However, there is little

to no exploration of the strengths they must draw on to navigate and cope with these expectations. Furthermore, there is limited published research that centers Sikh Punjabi Canadian women's strengths and/or coping strategies, especially not in the context of navigating gendered expectations. In fact, most research involving Punjabi, Indian, and South Asian women in Western contexts focuses on their experiences of suffering, abuse, and violence (e.g., Ahmad et al., 2013; Mucina, 2018; Mustafa et al., 2020; Sabri, Bhandari et al., 2018; Sabri, Simonet, et al., 2018; Singh et al., 2010; Wanigaratne et al., 2023, etc.). Although this is important given the prevalence of domestic violence against women in South Asian communities, it neglects to highlight the obvious strength involved in navigating gendered expectations within their cultural-relational contexts.

Research Purpose

The aim of the present study is to take a strengths-based approach to exploring Sikh Punjabi Canadian women's experiences in navigating salient familial and cultural expectations, so as to provide potential avenues for culturally aligned interventions that draw on the group's pre-existing strengths, resources, and coping strategies. Given the lack of existing literature on Sikh Punjabi Canadian women's strengths, resources, and coping strategies it is necessary to take a qualitative approach that allows for an in-depth exploration of their lived experiences. Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) is a qualitative methodology fitting for this study as it allows for a detailed exploration of participants' understanding of significant experiences in their lives through individual semi-structured interviews (Smith et al., 2022). Therefore, through an IPA of individual semi-structured interviews, I aim to explore Sikh Punjabi Canadian women's strengths and coping strategies in navigating salient familial and cultural expectations.

Definitions

It is necessary to define what I mean by reoccurring key terms within the context of this study such as gendered expectations, patriarchy, strengths, stress, coping, and resilience.

Gendered Expectations

Expectations are generally defined as the norms, beliefs, and/or preferences that help to define one's role within a social group (Biddle, 1986). Gendered expectations can therefore be defined as the norms, beliefs, and and/or preferences that define one's gender role within their cultural context. This is consistent with Eagly's (1987) understanding of gendered expectations. According to Eagly's (1987) social role theory, or gender role theory, individuals' role in society is driven by their perceived gender, and gendered expectations perpetuate gender role beliefs specific to their cultural context.

Patriarchy

Given that gendered expectations in South Asian communities are rooted in patriarchal values, it is necessary to define patriarchy. Patriarchy is a system that perpetuates gender inequality in a way that privileges men and disadvantages women (Nash, 2020; Rai & Choi, 2018).

Strengths

Peterson and Seligman (2004) define strengths as positive traits, mechanisms, or processes that contribute to a meaningful, engaging, and fulfilling life. More specifically, they suggest that strengths are the means by which individuals display virtues, which are universal core characteristics that are valued cross-culturally by moral philosophers and religious thinkers alike and are likely rooted in biology through evolutionary processes. Strengths not only determine how individuals cope with adversity and produce beneficial outcomes but are also

valuable and fulfilling in themselves regardless of their ability to help individuals cope or lead to desirable outcomes (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Throughout this document, I use the term "strength" as it is described here, as an overarching concept that describes the traits and processes that are intrinsically valuable for individuals, facilitate coping, and/or promote resilience.

Stress and Coping

According to Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) transactional model of stress and coping, stress is defined as a subjective experience that arises when an individual appraises an event or situation to exceed their resources and endanger their wellbeing. Appraisal is the process by which individuals evaluate whether a situation is stressful, and assess their internal and external resources to cope with the situation. Appraisal is a precursor to successfully coping with a stressor. Coping is defined as the cognitive and/or behavioral processes by which individuals manage their distress, deal with the stressor, and sustain their wellbeing (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984).

Resilience

Resilience is often defined as one's ability and capacity to adapt and return to healthy functioning after facing adversity (Luthar et al., 2000; Masten, 2007). However, in Ungar's (2012) work on resilience across culturally diverse contexts, he argues that resilience is more than an individual's ability to overcome adversity. Ungar (2012) takes a social ecological approach to understanding resilience, emphasizing that the ability to promote wellbeing in the face of adversity is a consequence of personal strengths and the resources available to individuals in their social and physical environment.

The Researcher

I am a 25-year-old Sikh Punjabi Canadian woman with a strong connection to my family and culture. My initial understanding of the research topic was thus largely informed by my lived experience of navigating familial and cultural expectations, and of witnessing other women in my family and community do the same. I have grown up with expectations pertaining to academics, career, dating, chores, appearance, marriage, and children that my brother, male cousins, and partner have never had to navigate. Although some of these expectations came directly from my parents and extended family members, others came from internalizing gender roles I witnessed growing up. It seems to be implicitly understood by women within my circle that gendered expectations are a cultural phenomenon that centrally influence how they live their lives. Growing up in Canada one becomes exposed to values that conflict with their culture, making the experience of navigating one's culturally determined expectations even more complex.

Having been socialized within Sikh Punjabi and Canadian contexts, I wrestle with the tension between finding value in fulfilling cultural expectations and struggling with my cultural identity because of the lack of autonomy afforded by such expectations, especially compared to men in the community and peers from other cultural groups. While I feel empowered by my culture, I am often frustrated by the unfairness of certain gendered experiences rooted in cultural expectations. For example, as I was growing up, I enjoyed excelling academically and found value in the prospect of having a strong career, but I also struggled with the overwhelming pressure to excel in school and work. I was not interested in dating prior to "marriageable age," but I also felt envious as I witnessed others experience young love guilt-free in high school. I felt valued as a central figure and peacekeeper within my family, but also felt irritated that my

brother was not expected to share this responsibility. Other Sikh Punjabi women in my circle share this tension to different degrees depending on their individual cultural identities and familial contexts. Navigating these expectations involves reflecting, strategizing, processing, working to fulfill the expectations, working to resist the expectations, and dealing with the emotional, psychological, and social consequences of one's choices throughout this experience. Both stress and strength are implicit in this process, and I chose to focus on the latter in order to take a strengths-based approach when studying women navigating this cultural phenomenon, while still acknowledging the patriarchal roots of the expectations.

As a student in counselling psychology, my goal is to support Sikh Punjabi Canadian women in their navigation of culturally driven experiences through culturally aligned evidence-based interventions. I investigated the existing literature on how Sikh Punjabi Canadian women cope with salient familial and cultural expectations, knowing that drawing from my personal experience would not be enough. There is very limited published research on Sikh Punjabi Canadian women's strengths, resources, and/or coping strategies, especially within the context of navigating expectations. As a feminist, I am taking a transformative approach to the research problem. I aim to contribute a body of knowledge that recognizes Sikh Punjabi Canadian women as their own community, with strengths, resources, and resilience that can be drawn upon in their navigation of cultural experiences, so as to inform the future exploration of culturally-aligned interventions.

I come with my own identity, assumptions, beliefs, and values that likely influence my interpretation of other Sikh Punjabi Canadian women's experiences. This can be a strength as having a preexisting understanding of the community will help me contextualize findings in a culturally appropriate manner. It can also be a limitation if I allow any biases to interfere with an

accurate interpretation of participant accounts. I understand that individuals belonging to a shared cultural group may have unique cultural experiences based on several factors including age, family dynamics, acculturation, immigration, life stage, values, and so on. Keeping this in mind, I engaged in a significant amount of self-reflective journaling and memoing to minimize the negative impact of biases on the quality of analysis and reported findings. Overall, my goal is to support Sikh Punjabi Canadian women in their self-empowerment through dissemination of research that highlights the many strengths of this community.

Overview of Thesis

In chapter 2, I delve into the existing literature on the Sikh Punjabi Canadian community, the reason for gendered expectations, the different salient familial and cultural expectations, the consequences of deviating from the expectations, and Sikh Punjabi Canadian women's known strengths and resilience. In chapter 3, I go into the methodology and methods, further explaining and providing rationale for the use of IPA given the research purpose. In chapter 4, I report participant findings. First, I provide participant vignettes that focus on their reported experiences of expectations. Then, I report the group experiential themes and subthemes exemplifying participants' strengths and coping strategies, supported by evidence from interview transcripts. In chapter 5, I discuss the findings in relation to existing research, ending with a discussion of potential avenues for culturally aligned interventions, limitations of the current study, and future directions.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

I begin this review of literature with a discussion of South Asian identity, acknowledging the cultural, linguistic, and religious diversity of South Asian cultural groups. Then I dive into the Sikh Punjabi identity, which includes a brief overview of *Sikhi* and the history of Sikh oppression. I contextualize gendered expectations within the framework of honor as a tool of the patriarchy. Then I present the salient familial and cultural expectations, exploring each one in some depth, followed by an overview of the consequences of deviating from the expectations. Finally, I go over research literature on the strengths and resilience of Sikh Punjabi Canadian women and South Asian women in general, highlighting significant gaps.

South Asian Identity

South Asia is a socially constructed group of nations most often reported to include India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka, and sometimes Afghanistan, Bhutan, Myanmar, and Nepal as well (Ghosh, 2013). Although there are significant commonalities amongst South Asian cultures, each group also has unique rich historical, cultural, and social characteristics. Although community insiders often recognize their internal diversity, they are sometimes perceived as a homogenous cultural group in Western contexts, including Canada (George & Chaze, 2016; Ghosh, 2013). Scholars such as Ghosh (2013) problematize this generalization, arguing that the categorizations of "South Asia" and "South Asian" are externally imposed products of colonial and post-colonial power. In an empirical study exploring what being South Asian means to South Asian individuals in Toronto, majority of the respondents agreed to be labelled South Asian by a census but rejected the notion that South Asians share a culture (Ghosh, 2013). Labelling individual cultural groups as South Asian erases their great historical, linguistic, cultural, and

religious diversity which interferes with the intellectual understanding of individual communities wrapped up in this terminology (Ghosh, 2013).

I intend to focus on Sikh Punjabi culture specifically to ensure I do not further contribute to the wrongful homogenization of South Asian cultural groups. However, I cannot be certain that existing research surrounding South Asian women's experiences is not also somewhat representative of Sikh Punjabi women's experiences given that the latter is included as a part of this socially constructed broader South Asian culture in research contexts. Additionally, the patriarchal values underlying gendered expectations in Sikh Punjabi culture are internalized from a broader South Asian context (Dhillon & Humble, 2020; Singh, 2008), indicating that there are likely strong parallels in Sikh Punjabi and broader South Asian culture in terms of expectations. Therefore, in this literature review I draw on research focusing on Sikh Punjabi and broader South Asian cultural groups to provide a coherent narrative of the foundational context for the study, whilst remaining mindful of the vast cultural, linguistic, religious, and spiritual diversity of South Asian cultural groups (Ghosh, 2013).

Sikh Punjabi Identity

The Sikh Punjabi community is a globally minoritized and racialized group, only constituting 1.72% the population in its home country of India (Census 2011, 2022). The greatest proportion of Sikh Punjabi individuals live in Canada, making up 2.1% of the Canadian population (Statistics Canada, 2022a). The first Sikhs traveled from India to Canada in 1897 as colonial soldiers for the British army (Walton-Roberts, 1998). This was followed by a steady period of Sikh Punjabi immigration to Canada in the early 1900s, which increased exponentially towards the end of the century as anti-Sikh tensions reached an all-time high in post-colonial India (George & Chaze, 2016). The Sikh Punjabi community grew in Canada as members of this

group left their homes for safety and a better future in a foreign nation. Recently, Sikh Punjabi immigration to Canada has been a mix of wealthier families in search of greater education and employment opportunities (Smythe & Toohey, 2009). Currently, there is a vibrant community of Sikh Punjabi individuals in Canada, composed of first, second, and third generation immigrants, mainly residing in Alberta, British Columbia, and Ontario (Statistics Canada, 2024).

Punjabi individuals are originally from the divided Punjab region of post-colonial India and Pakistan established in 1947 (Ahluwalia & Alimchandani, 2013). Although the terms "Sikh" and "Punjabi" tend to be interchangeable within a Canadian context (Mucina, 2018), it is necessary to acknowledge that Punjabi culture is shared by individuals from diverse religious backgrounds, including Sikhs, Hindus, Muslims, and Christians. Given that over 90% of Sikhs have Punjabi roots, there is a significant interplay of Sikh and Punjabi cultural traits (Bal & Daman, 2021) which creates a unique Sikh Punjabi cultural identity influenced by both, the Punjabi culture and the Sikh religion.

Punjabi is a complex multireligious linguo-ethnic identity (Bal & Daman, 2021). Punjabi culture is collectivistic with a strong focus on family and community (DuPree et al., 2013; Mucina, 2018), and patriarchal with traditional gender roles (Bal & Daman, 2021; DuPree et al., 2013; Koehn, 2021). It is known for its welcoming hospitality (Ahluwalia & Alimchandani, 2013; Bali & Thakur, 2024), colorful regal attire, delicious food rich in fats and spices, and spirited song and dance (Bali & Thakur, 2024). Punjab is largely located on agricultural land, making farming a part of Punjabi culture that contributes to the strong connection Punjabis have to their land and the value they place in hard work (Bali & Thakur, 2024). Sikhi is the defining feature separating Sikh Punjabi culture from Punjabi culture in general. In the following sub-

sections, I provide an overview of the Sikh religion followed by a discussion of this community's history of oppression to contextualize the research problem.

An Overview of Sikhi

The Sikh religion is widely known as "Sikhism," an extension of the word "Sikh" created by colonialism (Nesbitt, 2016). Sikhs refer to their path as Sikhi or *Gursikhi*, wherein the "Sikh" is the disciple or learner, and the Guru is the teacher. A central focus in Sikhi is oneness in all living beings and in nature (Nesbitt, 2016). According to Sikhi, life is cyclical, death is certain, reincarnation is common, and souls are immortal (Ahluwalia & Alimchandani, 2013). Sikhs attend Sikh temples, called *Gurudwaras*, to practice their religion around the world (Nesbitt, 2016). Sikhs cover their heads and remove their shoes in *Gurudwaras*, and kneel and bow towards the *Guru Granth Sahib*, the Sikh book of scriptures, to show respect. Depending on their relationship with Sikhi, men might wear a turban, women might wear a *dumalla* or *chunni* (head coverings). How formally Sikhs practice Sikhi varies for each individual. Sikhi was created as an alternative way of knowing and living that rejected the oppressive practices of existing systems and perpetuated the belief that everyone deserves to be treated equitably (Nesbitt, 2016). Evidently, the tenets of Sikhi oppose the patriarchy and support gender equality, which contrasts with the patriarchal nature of Punjabi culture (Bal & Daman, 2021).

Beyond gender equality, Sikh scriptures express abundant respect for women, especially recognizing their power in creating and nurturing life (Kaur & Moghal, 2014). The related concepts of *daya* (compassion), *sat* (truth), *santokh* (contentment), *nimrata* (humility), and *pyaar* (love) have been referred to as the five pillars of Sikhi (Mehta, 2020). Courage and compassion are especially defining characteristics of the Sikh community (Mehta, 2020). Additional prominent beliefs in Sikhi include *hukam* (divine will and timing), *karma* (actions determine

consequences), *seva* (selfless service), *sangat* (community), *simran* (meditation and prayer), and advocacy (Ahluwalia & Alimchandani, 2013). According to Sikhi, connecting to the Divine through various forms of meditation (Curie & Bedi, 2019) will provide the strength to fight oppression and empower equity-deserving groups (Ahluwalia & Alimchandani, 2013; Kaur & Moghal, 2014). A strong history of oppression unites the Sikh community since its creation, giving rise to its warrior spirit of self-sacrifice, heroism, and martyrdom in fighting against discrimination (Ahluwalia & Alimchandani, 2013).

History of Oppression

It is necessary to recognize the Sikh Punjabi community's unique history of oppression to emphasize the importance of recognizing Sikh Punjabi culture as a distinct individual part of the broader South Asian context. Additionally, this history will help contextualize the setting and enforcement of gendered expectations within the Sikh Punjabi Canadian community. The Sikh Punjabi population is globally marginalized, and has experienced a history of oppression since its creation in both native and foreign contexts (Ahluwalia & Alimchandani, 2013; Aujla-Bhullar, 2021; Benson, 2023; Rana & Lara-Cooper, 2021). The development of the Sikh identity was met with religious oppression by dominant cultural groups in the form of horrific violence early on (Mandair, 2022; Rana & Lara-Cooper, 2021). The warrior spirit central in Sikhi is rooted in a "historical legacy of radical resistance" (Kaur, 2020, p. 117) against violent oppression. During India's colonization, the British rule's capitalization on the Sikh warrior spirit of sacrifice and martyrdom was evident in the overrepresentation of Sikh soldiers in the British colonial army (Kaur, 2020). At the end of the British rule in 1947, the partition of India and Pakistan across the Punjab region represented the division of Hindus and Muslims into separate independent nations (Ahluwalia & Alimchandani, 2013; Kaur, 2020; Rana & Lara-Cooper, 2021). This decision

neglected and disproportionately harmed the Sikh community, a group unwelcome in both nations.

As a direct consequence of Sikh religious marginalization in India following the partition, there was a series of events leading to the Anti-Sikh Riots of 1984, which involved the genocide of thousands of Sikhs in India (Ahluwalia & Alimchandani, 2013; Kaur, 2020; Rana & Lara-Cooper, 2021). Anti-Sikh violence continued for several years in the aftermath of this event (Kaur, 2020). This time aligned with a huge boom in Sikh Punjabi refugee migration (Rana & Lara-Cooper, 2021), especially to Canada, to escape an unsafe home country (George & Chaze, 2016). Although the racism and discrimination experienced by Sikh Punjabis in North America was already significant in early stages of Sikh Punjabi immigration, it escalated significantly after 9/11 as turban-wearing Sikhs were mistaken for Muslims, who were being targeted as terrorists due to a spike in misplaced Islamophobia (Ahluwalia & Alimchandani, 2013; Ahluwalia & Pellettiere, 2010; Kaur, 2020, Rana & Lara-Cooper, 2021). Following this, there have been several individual acts of discrimination, hate crimes, incidents of socio-spatial exclusion and violations of civil liberties that have contributed to the ongoing marginalization and hypervigilance of the Sikh Punjabi community in Western contexts (Benson, 2023). When marginalized groups face such oppression based on their cultural identity, they often respond by (1) taking on characteristics of the majority as a part of their cultural identity (Ahluwalia & Alimchandani, 2013; Chopra, 2021), and (2) engaging in measures to preserve this cultural identity in local and foreign contexts where it is threatened (Mucina, 2018; Esperitu, 2001).

Contextualizing Gendered Expectations within a History of Oppression

Recall that tenets of Sikhi include the equity and empowerment of all regardless of gender, caste, race, or religion, and thus, does not condone a patriarchal culture that places

women in a subordinate role (Aujla-Bhullar, 2021; Bal & Daman, 2021; Dhillon & Humble, 2020; Singh, 2008). This begs the question of how Sikh Punjabi culture became patriarchal. Sikhi was born into a patriarchal context within pre-colonial India and Pakistan regions, which was emphasized by colonialism shortly after (Singh, 2008). A key part of Sikhi was a counter-cultural movement towards gender equality in response to the dominant patriarchal culture (Dhillon & Humble, 2020). Published historical analyses of the patriarchy in India reveal that British colonialism both introduced and exacerbated patriarchal norms in Indian culture, leading to the continued assertion of Indian masculinity in post-colonial India (Khurana, 2018). This explains how patriarchal values became a central part of Sikh Punjabi culture, despite Sikh principles of gender equality (Dhillon & Humble, 2020; Singh, 2008). The gendered expectations Punjabi women experience are firmly rooted in this patriarchy (Koehn, 2021; Mucina, 2018). Situating Sikh Punjabi Canadian women's experiences in the context of broader patriarchal systems is important in separating Punjabi culture from wider systems of oppression (Koehn, 2021).

It is known that women's behavior tends to be controlled and policed in immigrant communities within foreign contexts as a way to protect their cultural identity (Esperitu, 2001), leading to a stronger enforcement of cultural norms, values, and practices (Mucina, 2018). Recall that this cultural identity is defined by the group's internalized patriarchy, which underlies a set of expectations women from South Asian communities, including the Sikh Punjabi community, have to navigate (Mehrotra, 2016; Mucina, 2018). Therefore, the gendered expectations might be more salient and strongly enforced in an attempt to facilitate the protection of the Sikh Punjabi identity within a Canadian context. This is reinforced by Srinivasan's (2018) comprehensive mixed-methods study involving focus group discussions, surveys, and 50 individual interviews

with multiple generations of Punjabi Canadian men and women. She argues that the desire to hold onto Punjabi culture in Canada through the stronger enforcement of traditional patriarchal gender roles is an attempt to overcome marginalization (Srinivasan, 2018). Recall that gender roles, perpetuated through gendered expectations, help define social roles within one's cultural context (Eagly, 1987). These social roles reinforce the family and community's social structure and identity, and thus it would make sense that these roles are more strongly enforced in contexts that threaten this identity. Gendered expectations are thus contextualized within the patriarchal values central in Punjabi culture (Koehn, 2021; Mucina, 2018), and enforced more strongly within a Canadian context (Srinivasan, 2018). In the following section, I explore this further, specifically examining the underlying role of honor or izzat as a tool of the patriarchy.

Honor or Izzat

Izzat is a collectivist notion pertaining to "one's responsibility to family and community, and the preservation of family "honor" and reputation" (Mucina, 2018, p. 427). Mucina's (2018) qualitative interviews with six second-generation Punjabi Canadian women revealed the centrality of honor in the expectations Punjabi Canadian women navigate. Izzat is a tool of the patriarchy that provides a means to control and regulate women through shame, guilt, honor-related violence (HRV), including domestic violence, sexual violence, and intimate partner violence (Mucina, 2018), and ruptures in family and community relationships (Mehrotra, 2016).

In the oppression of marginalized groups, women are victimized in a particularly violent way, often sexually, as an attack on the community's honor (Segalo, 2015). Sikh Punjabi women have experienced such violence across historical attacks on this community and continue to experience such violence within and beyond their own community (Ahluwalia et al., 2015). Policing women's behavior is usually a response to a group's threatened cultural identity

(Esperitu, 2001), thus, protecting honor through controlling women's behavior is likely a response to continued attacks on the community's honor. The patriarchal nature of several South Asian cultural groups places the responsibility to preserve honor on women's shoulders (Mucina, 2018; Somerville, 2019), which is done through their fulfillment of familial and cultural expectations defining a script for how they should live their lives (Mehrotra, 2016). These gendered expectations become discriminatory in contexts where the threats to honor are heightened (Srinivasan, 2018).

Srinivasan (2018) found that in the Canadian context, there is a greater level of insecurity surrounding family honor because there are greater "risks" associated with the freedom and autonomy women in individualistic Western societies are afforded. As a result, expectations that preserve family honor are more strongly enforced. Because daughters are the holders of family honor, having daughters puts the family honor at greater risk. In contexts where the community's honor is threatened, there is therefore a greater probability of "daughter aversion," which is the desire to avoid the birth of daughters. Upon the birth of a daughter, there is often "daughter discrimination," which is a term that explains the discriminatory treatment of Punjabi daughters compared to Punjabi sons. Conceptualizing the expectations Punjabi Canadian women face as discriminatory is fitting given their gendered nature and harmful consequences (Srinivasan, 2018). The specific expectations and their relationship to izzat are discussed as follows.

Salient Familial and Cultural Expectations

Recall that expectations are defined as the norms, beliefs, and/or preferences that help to define one's role within a social group (Biddle, 1986). Gendered expectations are the expectations that define one's gender role within their cultural context (Eagly, 1987). Therefore, the gendered expectations that Sikh Punjabi Canadian women experience within their cultural

context will provide insight into women's gender roles within the Sikh Punjabi Canadian community. Expectations by nature are neutral, but given that the patriarchy underlies gendered expectations (Koehn, 2021; Mahapatra & Marugan, 2024; Mucina, 2018), these expectations may be experienced as difficult and burdensome for women within the community. In a qualitative study with two generations of South Asian women, second generation immigrant daughters in the United States reported that navigating gendered expectations at the intersection of multiple identities is a continuous struggle (Chaudhary, 2024). South Asian immigrant women have described gendered expectations within their cultural contexts as unfair, biased, and even "oppressive" (Mahapatra & Marugan, 2024; p. 1621). However, some individuals find value and gain a sense of accomplishment from certain aspects of these expectations, as will become evident in the following subsections.

In her qualitative analysis of 30 interviews with South Asian women in the US, Mehrotra (2016) uses the term 'cultural script' to define the gendered norms and practices South Asian women are expected to follow. Given the fittingness of this term, I will be using it to refer to the combination of familial and cultural expectations South Asian women experience. This script is primarily delivered and enforced by immediate family members, mostly parents (Mehrotra, 2016). Even when the expectations are not directly communicated, the desire to please parents and have a positive perception within one's cultural community can indirectly impose these expectations on women (Mehrotra, 2016; Somerville, 2019). Furthermore, this script is often internalized by witnessing other women meet certain expectations in the role of "good" women (Mehrotra, 2016; Mucina, 2018).

Several qualitative studies on Punjabi and South Asian women's experiences in Western contexts convey a narrative of women acting as the upholders and preservers of izzat or honor

(Dhillon & Humble, 2020; Mehrotra, 2016; Mucina, 2018; Sabri, Bhandari et al., 2018; Sabri, Simonet et al., 2018; Somerville, 2019). The script of expectations they face is defined within the boundaries of izzat, and enforced through the implicit or explicit threat of painful consequences should the boundaries of izzat be transgressed (Mehrotra, 2016; Mucina, 2018; Srinivasan, 2018). Transgressing the boundaries of izzat means deviating from the cultural script – failing to meet familial and/or cultural expectations (Mafura & Charura, 2021; Mehrotra, 2016; Mucina, 2018). These expectations pertain to academics, career, marriageability, marriage, children, domestic responsibilities, family harmony, and cultural preservation, all of which are interconnected and overlap through the theme of izzat. The specific expectations, their relationship to izzat, and the toll they take on South Asian women, including Sikh Punjabi Canadian women, are explored as follows.

Academic and Career Expectations

Individuals from South Asian cultures face the expectation to achieve a high academic and career standard by their families and communities (Chaudhary, 2024; Mehrotra, 2016). In a secondary review of quantitative data, combined with qualitative interviews, Baggulay and Hussain (2014) highlight the steady increase in expectations faced by South Asian immigrant women, who report their parents expecting them to become doctors, lawyers, pharmacists, engineers and so on, as these are considered high achieving professions. Academic success is expected as a prerequisite to entering such a field. Although part of the motive behind encouraging a strong education is related to its contribution to a well-paying and stable career, having a higher education in itself is considered a symbol of the family's status and reputation, or izzat, especially for women (Dupree et al., 2013; Somerville, 2019). Although fulfilling academic and career expectations is challenging, individuals likely also gain a great sense of

accomplishment from contributing to their family's izzat through their academic/career achievements.

In a review of existing research, Koehn (2021) revealed that a higher level of education and successful career can provide social and economic capital for Punjabi Canadian women, which allows for greater autonomy and freedom as they age. This reiterates how academic and career expectations from one's family can be positive if they facilitate greater achievement in these areas. However, high academic expectations from one's family and community also predict greater stress, greater suicidality, and poorer mental health outcomes as per research on Indian cultural groups (Verma & Verma, 2020). In their thematic analysis of 22 semi-structured interviews, Islam et al. (2022) found that mental health professionals identify academic perfectionism as a source of great mental pressure and anxiety for South Asian Canadians.

When considering Indian women working in a Canadian context, they are expected to have a career to support their family to afford the cost of living in Canada, something that is likely not expected of them in India (Mustafa et al., 2020). The expectation to excel academically and work long hours in a high-achieving career has painful physical and emotional consequences, especially when they have to balance them with traditional gender role expectations (Mustafa et al., 2020). The expectation to hold full time employment while fulfilling traditional gender roles can lead to women feeling overwhelmed, stressed, and underappreciated by family members (Bhalla, 2008; Grewal et al., 2005; Rana et al., 1998; Witenstein, 2020). The host of family expectations that come after marriage limit career opportunities for several South Asian women, which conflicts with the expectation they face to have high achieving careers, and adds another barrier to their work success on top of the barriers they already navigate simply being women of color in a North American workplace (Witenstein,

2020). This host of expectations primarily involves handling the majority of domestic responsibilities (Mehrotra, 2016), maintaining peace and harmony within familial relationships (Grewal et al., 2005), bearing and raising children (Srinivasan, 2018), and working to represent one's culture within a foreign context (Witenstein, 2020).

Managing the household: Domestic Responsibilities, Harmony, and Cultural Preservation

Starting from a young age, women from South Asian cultural groups navigate expectations to handle domestic responsibilities, which ties into the process of preparing them to become ideal wives and daughters-in-law who are exceptional at household tasks (Dupree et al., 2013; Mehrotra, 2016; Srinivasan, 2018). Multiple studies of South Asian women's experiences have found these expectations to include handling most domestic responsibilities, facing greater social restrictions than their male counterparts, getting married and having children by a certain age, and being a nurturing mother and caretaker for older family members (Mehrotra, 2016; Somerville, 2019; Srinivasan, 2000; Witenstein, 2020). Men in the community do not typically face this expectation as they enjoy greater freedom than their female counterparts (Srinivasan, 2018).

Competence in handling domestic responsibilities directly links to marriageability which is tied to preserving izzat (Mehrotra, 2016). This unequal division of labor is a product of patriarchal gender roles that are exacerbated in a Canadian context in an attempt to preserve cultural identity (Srinivasan, 2018). A phenomenological analysis of semi-structured interviews on 13 Indian Canadian women's lived experiences of chronic pain identified gendered expectations pertaining to domestic responsibilities as a source of this great emotional and physical pain (Mustafa et al., 2020). It further revealed that they tend to be wholly responsible for all domestic responsibilities including cooking, cleaning, doing laundry, running errands,

driving family members to and from destinations, taking care of the children and elders in a joint family context, even after a long day of work, and without support from other family members. The values of service and sacrifice are associated with feminine responsibilities, as women are expected to sacrifice their own needs to serve the needs of their entire household, which includes their parents, grandparents, and siblings prior to marriage, and their in-laws, husband, and children after marriage (Mustafa et al., 2020). It is important to note that these expectations are not always perceived as negative by South Asian immigrant women. For example, in a qualitative study exploring pain management in South Asian immigrant women, some participants touched on how their culture socializes women to tolerate pain and continue to fulfill their duties for their family (Clarke et al., 2023).

There is a discrepancy in how women's responsibilities towards their family manifests itself in India versus Canada, as women often have lower expectations to provide financially, and greater support (e.g., servants and drivers) for their domestic responsibilities in India (Bhalla, 2008; Grewal et al., 2005; Mustafa et al., 2020). In Canada, women from South Asian groups are often expected to provide for their families financially while handling all domestic responsibilities without the support they would have in their home country (Bhalla, 2008; Grewal et al., 2005; Mustafa et al., 2020). However, they are expected to not invest so much into their career that it interferes with their role in managing the household (Neupane, 2024). They are expected to be "obedient wives, dutiful daughter-in-laws, nurturing mothers, and self-sacrificing caregivers" (Grewal et al., 2005, p. 251).

Given that filial piety is a huge aspect of several South Asian cultures, elderly women often live with their families, most often cared for by their daughters and daughters-in-law (Mehrotra, 2016; Somerville, 2019; Witenstein, 2020). Elderly Sikh Punjabi Canadian women

are not free of expectations, however; they face expectations to be full-time caretakers of their

grandchildren (Aggarwal & Das Gupta, 2013; Koehn, 2021). The value of self-sacrifice for one's

family thus transcends generations of Sikh Punjabi Canadian women. Although the expectation

to manage all domestic responsibilities can be explicitly enforced, it is more often internalized

through socialization of gender roles wherein women accept the high level of suffering to serve

their families as normal (Mustafa et al., 2020). This can cause overwhelm, burnout, chronic pain,

and takes a significant toll on their bodies (Mustafa et al., 2020), which is indicative of the

strength required to navigate such domestic responsibilities. Reiterating the multidimensional

impact of such expectations, it is important to note that although Sikh Punjabi women may find

domestic responsibilities to be challenging, they often also find value in caring for their families

given the centrality of family within Sikh communities (Cowan, 2014).

Women from South Asian cultures are often also responsible for promoting harmony and

peace within their household (Grewal et al., 2005). In Canada, this takes the form of helping their

family reconcile their generational acculturation discrepancies, supporting them with any

displacement and resettlement challenges, mediating any familial conflicts, and maintaining their

silence in the face of violence or abuse to preserve the family's honor (Ahmad et al., 2009;

Grewal et al., 2005; Sabri, Bhandari et al., 2018; Somerville, 2019). Managing the household

chores, childcare, and eldercare responsibilities also maintains harmony and peace within the

family, as the household would suffer from chaos and confusion if the women deviated from

their expectation to play family manager (Mustafa et al., 2020).While playing this peacekeeping

role, they are also expected to uphold the cultural value of hospitality and warmth and act as

representatives of their family and culture within and beyond their community (Ahluwalia, 2002;

Chaudhary, 2024; Witenstein, 2020). South Asian immigrant women are expected to be carriers

of culture across generations, through embodying cultural traditions and practices, and participating in community events (Chaudhary, 2024). Again, although such expectations can be burdensome, some Sikh Punjabi individuals report finding strength in promoting cross-cultural understanding at cultural events and fostering hospitality within and beyond their community (Benson, 2023).

Marriageability, Marriage, and Children

Mehrotra's (2016) "cultural script" is directly related to a woman's marriageability, which is central to her family's izzat/honor. At a young age, there are expectations to dress modestly, focus on school, and support the women in the family in handling household chores (Dupree et al., 2013; Mehrotra, 2016; Somerville, 2019). As they grow older, they experience greater restriction in their social activities, especially dating (Mucina, 2018; Somerville, 2019). They have significantly less freedom than their male counterparts when it comes to going out with friends, engaging in social activities, staying out late, going on trips, and so on (Mehrotra, 2016; Srinivasan, 2018). A restricted social life and modest appearance is intended to maintain purity, which is key to one's marriageability in Punjabi culture (Mucina, 2018). This involves expectations pertaining to wearing clothing that does not reveal too much skin (Chaudhary, 2024). Honor-focused cultures (like Punjabi culture) also expect their women to remain virgins until they are married, and engaging in any sexual activity dishonors the family (Gill & Aujla, 2014).

Being highly educated and having a high-achieving career is also related to enhancing marriageability (Dupree et al., 2013; Mehrotra, 2016; Srinivasan, 2000). Having a high GPA, multiple degrees, and a high achieving career can also directly enhance South Asian immigrant women's marriageability (Srinivasan, 2000), which is central to upholding izzat (Mehrotra,

2016). Furthermore, izzat sometimes plays a role in academic decision making for South Asian women in terms of where they are "allowed" to go to school by their parents (Baggulay & Hussain, 2014). Going to school far away from home makes it more challenging for their behavior to be monitored and regulated by their family, which risks their izzat (Baggulay & Hussain, 2014). Similarly, if academic pursuits interfere with marriageability and marriage, the family might interfere by promoting marriage over academic/career pursuits (Baggulay & Hussain, 2014), as marriage is central to the family's izzat (Mehrotra, 2016). As a result, women from South Asian cultural groups can be restricted in academic decision making because of their role in maintaining izzat and prioritizing marriageability (Baggulay & Hussain, 2014).

Qualitative descriptive research involving seven focus groups with young South Asian American women revealed expectations associated with appearance that are implicated in body image and eating disorders (Goel et al., 2021). Lighter skin and thinness are internalized western beauty standards that are associated with increased attractiveness, which inherently boosts women's marriage prospects (Goel et al., 2021; Mehrotra, 2016). South Asian women are encouraged to do what they can to lighten their skin, or maintain their lightness if they are already light-skinned, and to maintain thinness (Mehrotra, 2016). The expectation to appear young, thin, light-skinned, and have minimal body hair are typically enforced by parents, extended family members, and peers, often becoming internalized (Goel et al., 2021). This can contribute to body dissatisfaction and disordered eating in young South Asian women in Western countries (Goel et al., 2021).

South Asian women also often face severe restrictions on dating until they reach a marriageable age at which point finding a partner is highly encouraged, leading them to feel pressure (Mehrotra, 2016). Between 20 to 30 years old, they are expected to get married through

an arranged marriage (Srinivasan, 2000; Yeung et al., 2018), or find themselves a partner

deemed an "acceptable groom" (Srinivasan, 2018). An acceptable groom would be a man with

the same cultural and religious background (Mehrotra, 2016; Koehn, 2021; Srinivasan, 2018).

Getting married to the "right man" is a symbol of the family's success in ensuring their daughter

will preserve their cultural identity through raising children within the same culture (Srinivasan,

2018). Finding the "right man" boosts the family's honor, and consequently the chances of other

women within the family also finding appropriate partners that will further uphold the family's

honor (Mehrotra, 2016). This expectation seems to shift as women get older, passing this

"marriageable age," at which point there are less expectations surrounding who they marry as

they are encouraged to compromise on finding a match (Mehrotra, 2016).

Getting married at the "right time" is a symbol of the family's success in making their

daughter marriageable (Mehrotra, 2016). The expectation to marry young is likely tied to

childbearing, which is yet another way in which a woman is expected to uphold her family's

izzat (Mehrotra, 2016). Shortly after marriage, she is expected to have children, ideally bearing

at least one son to carry on her husband's family name (Dupree et al., 2013; Grewal et al., 2005;

Srinivasan, 2018; Witenstein, 2020). Childlessness can have harsh consequences for several

South Asian women, including abuse, exclusion, and stigmatization, which is significantly worse

than what childless men might experience in the community (Mumtaz et al., 2013). Punjabi

Canadian women often report experiencing pressure to give birth to a son because of internalized

socialization of gendered expectations (Srinivasan, 2018). They often experience relief upon

fulfilling the expectation to have a son because they have witnessed the adverse consequences

generations of Punjabi women have faced when they "failed" to have a son (Srinivasan, 2018).

In their qualitative research with South Asian women in the UK, Sandhu and Barrett (2024) explain how decision-making before, during, and after the ending of intimate relationships is shaped by family members', community members', and in-laws' gendered expectations. Once in a relationship with a man, there is an expectation to stay in that relationship. Break-ups, separations, and divorce are considered highly dishonorable, leading women to feel as though they have no choice but to stay with their partner. This can mean having to withstand years of suffering and abuse, leaving them feeling trapped (Sandhu & Barrett, 2024). Although young women experience greater autonomy in choosing their partners than previous generations (Koehn, 2021), they also feel coerced into marrying whoever they are dating once their family finds out about the relationship (Sandhu & Barrett, 2024). The privilege of being able to choose their own partner makes the expectation to marry and stay with them more powerful, as they are made to feel there is no justifiable reason for wanting to leave someone they chose of their own accord. This creates an "intrinsic coercion" to marry who they are dating (Sandhu & Barrett, 2024, p. 7).

Brief Commentary on Punjabi Cis-Heteronormativity

Punjabi culture perpetuates the belief that gender is binary (Sahota, 2019). In pre-colonial South Asia, there was a recognition and open acceptance of third gender, which includes all those who do not align with a gender binary or do not identify as heterosexual (Bal, 2016). The marginalization of these communities is considered an influence of colonialism (Bal, 2016). Punjabi culture falls into one of many colonized communities that have internalized the oppression of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community (Sahota, 2019). It is challenging to determine the precolonial orientation of Punjabi culture to gender and sexuality, however, individuals within the community recognize that the prejudice against the 2SLGBTQIA+ community is not rooted

in Sikhi and its teachings, which promote equality and empowerment of marginalized groups. Additionally, the internalized cis-heteronormativity of the Punjabi community is amplified in a North American context in order to maintain model minority status and reject anything considered "deviant" in terms of gender and sexual orientation (Sahota, 2019). Punjabi Canadians whose biological sex is female are expected to identify as cis-gender women, marry a cis-gender male, and take on all roles and responsibilities expected of Punjabi Canadian women (Bal, 2016). The purpose of this commentary is to convey that Sikh Punjabi Canadian women's expectations pertaining to gender and sexuality, and the narrative surrounding this community in the literature, are framed within the context of culturally internalized cis-heteronormativity.

Consequences of Deviating from the Cultural Script

As discussed earlier, women from several South Asian cultures, including Sikh Punjabi culture, face significant familial and cultural expectations to uphold honor, or izzat, which includes ensuring one's marriageability through restricted social interactions, modest dressing, adherence to certain beauty standards, maintenance of one's "purity," and high academic and career achievements (DuPree et al., 2013; Grewal et al., 2005; Mafura & Charura, 2021; Mehrotra, 2016; Somerville, 2019; Srinivasan, 2000). They also face expectations related to handling all domestic responsibilities, getting married at the "right age" to the "right man," having children including at least one son, being experts in their culture, maintaining family and community harmony, and caretaking. Even if a woman tries her best to navigate all the expectations across her lifetime without resisting this cultural script, stress, exhaustion, and burnout from being overworked seem inevitable as a result of these multiple, and often conflicting, expectations (Grewal et al., 2005; Mafura & Charura, 2021; Mehrotra, 2016; Mustafa et al., 2020; Somerville, 2019). This is consistent with the concept of feminine gender

role stress, which posits that attempting to conform to feminine gender roles is overly stressful, which is a vulnerability factor for women regardless of whether they fulfill or resist gender roles (Gillespie & Eisler, 1992). Further, given that many of these expectations contrast with Western norms and values, Punjabi women in Canada with greater acculturation and internalization of Western values likely experience greater disagreement with their cultural script, leading to a host of challenges associated with rejecting these expectations. This is consistent with research that indicates that women with more egalitarian attitudes towards gender roles who still had to face traditional gender roles experience poorer mental health in general (Sweeting et al., 2014).

Given the boom of immigration of young Sikh Punjabi families towards the latter half of the 1900s (Basra, 2017), the current generation of young Punjabi women are likely descendants of this wave of immigrants. Punjabi women born in Canada to immigrant parents are raised in a completely different world than their parents. The more collectivistic values of the parents often conflict with the more individualistic values of the children (Khanna et al., 2009). The resultant intergenerational conflict can create anxiety, anger, fear, or general distress within parents in response to the possibility of their daughters deviating from the cultural script and bringing shame to the family (Mehrotra, 2016). This leads to increased community monitoring of young women in this foreign land where their cultural identity and honor is threatened (Handa, 2003; Mucina, 2018; Rajiva, 2009). Increased monitoring creates a sense of hypervigilance and secrecy, as women often hide script-deviating actions from their families (Handa, 2013). Some examples of what might be considered a rejection of the cultural script may include dating, premarital sexual relations, wearing clothing that reveals "too much" skin, tanning in the sun, cohabitating with one's partner prior to marriage (Mehrotra, 2016), having a gender identity or sexual orientation deviating from cis-heteronormativity (Bal, 2016), choosing to not pursue

university (Baggulay & Hussain, 2014), going on vacations, staying out late at night, marrying outside of one's culture and/or religion, living and making decisions independently in adulthood, sending one's elderly parents to a long term care facility, choosing to not get married, or have kids, and so on (Mehrotra, 2016; Somerville, 2019; Witenstein, 2020).

Women universally experience stress, specifically gender role stress, in response to their perceived failure in fulfilling expectations that define their gender role (Kelmendi & Jemini-Gashi, 2022). Engaging in "dishonorable" activities, even if hidden from the family, can thus create a sense of shame, embarrassment, humiliation, and sense of failure (Gill & Aujla, 2014). As the counterpart to honor, shame is one of the greatest emotional consequences of rejecting honor-related expectations (Mucina, 2018). Examples of other consequences may include anger at the pressure to conform to the cultural script, shame over a lack of connection with their own culture, sadness over loss of familial support upon doing something "unacceptable," or identity issues if struggling with a conflicting desire to please one's family while also wanting to live in alignment with one's own values.

Depending on their family's degree of acculturation, some women may experience greater support when they deviate from the cultural script. However, for those who are socialized in this cultural script, it is common to experience familial ruptures and intergenerational conflict when deviating from it if their family is made aware of this deviation (Mafura & Charura, 2021; Mehrotra, 2016; Somerville, 2019). These ruptures and conflicts can range from conversations wherein women negotiate and advocate for their autonomy in making script-deviating decisions to full-blown violence in response to their actions (Sandhu & Barrett, 2024). Given the prevalence of gender-based violence in this group (Mucina, 2018), physical and/or emotional violence and its trauma-related consequences are a common presenting concern for Punjabi

women who reject expectations. Domestic violence is highly prevalent in immigrant South Asian communities in Canada, with 31% reporting having experienced some form of domestic violence (Statistics Canada, 2021). Given the expectation to maintain silence in the face of abuse, this is likely an underestimation. Honor related violence (HRV), specifically honor killings, can be a real threat for Punjabi women deviating from what is culturally expected of them (Virdi, 2012).

HRV (interchangeably referred to honor crimes or honor-based violence) is violence against women by their family and/or community for their perceived role in dishonoring their family through their actions. This has led to severe abuse and murder of several Sikh Punjabi Canadian women (Gill & Aujla, 2014; Virdi, 2012). Although not all families engage in abuse or violence, the pressure to preserve their marginalized cultural identity through enforcing cultural values is common (Ahluwalia & Alimchandani, 2013; Esperitu, 2001). They may, therefore, be threatened by the rejection of the cultural script by women in their families even if they choose to be supportive of them. Given that parents are often the enforcers of this script (Mehrotra, 2016), mothers who want to support their daughters whilst preserving their cultural identity likely experience significant stress when their daughters deviate from the script, taking the form of anxiety, depression, worry, grief, hopelessness, and so on. In sum, there can be complex adverse physical, mental, and emotional consequences of trying to meet all expectations, failing to meet them, rejecting them, secretly or openly, or trying to cope with other women's rejection of them. Although the literature clearly indicates that Sikh, Punjabi, and South Asian women more broadly suffer in their navigation of these gendered expectations, their strengths and coping strategies during this process are not clear. This raises the question, what are Sikh Punjabi Canadian women's strengths and coping strategies in navigating salient familial and cultural expectations?

Strengths and Resilience

There is no published research that centers young Sikh Punjabi Canadian women's strengths, resources, coping strategies, and/or resilience, especially not in the context of navigating gendered expectations. In fact, the majority of the literature on Punjabi, Indian, and South Asian women in a Western context focuses on their suffering and victimhood, raising concerns for how they might be helped by targeted interventions, programs, and strategies (e.g., Ahmad et al., 2013; Mucina, 2018; Mustafa et al., 2020; Sabri, Bhandari et al., 2018; Sabri, Simonet, et al., 2018; Singh et al., 2010; Wanigaratne et al., 2023, etc.). Although this is important, it neglects to highlight the obvious strength involved in navigating the day to day of this cultural script that burdens them with significant responsibility. It would take strength to fulfill expectations, reject expectations, and deal with the consequences of deviating from the expectations. Inclusive, anti-racist, and culturally responsive research should focus on the strengths and assets of the community (Tajima, 2021). Therefore, this study takes an active strengths-based approach in exploring women's experiences of navigating gendered expectations within Sikh Punjabi Canadian culture.

Much existing research frames South Asian women's strengths and coping strategies in context of abuse, with studies focusing on their resilience in surviving violent and harmful situations. Speaking to researchers about such experiences indicates their overcoming of the expectation to maintain silence in the face of abuse, which might be considered a strength in itself. Other implicit strengths include their recognition of the harm caused by conforming to expectations and preventing themselves from self-blame for their situations (Sandhu & Barrett, 2024). Recognizing expectations as harmful and unreasonable provides the courage and motivation to reject them (Goel et al., 2021). Gaining the willpower from stories of other

women's strength and resilience, including previous generations of women, helps build the courage to stand up for oneself (Ahmad et al., 2013; Reyes & Constantino, 2016). Support from family and friends is a commonly reported resource in helping to build courage to fight for oneself and cope with the emotional distress of navigating challenges (Ahmad et al., 2013; Reyes & Constantino, 2016; Sabri, Simonet, et al., 2018). Similarly, modification of one's social circles to exclude those who perpetuate harm and include those who are supportive and provide safety is reported as a source of strength (Ahmad et al., 2013). Sharing their stories of hardship within their community creates a sense of liberation (Singh et al., 2010), acts as an outlet, and provides a source of strength in wanting to support other women stuck in similar cycles (Reyes & Constantino, 2016).

South Asian women with children report hope for a better future for their children as a source of strength (Ahmad et al., 2013). Younger generations of women engage in activism as a source of strength to fight gender inequality, increasing the community's awareness of anti-oppressive ideologies (Srinivasan, 2018). Being in a Western context and having a bicultural identity that can balance autonomy with respect for one's family values is also a source of strength for South Asian women (Ahmad et al., 2013; Reyes & Constantino, 2016). Factors that enhance one's autonomy and freedom are also sources of strength, such as education and financial independence (Sabri, Bhandari, et al., 2018). Additionally, second generation South Asian American women report that communicating with sources of gendered expectations, especially mothers, to negotiate balanced solutions is one of the ways they navigate such expectations (Chaudhary, 2024). Drawing on culturally-informed professional services when navigating familial and cultural challenges provides a source of strength as well (Ahmad et al., 2013; Sabri, Bhandari, et al., 2018).

It is not clear whether the strengths and resilience of South Asian women in the face of adversity also represent Punjabi Canadian women's experiences of navigating gendered expectations. Given that the Punjabi community is a minority within South Asians, it is likely that the research focused on South Asian experiences more broadly experience fails to capture the depth and nuance of this cultural group. Some research on Sikh women's strengths and coping strategies is presented as follows. Existing literature on Sikh women recognizes their inherent strength as keepers of knowledge that is rooted in lived experiences (Bal & Daman, 2021). A qualitative study exploring Sikh individuals' experiences of caring for dying family members highlighted Sikh women's strength in their Sikh faith (Cowan, 2014). In a phenomenological analysis of interviews with Sikh Punjabi Americans, participants reported finding strength in seva (selfless service), in business and financial success, and in strengthening community relations (Benson, 2023). Research has also highlighted Sikh individuals' strength in their care for their family members and support from family members (Cowan, 2014). Although Punjabi culture is collectivistic, Sikhi has a strong focus on the self, and developing one's inner strength and resources to find happiness for oneself, and to serve others (Ahluwalia & Alimchandani, 2013; Kalra et al., 2010). Thus, practices that promote self-regulation, such as meditation and prayer, are emphasized.

Sikh Punjabi Canadian women have a unique cultural identity defined by a blend of Sikhi, Punjabi culture, and their Canadian identity, justifying the need to explore their gendered experiences and to identify, examine, and celebrate their strengths and resilience in navigating these experiences. Therefore, the present study specifically explores Sikh Punjabi Canadian women's strengths and coping in their lived experience of navigating familial and cultural expectations. Given the limited research centering strengths, an in-depth qualitative analysis was

deemed necessary. Further details and rationale for the methodology and methods of the study

are presented in the next chapter.

Chapter 3: Methodology and Methods

I am interested in a systematic and deep exploration of participant experiences of navigating expectations within the context of being a woman in the Sikh Punjabi Canadian community, in order to identify and highlight their strengths and coping strategies in this navigation process. Given the limited literature on this topic, the use of a qualitative methodology allowed for in depth and detailed exploration of the complexity and multidimensionality of participant experiences. Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) is a qualitative approach that focuses on individuals' lived experiences based on their social, cultural, and historical contexts (Smith et al., 2022), making IPA a strong fit for this study. In this chapter, I first provide an overview of IPA and its theoretical underpinnings. Then I provide a rationale and description for the interpretive frameworks for this study. Next, I outline the study methods, which includes details on participant criteria, recruitment, data collection, and data analysis. I conclude with a brief discussion of relevant validation strategies and ethical considerations employed to enhance methodological integrity and participant safety.

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

IPA is a qualitative methodology that is concerned with how participants make sense of their lived experiences (Smith et al., 2022). IPA operates under the assumption that individuals will engage in considerable reflection, thinking, and feeling as they make sense of experiences that are of significance to them. IPA researchers engage in a double hermeneutic as they make sense of the participant making sense of their experience. The major theoretical underpinnings of IPA are phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography (Smith et al., 2022).

Phenomenology

Phenomenology is a philosophical approach to the study of subjective human experience (Smith et al., 2022). The process of genuinely listening to someone's experience while reflecting on our own perceptions is inherent to human nature, and phenomenological research formalizes this process. IPA is a phenomenological approach as it focuses on human experiences and posits that such experiences can be understood through systematically exploring the meaning individuals make of them while reflecting on our own perceptions. IPA is particularly concerned with everyday experiences that become significant enough for individuals to reflect on them and try to make sense of them. Thus, holistically phenomenological approaches like IPA are most fitting for studying major experiences that elicit a multidimensional response that prompts meaning-making within individuals (Smith et al., 2022).

Hermeneutics

Hermeneutics is the theory of interpretation (Smith et al., 2022). In IPA, participants and researchers both engage in interpretation. The participant interprets their own lived experience and reports it to the researcher, and the researcher interprets this interpretation. This is the double hermeneutic that underlies IPA. Furthermore, IPA researchers skillfully attend to participant accounts while acknowledging their own preconceived notions and engaging in critical reflection. This practice fits within the hermeneutic circle that defines IPA's research process. The hermeneutic circle is concerned with the dynamic relationship between parts and the whole. In IPA, the whole is the researcher's ongoing state, and the part is their encounter with the participant. The researcher engages with the participant while attempting to bracket their preconceptions, and then engages in data analysis through the lens of their preexisting state, now

changed by the encounter with the participant. This is the hermeneutic circle that involves moving between part and whole throughout IPA's iterative research process (Smith et al., 2022).

Idiography

An idiographic approach involves an attention to the particular (Smith et al., 2022). IPA is idiographic in the sense that it engages in detailed analysis of a particular phenomenon experienced by particular people within a particular context. As a result, IPA relies on purposive sampling of a small number of participants that share a context of interest. IPA research does not lead to broad generalizations, but researchers can engage in the careful development of general claims located within the particular. This involves deeply engaging with each participant's data individually prior to examining similarities and differences across cases to ultimately produce a detailed report that captures the patterns of commonalities, variations, and nuances in what a shared experience means to individuals who share a particular context (Smith et al., 2022).

The Present Study

In the present study, I examined participant experiences of navigating salient familial and cultural expectations, focusing on their strengths and coping within this navigation. Navigating such expectations, as previously established, is a significant experience for young Sikh Punjabi Canadian women, which requires them to engage in reflection and meaning making surrounding this phenomenon. As a young Sikh Punjabi Canadian woman myself, I addressed my preconceptions of what strengths and resources help navigate such expectations through self-reflective journaling and memoing prior to engaging with participants. I then attentively engaged with, and interpreted, the participants' interpretations of the strengths and coping strategies they draw on in navigating expectations, aware of how my own perceptions influence this interpretation. Then I analyzed each participant's transcript individually prior to examining the

similarities and differences amongst cases, ultimately creating an account that highlights the convergent and divergent patterns of strengths and coping strategies in Sikh Punjabi Canadian women's (particular group) experiences of navigating familial and cultural expectations (particular phenomena). In these ways, the present study exemplifies the theoretical underpinnings of IPA, namely phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography, while following the recommended procedure for IPA.

Interpretive Frameworks

Social Constructivism

IPA as a methodology inherently operates within a social constructivism framework. Social constructivism is an interpretive framework that centers lived experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). It posits that individuals make meaning of the world around them through subjectively interpreting their experiences within their own social and historical contexts. It operates under the assumption that reality is subjective and multidimensional. In research, the participant and researcher co-construct reality (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This co-construction is evident in IPA as the participant reports the subjective meaning they interpret from their own experiences, and the researcher interprets and reports this meaning also impacted by their own context (Smith et al., 2022). In exploring Sikh Punjabi Canadian women's experiences of drawing on strengths and coping strategies in navigating salient familial and cultural expectations, it is necessary to operate within a framework that emphasizes how one's subjective experience is influenced by social and historical contexts. The present study operates under the foundational assumption that participant experiences, and how they make sense of these experiences, are heavily influenced by their cultural and relational contexts. It was necessary to choose a methodology with an interpretive framework that was compatible with the underlying

assumptions of this study. Thus, IPA and its underlying interpretive framework of social constructivism were deemed a strong fit.

Intersectional Feminism

Intersectional feminism is a variation of feminism that recognizes that race and gender are not mutually exclusive identities (Crenshaw, 1991). It emphasizes that the intersection of marginalized identities can compound oppression (Crenshaw, 1991). The present study rests on the premise that gendered expectations are experienced by Sikh Punjabi Canadian women as a function of their multiple intersecting identities, making intersectional feminism an inherently fitting framework to conceptualize the research problem. Furthermore, intersectional feminism encourages transformative research that contains an action agenda to tackle discrimination and injustices, and center marginalized voices (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In exploring Sikh Punjabi Canadian women's strengths and coping strategies in this context, I aim to center Sikh Punjabi Canadian women's voices and highlight tools that clinicians, healthcare providers, and educators can draw upon to support the self-empowerment of this community. This transformative and anti-oppressive intersectional feminist framework informed my conceptualization of the research problem, my interactions with participants, the analysis and writing process, and ultimately, the dissemination of findings.

Methods

Participant Recruitment

After obtaining ethics approval from the University of Alberta Research Ethics Board 1, participants were recruited through purposive sampling, followed by snowball sampling. Smith and colleagues (2022) recommend purposive sampling through referrals and snowballing for IPA studies as it allows to focus on particular phenomena within particular contexts. Digital

recruitment posters (Appendix A) containing email contact information were shared with my

academic colleagues (initial contacts) within the Sikh Punjabi Canadian community, who then

reached out to eligible participants via direct messages on virtual platforms (e.g., Instagram,

Gmail, and so on). The initial contacts were encouraged to purposefully send the recruitment

poster to individuals with whom I have no pre-existing relationship, given our shared

membership in the Sikh Punjabi Canadian community. The initial contacts informed potential

participants that they can choose to send the recruitment poster to other eligible participants who

might be interested through direct messages. Individuals were asked to not share the recruitment

poster publicly on social media so as to protect individual privacy. Interested participants were

informed to contact me, the principal investigator, via the email address listed on the recruitment

poster. The recruitment poster consisted of the study title, participant criteria, the estimated

length of time for the interview, and a mention of the honorarium that would be provided to

participants as a thank you.

Participants

Five Sikh Punjabi Canadian women between the ages of 22 and 35 participated in the

study ($M = 27$). Five is the recommended number of participants for master's level IPA studies

(Smith et al., 2022). All participant communication took place via email and all participants

chose to have their interviews virtually via Google Meets. Participants were required to be Sikh

Punjabi Canadian women between the ages of 20 and 35 who have spent the majority of their

lives in a Punjabi household in Canada. Although South Asian women broadly also experience

salient familial and cultural expectations (Mahapatra & Murugan, 2024; Neupane, 2024), South

Asians are not a homogenous group (Statistics Canada, 2022b). To maintain relative

homogeneity as is encouraged by IPA (Smith et al., 2022), it made sense to focus on the largest

South Asian subgroup within Canada, Punjabi Canadians (Statistics Canada, 2022c). Given the

diversity of Punjabi culture, focusing on Sikh Punjabis allowed for even greater homogeneity. I

chose the age group of 20 to 35 because participants within this age group are highly likely to

experience overlapping salient expectations pertaining to academics, career, domestic

responsibilities, marriageability, marriage, and children from their families and culture (DuPree

et al., 2013; Grewal et al., 2005; Mafura & Charura, 2021; Mehrotra, 2016; Mustafa et al., 2020;

Somerville, 2019; Srinivasan, 2000). This would allow for greater richness of data pertaining to

their experiences, which is fitting for an IPA study (Smith et al., 2022). I specified that

participants must have spent the majority of their lives in Punjabi households in Canada based on

the assumption that growing up in a Sikh Punjabi family in Canada is a prerequisite to

experiencing the expectations associated with being a Sikh Punjabi Canadian woman.

Each participant was confirmed to identify with having a Sikh identity. As a part of a

demographic questionnaire (Appendix B), they were asked about their age, birth order,

career/education, relationship status, living situation, and to identify the individual(s) who played

the most significant role in raising them (see Table 1). It is likely that each of these factors plays

a role in the nature, enforcement, and salience of the expectations. Thus, this information was

captured to identify any prominent patterns that might guide future research.

Table 1

Participant Demographic Information

Participant	Age	Birth Order	Career/ Education	Relationship Status	Living situation	Significant figure in raising them
Mai B (Edmonton, AB)	22	Middle child with older brother and younger sister	Student in finance	Single	Parents and siblings	Primarily mom (supplemented by mom's first cousin, *Masi*)
Jessica (Surrey, BC)	26	Oldest sibling with younger brother	Licensed Practical Nurse (LPN) and student in Registered Nurse (RN) program	Single	Independently and with parents and brother (raised with immediate and extended family)	Both parents
Aria (Edmonton, AB & Surrey, BC)	27	Oldest sibling with younger brother and sister	LPN and student in RN program	Single	Independently (raised with immediate and extended family)	Primarily paternal grandparents (supplemented by parents)
Sandeep (Brampton, ON)	35	Middle child with older brother and younger brother	Business development professional and small business owner	Married	Husband and daughters (raised with parents, siblings, and grandparents)	Primarily mom
Noor (Edmonton, AB)	25	Youngest child with older brother	Student in psychology	Single	Parents and brother	Primarily mom

Data Collection

I collected data through in-depth individual semi-structured interviews. This is the

preferred method of data collection in IPA because it allows for a detailed first-person account of

the participant's experiences (Smith et al., 2022). Prior to the interviews, participants were sent

the informed consent form (Appendix C) and semi-structured interview guide (Appendix D). The

interviews began with building rapport to foster comfort and trust so that the participant felt

more able to freely and fully express their authentic experiences in depth (Smith et al., 2022).

We then went through informed consent, ending with asking their permission to begin the audio recording. Before the interview itself, I verbally administered a demographic questionnaire asking details about their age, birth order, family, education/employment, relationship status, and residence (see Table 1).

For the interview itself, I followed the semi-structured interview protocol. The protocol was created to capture the participants' multidimensional experience of navigating salient familial and cultural expectations. It began with asking what expectations they face from their family and culture as Punjabi Canadian women, with follow up questions to elaborate. This was intended to set the stage for the rest of the interview which focused on their experience of navigating said expectations (focusing on sources of strength and coping strategies), how the expectations have changed, and how their ways of navigating them have changed. Although the protocol guided the conversation initially, I flexibility followed along with the participant accounts, asking additional questions to gain a deeper understanding of their lived experience as it pertained to the research question. This provided detailed and rich data centering their evolving experiences of navigating expectations that would yield their strengths and coping strategies through further analysis. Interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. I conducted follow-up interviews with three of the five participants after completing the majority of the data analysis. These lasted between 15 and 20 minutes and were focused to fill in gaps in the data. Out of the remaining two participants, neither responded to the emailed requests for a follow-up. Given the breadth of data without the last two follow up interviews, further attempts to reach out were not deemed necessary.

Data Analysis

Smith and colleagues' (2022) guidelines for data analysis in IPA informed my analysis of participant interviews. I began by transcribing the audio recordings of participant interviews verbatim. The Google Meets transcription function created a skeleton transcript of each interview. I refined and expanded the skeleton transcripts until they were complete. Self-reflective journaling was particularly helpful as I started to notice patterns of experiences during transcription. After transcription, I sent each participant their interview transcript to review prior to proceeding with analysis. None of the participants requested any changes to their initial data after viewing their transcripts; all participants sent their written consent to continue with next steps.

As recommended by Smith and colleagues (2022), I treated each participant transcript like a case study before working across cases. First, I read and reread the transcript, memoing relevant reflections throughout this process. Second, I used the comments function on Google Docs to engage in exploratory noting, which involved producing a comprehensive set of notes on the data, focusing more on rich parts of the interview. Third, I constructed experiential statements, also using the Google Docs comments function. Experiential statements are typically phrases that either directly relate to the participant's experience of the phenomenon of interest, or the participant's experience of making sense of the phenomenon of interest (Smith et al., 2022). The purpose of developing experiential statements was to crystallize my thoughts after having actively engaged with the data during transcription, repeated reading of the transcript, and exploratory noting. Fourth, I compiled a list of the experiential statements and searched for connections. I clustered together statements that fit together, trying out different ways of grouping until settling on clusters of statements that seemed to best represent the participant's

experience. Fifth, I consolidated the clusters of statements under personal experiential themes (PETs) that were representative of each cluster. The PETs often had sub-themes, as clusters of experiential statements within each PET often prompted further grouping.

I then continued the aforementioned procedure, starting with reading the transcript and ending with developing PETs and subthemes, for each participant. As I engaged in analysis for subsequent participants, patterns across cases became evident, prompting me to memo my insights so as to minimize the impact of my preconceptions based on other participants' experiences on my interpretation of the present data. After working through each participant individually, I looked across participant PETs to establish group experiential themes (GETs) and subthemes that represent the unique and nuanced ways in which participants reflect a shared experience. I then conducted focused follow-up interviews to gain further clarity and insight into participant experiences of certain GETs that required further exploration. I also drew on these interviews for participant feedback on my interpretation of their salient experiences. Lastly, I followed the trail of GETs, PETs, and experiential statements to the original transcripts to find the most meaningful extracts that best voiced participant experiences.

Assessing Accuracy

Validation in qualitative research is concerned with assessing the accuracy of the study through validation strategies (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Validation strategies include prolonged engagement and persistent observation, peer review, negative case analysis, clarifying researcher bias, member checking, rich, thick description, and external audits (Creswell & Poth, 2018). It is recommended that qualitative researchers engage in at least two of these strategies to enhance the accuracy of their findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018). My lived experience as a Sikh Punjabi Canadian woman has facilitated prolonged engagement with Sikh Punjabi Canadian culture and

persistent observation of women navigating salient expectations. This lived experience also creates room for bias, so I engaged in self-reflective journaling and memoing through the research process to ensure my own knowledge and experiences did not interfere with my interpretation of the participants' meaning making. I drew on peer review practices to further support the accuracy of the findings. I had multiple peer review sessions with my research supervisor and an academic colleague, a Sikh Punjabi Canadian woman, who had no previous connection to the research. They reviewed and provided feedback on the research process, including the analysis, coding structure, organization of themes and subthemes, and choice of extracts to best exemplify the findings. I also engaged in member checking to gain participant perspectives on whether their meaning making was aptly captured. Participants were sent their interview transcripts to review and approve prior to analysis. All five participants approved their transcripts within two weeks of receiving them. Follow-up interviews were conducted after the initial analysis was completed to fill in gaps within the findings and inquire whether the results represented their experience. In the results section, I provide rich, thick descriptions of both participant experiences of expectations and participant strengths and coping strategies in navigating expectations. The detail here serves transferability of findings, as readers can transfer information to other contexts with shared characteristics (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In sum, I drew on five of the eight recommended validation strategies to amplify the accuracy of the findings and enhance the success of the research process.

Ethical Considerations

Given the potential distress associated with discussing challenging experiences of navigating expectations, I took several measures to minimize discomfort and mitigate harm. I provided participants with the interview questions beforehand and emphasized their freedom to

refrain from answering questions they did not wish to answer. I informed them of their right to temporarily or permanently end the interview and withdraw from the study at any given time without being penalized. I communicated that the gift card would be provided to thank them for their time after the interview regardless of whether they end it prematurely or withdraw their data thereafter. I also provided participants the option to modify and selectively remove specific information within a given timeframe after the interviews. As a counselling psychology graduate student, I have some training in assessing distress and providing the appropriate support. Although several participants shared vulnerable and emotional experiences, there was no indication of significant distress that required immediate intervention. For additional support, I shared a list of resources (Appendix E) for counselling services and helplines for participant use in addition to providing a space to discuss any psychological challenges arising during or after the interview.

Many of the aforementioned ethical considerations were discussed during the informed consent process prior to the interview, alongside a discussion of privacy and confidentiality. Through signing the consent form with the participants, I demonstrated my commitment to keeping participant data confidential. All electronic files, including those involved in data analysis, were stored in an encrypted University of Alberta Google drive account on an encrypted device. I removed any identifying information from participant data, only including participant identification in password protected consent forms and a password protected master list linking participant names to their chosen pseudonyms. Both of these documents were stored in separate encrypted locations. Lastly, I relied on academic colleagues to lead the recruitment process to ensure an arm's length distance from eligible participants, given my membership in the Sikh Punjabi Canadian community. The recruitment process resulted in eligible participants

with whom I had no preexisting relationship that might hinder participant privacy, confidentiality, or safety.

Summary

I chose IPA as a methodology to gain a rich, detailed understanding of participant lived experiences of navigating salient expectations within their cultural and gendered context. IPA inherently operates within a social constructivist framework (Smith et al., 2022), which is supplemented by an intersectional feminist lens that strongly aligns with the transformative goals of this research. I conducted individual semi-structured interviews with five participants that share their gender and cultural identity, creating a small homogenous participant pool as is recommended when using IPA (Smith et al., 2022). Analysis involved transcription, exploratory noting, development of experiential statements and personal experiential themes, followed by the development of group experiential themes and subthemes that capture the convergence and divergence of participant experiences. I engaged in several recommended strategies to enhance the methodological integrity and accuracy of the findings and followed relevant ethical guidelines for this research project. In the following chapter, I present my analysis of results including demographic data, participant vignettes that capture their lived experiences of salient familial and cultural expectations, and group experiential themes and sub-themes that highlight their strengths and coping strategies in navigating said expectations, supported by extracts from each transcript.

Chapter 4: Findings

In this chapter, I present participants vignettes highlighting their experiences of navigating familial and cultural expectations. Participants reported experiencing salient interconnected expectations pertaining to academics, career, domestic responsibilities, dating, marriageability, marriage, honor, appearance, family management, cultural preservation, and children. Then I present the group experiential themes (GETs) and sub-themes that capture participant strengths and coping strategies in navigating these expectations. Findings revealed four overarching themes, including (1) recognizing expectations as unfair and harmful, (2) gaining the courage to take action and resist expectations, (3) engaging in strategies to alleviate distress and improve emotional wellbeing, and (4) balancing care for self and care for family. Each GET and sub-theme is supported by extracts from participant interviews.

Participant Vignettes

Participant vignettes are presented as follows to capture each participant's lived experience of navigating salient familial and cultural expectations in the past and present. Each vignette integrates participant accounts with information from the demographic questionnaire to contextualize their experiences within their particular contexts, as is expected in IPA (Smith et al., 2022). Their strengths and coping strategies are captured in the subsequent section on group experiential themes.

Mai B

Mai B is a 22-year-old undergraduate student in finance, who lives with her parents and two siblings in Edmonton, Alberta (AB). She reported being single but has previously been in a long-term relationship. Mai B identified her family as the greatest source of familial and cultural expectations, especially her mom. When asked to talk about the most salient expectations she has

navigated, Mai B stated that being the family mediator, peacekeeper, and manager have been most significant. Her mom expected her to "get involved" in conflict between the two parents, and between her mom and in-laws starting at a young age. She stated:

> [My mom] would constantly be asking me to go and talk to my dad or my dad would constantly be asking me to go and talk to my mom and they literally still do this. Instead of talking to each other they talk through me.

Mai B expressed feeling that her "mom really [depends] on [her] to help her get through" all challenges, and that the rest of her family has internalized this reliance on her as a result. She captures her family's expectation that she manages everything as follows:

> I really felt like that's where all my expectations were. They wanted me to basically just…do everything for the family. Help them solve everything…even the smallest issue that I know that they were able to think about themselves.

> Additionally, Mai B reported experiencing the expectation to handle domestic

responsibilities more so than her siblings, especially her brother. She explained that she has always been expected to "clean the entire house," "[take] care of [the family dog]," and handle other household chores. She expressed feeling that her mom imposed the expectation of "doing these household chores because…[she is] a girl." Mai B also reported experiencing the expectation to have an "arranged marriage" and not date growing up, so as to be the perfect "Punjabi daughter." This expectation changed as she grew older, at which point the expectation was to find "the all-around perfect guy." She described this perfect guy as a tall, Sikh Punjabi man, with a good education, career, and family. When she was in a relationship with her ex-partner, she experienced the expectation to marry him "*immediately,*" causing her to feel significant "pressure." Even though her partner was "verbally abusive" and "emotionally

manipulative," which significantly harmed her mental health and education, she felt "*too afraid to leave*" because of the expectation that she make her relationship with him last, as their families were already aware of them being together.

> Mai B also commented on education/career-related and appearance-related expectations: Punjabi women…have this expectation from their family that they need to be as successful as they possibly can, and get the highest marks that they possibly can, and almost in a way that's competitive... just setting the absolute highest standards for themselves and having that pressure from their parents to be successful.

Mai B found it unusual that she did not experience this expectation from her parents. She identified their preoccupation with family conflict as the reason for their lack of education/career-related expectations. In terms of appearance, she expressed that her "tomboy" like nature made the expectation to "look more feminine" salient. She stated that people would compare her appearance to other women as a means of enforcing this expectation. Overall, Mai B's experiences of salient familial and cultural expectations include mediating familial conflict, handling family matters, taking on significant domestic responsibilities, not dating growing up, finding the perfect Sikh Punjabi partner when she reached marriageable age (early twenties, according to her family), making her relationship last, and looking more feminine.

Jessica

Jessica is a 26-year-old Licensed Practical Nurse (LPN) from Surrey, British Columbia (BC), who is currently in school to become a Registered Nurse (RN). She reported being single but has previously been in a long-term relationship. Jessica identified the internalization of cultural norms and practices she has witnessed within her immediate and extended family as the greatest source of expectations. She also expressed that women in her extended family are the

most direct enforcers of the expectations she faces. The most salient expectation Jessica reported

experiencing is to get married and be a homemaker because of her age:

> I think that a lot of my expectations personally have kind of centered around …settling
>
> and taking on more of that homemaker role as opposed to having a full-fledged career
>
> and being educated.

Since she decided to return to school in her mid-twenties, the expectation to get married has

overpowered any previous expectations related to her academics and career. This expectation

mainly comes from her extended family. However, this does not mean that the expectation to be

educated and have a successful career was not salient previously. She expressed that the

expectation to have success in her education and career is stronger for her, as a woman, than it is

for men in the community. Her reflections on the reasons behind this were especially interesting.

Firstly, she expressed that doing well in school is a part of the expectations Punjabi women face

to generally "be better" as they are held to a higher standard than the men. Secondly, she

reported that families likely enforce this expectation because education and career success is a

"tool of removing yourself from cycles" of potential "domestic violence." The financial

independence and awareness that comes with an education and career "lowers [the] risk" of

having to stay in abusive situations in the future.

Jessica expressed experiencing the implicit expectation to handle domestic

responsibilities, so as to be a good wife in the future. Growing up, she was expected to "not

[stay] out late" and "[come]...home right after school." Like Mai B, she reported that she was

expected to not "[date] around," and get married "pretty early," ideally before 30 years old. The

type of man she is expected to marry would ideally have the "same background culturally," a

good education, and a mild temperament. Jessica also experienced the cultural expectation to

"make a relationship work" and "see it through" rather than leave the relationship and start fresh if it does not seem to be working. Appearance-wise, she expressed facing the expectation to have lighter skin and appear young for her wedding:

> When you're younger [you are] being told not to play outside because then you're gonna get dark…As I'm getting older, [I am getting] gray hairs, of course! Hearing from extended family members,"Oh but you're not gonna look as young on your wedding or look as good." So…I feel like there's definitely beauty standards that play a large role.

Lastly, Jessica expressed experiencing the expectation that she will have children after getting married, as a "natural progression" or "next step," and that she will face greater expectations as the mother to "raise [her] kids right" compared to what a father might experience. Overall, Jessica's experiences of salient familial and cultural expectations include being a good homemaker, doing well in school, having a good career, not dating around, finding the right husband, making her relationship last, getting married within her 20s, appearing light-skinned and young for her wedding, and having children after getting married.

Aria

Aria is a 27-year-old LPN originally from Edmonton, AB. She currently lives in Surrey, BC and is in school to become an RN. She reported being single but has previously been in a long-term relationship. Aria identified her grandparents as the greatest source of familial and cultural expectations, in addition to her parents and aunts in extended family. The most salient expectation Aria reported experiencing as she approaches age 30 is to get married. She expressed that the ideal expected age to get married was 25, by which point she was expected to be done her education, settled in her career, and prepared to be a good wife:

> [I] was expected to be married by 25…This is the locked down time…that's it. Regarding
>
> your expectations to cook, you have to make Indian food, you gotta learn this before you
>
> get married. Career-wise, you also need a career before you get married too. So all that is
>
> jam packed before the age of 25.

She stated that she has accomplished a lot of what was expected, including being a good role

model to her younger siblings and cousins, becoming competent in cooking and cleaning,

respecting her elders, becoming accomplished in school, and having a successful career:

> I do all of those things that would make a good household daughter…I'm already doing it
>
> all in a way…They want the perfect kids. I'm not saying I'm perfect, but I think they're
>
> happy with the spot I'm in, and the only factor that I'm missing is the marriage factor.

Being single at 27 years old has made the expectation to settle down with someone

"[skyrocket]." She reported feeling that the biggest cultural expectation is the "timeline of when

to get married."

As the oldest grandchild, Aria reported that a lot of the expectations she navigated were

more strongly enforced compared to what younger people in her family experienced. She

described the expectation be the "ideal perfect Indian daughter" as associated with "being the

oldest," which involves "always studying," "[finishing] school," "representing yourself in a

certain way," "getting married at a good time," "respecting everyone," "[going] to bed on time,"

"[waking] up on time," not "[spending] too much time on your phone," and "educating the

younger ones to be the perfect Indian child." Aria also experienced appearance-related

expectations growing up, specifically from her dad, to not cut her hair, show any skin, or wear

makeup. A lot of the expectations she faced when younger have decreased in salience, aside

from the expectation to get married and have children, which is now stronger. She expressed that

her grandparents are worried they may not live long enough to witness their oldest granddaughter's wedding, which causes her significant distress. Aria reported that she foresees the expectation to be "the perfect daughter-in-law," "pop a baby out" soon after getting married and be a "good mom." Overall, Aria's experiences of salient familial and cultural expectations include being the perfect Indian daughter and role model to her younger siblings and cousins, the perfect daughter-in-law, and the perfect mom. This entails being successful in school, work, and domestic responsibilities, maintaining modesty, being respectful and disciplined, getting married on a certain timeline, and having children soon after marriage.

Sandeep

Sandeep is a 35-year-old business development professional and small business owner from Brampton, Ontario. She is married to her long-term partner and is a mother to twin daughters. Sandeep identified her parents, especially her dad, as the greatest source of expectations growing up, and her husband, in-laws, and parents as the primary sources of expectations currently. Growing up, the greatest expectations Sandeep navigated were to support her mother in domestic responsibilities, which involved cooking, cleaning, and serving the men before herself, something that her brothers did not experience:

> I'd have to help with serving *roti* everyday. I don't know why you guys need help serving three people *roti*, why? Why do I have to eat last? I remember one time my dad's friends came over and it was 1am and he woke me up to help with roti, and I was 15.

Pertaining to academics and career-related expectations, Sandeep expressed that her parents expected her "to be a lawyer" even though she was never particularly "studious," while her brothers were allowed to "do whatever they want." Sandeep also reported the expectation to keep her skin light in color, get rid of body hair, and how comments about her not looking Indian were

delivered as "compliments." She explicitly talked about honor as a driving force underlying a lot of the expectations she navigated, specifically those related to maintaining modesty in her appearance, not cutting her hair, maintaining her purity by not dating or being involved with boys, acting appropriately in public as a representative of her family's honor, and maintaining silence and secrecy about things that could cause "besti" (*be-izzati*, the opposite of izzat) or bring shame to her family. This included keeping her relationship with her now husband a secret from her father until she was ready to get married, and keeping quiet about having experienced sexual assault at the hands of an older extended family member growing up, so as to not "rock the boat":

> As an Indian girl you cannot talk about sex. So you can't even talk about being sexually assaulted. If someone's doing something you can't really open up and tell your parents…I remember this one uncle I had…every time he would hug me, he would squeeze a breast. But as an Indian girl with a family, it was not something I could say, so I just kinda suppressed it, didn't talk about it for years.

Sandeep's parents did not enforce the expectation to get married in her twenties until her younger brother decided to get married, at which point there was an expectation for her to have a marriage prospect so as to seem marriageable at her brother's wedding, thus preserving family honor. She expressed navigating the expectation to marry someone from the same cultural background, and was afraid that her father would react poorly to her partner being half-Hindu rather than fully Sikh, making her surprised by his reaction:

> I always expected [my dad] to be like, "He has to be in the religion, has to be in the same caste." I don't really believe in that stuff, but he did, so I thought it would be a big deal.

[He] didn't care about it! Or at least he didn't make it known to me that he cared about

it. I think he did care about it, but I don't think he made it known to me.

Although her parents expected her to move in with her in-laws after getting married, she

never experienced this expectation from her in-laws, and lives independently from them.

Currently, the most salient expectation she reported facing is to "keep everything together" for

her parents, husband, kids, and in-laws. This involves, for example, mediating conflict between

her brothers' families and her parents, helping her parents "write [their] will," taking them to

appointments, mediating the relationship between her in-laws and her husband, and managing

everything in her household with her husband and kids. She reported having to handle the vast

majority of domestic responsibilities and having to be the "default parent" for her kids, which

can she described as "a lot":

> I do 90% of the cooking, I either take care of the cleaning, or I do the cleaning. I get the
>
> kids' stuff ready…everything is just me… As a woman, it's my responsibility. I even
>
> hear from [my husband], "You're the mom."

Pertaining to parenting, she discussed the expectation that she teaches her kids "how to speak

Punjabi" in order to preserve Punjabi culture. It is also worth noting that, as a mother to twin

daughters, Sandeep experiences the expectation to also have a son, especially from her in-laws:

> When I was pregnant with the girls, it was this expectation of "Oh, you're having two so
>
> *one* should be a boy." If I had two boys, I think I would hear from people, "Oh you
>
> should try for a girl." I do think I would, I do. But I don't think it would be as much of a
>
> *need*…As a Punjabi girl, there is that expectation that you give your in-laws an heir, a
>
> son.

She also discussed how working "two jobs" in addition to managing her familial expectations is "a lot," leading to significant overwhelm. Overall, Sandeep's experiences of salient familial and cultural expectations include handling domestic responsibilities, having a high achieving career, maintaining modesty in appearance, acting appropriately, maintaining silence/secrecy to preserve honor, mediating family conflict, handling most family matters, appearing light-skinned, being the default parent, being a good wife and daughter-in-law, having a son, and preserving Punjabi culture through teaching her children to speak Punjabi.

Noor

Noor is a 25-year-old graduate student in psychology, who lives with her parents and brother in Edmonton, AB. She reported being single but has previously been in a long-term relationship. Noor identified her parents, primarily her mom, as the greatest source of expectations. Noor reported navigating significant expectations pertaining to having a sense of direction in her academics so as to have a "well-paying" career in a "good field." These academic and career expectations take precedence over any relationship or marriage-related expectations for Noor. Another salient expectation she reported facing is appearance-related, wherein she is expected to appear "thin" and "put together" in front of other people. As an extension of this expectation, she is also expected to socially engage with family and friends in an appropriate manner. She categorized this as the expectation to "keep up appearances" and related it to preserving honor:

> I find preserving honor highly relevant to when we're socially engaging within our
> families…I find it very relevant because it's honorable to be social, to be in those
> events…just to greet the people and just to be in their house is honorable. And to look
> honorable before you go, to behave honorable, if that means stifling your personality or

even not being too loud or not laughing too loud. All the social rules [are] very tied in

with honor and appearance, not just physical, but your demeanor, everything.

Noor also expressed how she has navigated the expectation to keep her hair in tight braids to

appear more "culturally in line" and disciplined, which has damaged her hair and hairline. Also

related to appearance, she discussed how being overweight has made the expectation to be thin a

"higher priority" than other expectations from her family.

Furthermore, Noor reported the expectation to take on domestic responsibilities, be

hospitable when it comes to helping with chores, and making tea for guests. She compared these

expectations to her brother's experience:

I find that I have to do more chores than my brother always. And they'll just default come

to me for the chore and I'm like, I've already done three different things, go ask him.

Noor does not identify as heterosexual, which opened up a discussion on the huge salience of the

expectation to end up with a cis gender male if individuals are born female:

When a brown kid tells their parent, "Oh, I'm gay." It's like a bomb dropped, right.

Because it's *so* expected, it's *so* expected that you're straight. You were born a girl, so

you're straight, you're gonna find a man. There's no question about it.

Interestingly, Noor expressed that she is not expected to find a partner and marry to the same

extent as other young women in the community. She explained that this is partially because her

parents want her to prioritize her education and partially because her mom has suffered in her

own marriage and does not want Noor to suffer the same way. Overall, Noor's experiences of

salient familial and cultural expectations include succeeding in her academics and career,

appearing thin and put together, engaging socially with family and friends in a manner that

preserves honor, taking on chores, being hospitable, and conforming to a heterosexual identity.

Group Experiential Themes

The interpretative phenomenological analysis of semi-structured interviews with all five, and structured follow up interviews with three out of five (Mai B, Noor, and Jessica), participants revealed four group experiential themes (GETs), each with multiple subthemes. These GETs include (1) recognizing expectations as unfair and harmful, (2) gaining the courage to take action and resist expectations, (3) engaging in strategies to alleviate distress and improve emotional wellbeing, and (4) balancing care for self and care for family. The occurrence of the GETs and subthemes is presented in Table 2.

Table 2

Occurrence of Group Experiential Themes and Sub-themes Across Participants

Group Experiential Themes	Sub-themes	Participants				
		Mai B	Jessica	Aria	Sandeep	Noor
Recognizing expectations as unfair and harmful	Recognizing the Discriminatory Gendered Nature of Expectations	●	●	●	●	●
	Comparison to Peers with More Freedom	●	●	●	●	●
	Naming the Harm Caused by Expectations	●	●	●	●	●
Resisting Expectations: Gaining the Courage to Take Action	Drawing Courage from a Sense of Self-Preservation	●	●	●	●	●
	Drawing Courage from the Experiences of Other Women	●	●	●	●	●
	Taking action: Setting and communicating boundaries	●	●	●	●	●
Engaging in Strategies to Alleviate Distress and Improve Emotional Wellbeing	Drawing on Supportive Relationships	●	●	●	●	●
	Engaging in Independent Self-Reflection	●	●	●	●	●
	Focusing on the Positive	●	●	●	●	●
	Understanding and Embracing Imperfect Coping	●	●		●	●
Balancing care for self and care for family	Having Empathy and Understanding for Sources of Expectations	●	●	●	●	●
	Factoring in Care for One's Family	●	●	●	●	●
	Choosing when Acceptance is Easier than Resistance	●	●		●	●

- Indicates the occurrence of the sub-theme for the selected participant.

Recognizing expectations as unfair and harmful

All participants experienced a consciousness raising process wherein they recognized salient familial and expectations they have faced as unfair and harmful. This involved (1) recognizing the discriminatory gendered nature of expectations, (2) recognizing how their experiences were different from their peers with greater freedom, and (3) naming the physical, emotional, and psychological harm caused to them by the expectations. Recognizing that expectations are unfair and harmful is a prerequisite to participants exercising strengths and taking action in response to these expectations to mitigate harm and protect themselves going forward.

Recognizing the Discriminatory Gendered Nature of Expectations. As a part of recognizing and labeling expectations as unfair, all participants compared the challenging nature of their experience to their male counterparts in their cultural community. This especially included a comparison to their perceived understanding of their brothers' experiences, as all participants grew up with at least one brother as revealed in their demographic data. Mai B compared her own and her brother's experience of expectations, framing it as an example of what she feels Punjabi women experience universally:

> Collectively I feel like a lot of us Punjabi women believe and feel that we face so many more expectations compared to our brothers and our male counterparts…I feel like [my brother] literally had no expectations at all. He was never expected to clean the house. He was never expected to… contribute to the household in any way. He was never expected to…set high goals in school. Or think about what he wanted to do as a career. So that was like a very stark difference between my brother and I.

Aria seconded this sentiment by expressing how "[Punjabi men] don't have as many expectations as girls, young girls or women have ever had." Sandeep expressed how her "brothers didn't have to help with cooking" and were allowed to "cut their hair" growing up, unlike herself. Now that they have all gotten married and moved out of their parents' home, she still faces more expectations as she still handles "every little thing" for her parents instead of her brothers. Noor expressed that restrictions in leaving the house growing up have been a "very long and consistent way that [she sees] the gender difference in expectations" wherein her brother would be allowed to be out of the house until late at night, but she would not bother asking because she "just knew…it [would not] be allowed" for her to do the same. Jessica reported feeling that her parents tried to have similar expectations for her and her brother, however, the internalization of gender norms she witnessed growing up made her "worry more about [the expectations] than [her brother]." Therefore, all participants recognized their experiences of navigating expectations as different, and more challenging, than their male counterparts.

As a part of comparing the experience of navigating expectations to their male counterparts, several participants also reflected on how the consequences of resisting expectations are more severe for women than for men. Jessica stated, "there are still expectations for [Punjabi men]" but they are not as intensely enforced as they are for women, who are likely to "[face] more consequences" and thus feel more "apprehensive" of resisting expectations. Aria seconded this sentiment by expressing how Punjabi men "get away with everything." Sandeep provided an especially fitting example of the lack of consequences men in the community face for resisting expectations:

> I remember one time [my brother] left…him and his girlfriend, now-wife's, boarding
>
> passes to the Dominican or something *on* my dad's office table while they were dating.

And he said he was going on a work trip, or something. And so my dad was like "What

the hell?" But he was mad for a day, and that was it. Could you imagine if that was me?

My parents would *kill* me. My dad would *kill* me.

In this example, Sandeep's brother violated honor-related expectations as he was not married to

his girlfriend at the time of taking a vacation. He was seemingly not as concerned about the

consequences of this violation as Sandeep would have been, and rightfully so, as the

consequences were not nearly as severe as what Sandeep felt she would have to face if she was

in her brother's position. Noor provided a similar example wherein she went to her cousin's

house and was "yelled at" by her mom for not informing her she had reached there safely. She

compared this to her brother's experience of not having to report his whereabouts to his parents,

where the most severe consequence he would face for his actions would be a "call or text" from

their parents asking when he might come home even if he stayed out way later than her.

Therefore, participants recognize the difference in both, the expectations they face, and the

consequences of resisting said expectations. By acknowledging the more privileged gendered

experiences of their male counterparts, participants demonstrated their perspective of gendered

expectations as an oppressive experience for women in the Sikh Punjabi community.

Comparison to Peers with More Freedom. All participants discussed how comparing

their experience to peers who had greater freedom was part of their consciousness raising

process. All but one participant compared their experiences to peers from other cultural

backgrounds, with the remaining participant (Sandeep) primarily comparing her experience to

her brothers' experiences. Mai B expressed how witnessing her friends from diverse cultural

backgrounds have more freedom and less restrictions helped her cope, as it made her feel like it

was not "wrong" to resist the expectations she faced:

One of the ways that I coped, or tried to see past the expectations set upon me was that, when, especially living in Canada where there's so much diversity, seeing those expectations and those restraints and limitations set upon you, and then going to school, and seeing that your friends from different cultural backgrounds have the freedom to do XYZ, stay out late, date whoever they want to date, stuff like that. It just kind of makes you realize that there's more to life.

Aria expressed engaging in a similar comparison in her work setting, where she feels that "no one has a timeline" in "any other cultural backgrounds" to the degree of severity she has experienced the expectation to finish school, get settled in her career, learn to be competent in running a household, get married, and have children. This made her feel that the expectations she faced were "stupid" compared to what she witnessed her peers experience. Jessica discussed noticing how "her parents were a lot stricter than [her] peers' [parents]...that were from different cultural backgrounds," making her aware of the contrast between her and her peers' experiences. Similarly, Noor expressed that she drew awareness from "[seeing] friends that are allowed to do something [she is] not, or [do not] have to fight as much." For Noor, these friends tend to be "Indian or other people of color," which provides her with grounds for comparison because of her perceived "resemblance" in their experience. She expressed that this resemblance makes her feel that the freedom they have is "reasonable" within their cultural context, and thus should also be reasonable within her own, similar, cultural context.

Pertaining to Sandeep's experience, we did not have the opportunity to discuss whether witnessing friends with more freedom helped her recognize the unfairness of expectations as a prerequisite for her decision to resist them. However, she was very clear that witnessing her younger brother experience a massive amount of freedom compared to herself made the severity

of her experience salient. She expressed how she "[had] to be home by 9:30pm" but her younger brother could stay out partying till "5am in the morning" and their mom would make him breakfast rather than punish him in the way she might be punished in such a situation. This made her feel "if he can do it, I can do it," giving her the strength to resist expectations she felt were unfair. Overall, all participants engaged in a comparison process to others in their social circle who experienced greater freedom, providing them with the grounds to label their experience as unfair and consequently engage in rightful resistance.

Naming the Harm Caused by Expectations. All participants named the specific physical, emotional, and psychological harm caused by expectations. Mai B expressed how she endured "verbal abuse" at the hands of her "emotionally manipulative" ex-boyfriend because of the expectation that she marry the man she was dating. Staying in this relationship made her feel "extremely unhappy," "down," "depressed," drained her of "the energy to try in [her] day-to-day life," and caused her to "almost [lose her] spot at school." She recognized the cultural expectation that she "see [her relationship] through" as the source of this harm. Mai B also discussed how the accumulation of expectations she faced from her mom and family growing up led to emotional distress, resulting in her becoming "angry," "frustrated," "short-tempered," and "impatient" because she was "burnt out." Sandeep expressed experiencing significant physical and mental health consequences because of the accumulated distress of expectations she has navigated throughout her life:

> I ended up with depression and I had these physical manifestations of my anxieties,
> where I would feel numbness, tingling, and pain…At a certain point I started to have
> such bad pain….I remember one day, we were at some event and I was in the car, and I
> was like, "I'm gonna die, like something's wrong, something's really wrong, I'm gonna

die." And I remember they took me straight to the ER and they were like, "Well, you're

having a really bad anxiety attack."

Jessica also discussed how navigating expectations has been "distressing." Being around

extended family that set expectations would lead to such a response:

I would feel very anxious, on the verge of panic attacks, after interactions. So I feel like

"distressing" or "distressed" is a good word for it, and just feeling very stressed out when

I'm around them.

Similarly, Noor expressed experiencing "mental health problems" and "physical health

problems" as a result of being "overwhelmed with everything" growing up, conveying the harm

caused by the accumulation of expectations throughout her life. She also experienced physical

damage to her hair because of the expectation to keep it in "tight braids" to conform to how she

should look as an Indian girl:

I've had fights about my hair because when I was growing up, it would need to be in four

braids, lifted two smaller ones and then the two big ones. And that was actually terrible

for my hair. It was too tight and it pushed back my hairline, but it didn't matter because

that is the expectation, it's to conform to how you should look as a kid, and growing up

and you should have those braids.

Aria's experience was slightly different as she recognizes that expectations have caused harm,

but she "still [does not know]" how exactly this has impacted her. She recognized her experience

of navigating expectations as a form of "trauma" that has "impacted [her] internally" in a way

she does not fully understand yet, stating that she feels the need to "reach out to a therapist" to

gain clarity and insight. She also shared how resisting expectations could mean taking "a

beating" growing up, leading to great emotional, psychological, and physical harm. Overall,

recognizing the harm caused as a consequence of these expectations was an essential step for every participant, as naming this harm precedes the motivation to resist these expectations to mitigate future harm. There is some nuance in the extent to which participants understand the harmful impact of expectations, and a difference in the severity and nature of this harm, yet, the recognition of harm was universal across participants.

Resisting Expectations: Gaining the Courage to Take Action

After recognizing the unfairness and harm caused by expectations, participants expressed how they experienced the desire to resist them. Resisting expectations can have severe consequences, therefore, each participant discussed how they built up the courage to stand up for themselves. Participants (1) drew courage from a sense of self-preservation, (2) drew courage from the experiences of other women, and finally were able to (3) take action against the expectations, which involved setting and communicating boundaries. The courage to take action against expectations requires strength, and the first two sub-themes describe the sources of this strength. The third sub-theme describes participants' process of acting on their courage to set boundaries against the expectations.

Drawing Courage from a Sense of Self-Preservation. Three of five participants (Mai B, Noor, and Sandeep) explicitly discussed reaching a point where the harm caused by expectations became too much to handle, giving them the courage to finally fight back for the purpose of self-preservation. The remaining two participants (Jessica and Aria) expressed having a more implicit self-preservation instinct, wherein they have always experienced the need to prioritize and protect their way of life, which gives them the courage to resist expectations that are incompatible with their sense of self. Mai B described reaching a point in her relationship with her ex-boyfriend where the harm of staying in the relationship to fulfill the expectation to

marry her partner outweighed the potential harm of rejecting the expectation and breaking up with him, and the need to protect herself won out:

> [The relationship] was getting pretty bad. And it was affecting my life in so many ways that I was just like, no I can't. No matter what my parents say, no matter what anybody else says, I need to do this for myself.

Mai B reached a moment where she prioritized protecting her own wellbeing even though this could lead to adverse consequences from her family and community. Noor also expressed reaching a moment like this, where she "had had enough." The overwhelming nature of accumulated expectations from her mom led "something" to "click in [her]" resulting in a "bad fight with [her] mom." This was the "first time [she] pushed back" against her mom's expectations, finally gaining the courage to engage in resistance as a consequence of being unwilling to withstand more harm because of these expectations. Similarly, Sandeep experienced a moment where the harm of fulfilling the expectations became too much, giving rise to the courage to resist rather than conform:

> I just couldn't do it anymore and I had to have a mental breakdown where I just lost it. I physically lost it! My brother had to grab me. He was like, "Oh my God, calm down." And then my dad finally was like, "Okay, she's losing her mind. This is what she wants to do, just let her do it."

These three participants drew the courage to resist expectations from their sense of self-preservation kicking in, wherein they acted to protect themselves against the harm caused by expectations. Jessica and Aria, however, expressed having a self-preservation instinct as a part of their nature that gives them the courage to resist expectations that they perceive as harmful to their sense of self. Jessica describes herself as "steadfast on what [she wants] to do" which

provides her with built-in courage to live life in her own way, rather than based on the expectations of others. Similarly, Aria described herself as "strong headed," which has given her the courage to resist expectations that do not align with her sense of self:

> If I don't like something, if something doesn't feel right to me, I'm not gonna do it. I
> believe in my own gut and that has got me to where I am today and, you know, I think
> eventually *with time* my parents and grandparents understood, I'm gonna do things the
> way I want to do things.

Even with having this built in courage to resist expectations incompatible with her sense of self, it is evident that the process of resistance was not smooth and easy given that it took time for her family to accept her expectation-resistant choices. It is worth noting that Jessica and Aria are also both in the latter half of their 20s and live largely independently from their families, unlike the other participants (as revealed in demographic data) which might have some association with their implicit sense of self-preservation. Regardless of whether the participants gained courage to finally fight expectations once they reached a breaking point or if they always had the courage to resist expectations from a built-in sense of self-preservation, all participants drew on their desire to protect themselves so that they could overcome the fear of the potentially severe consequences of resisting expectations.

Drawing Courage from the Experiences of Other Women. All participants reflected on the suffering of other women in their families and communities, especially previous generations of women. Their acknowledgement of how women have suffered because of expectations provides them with the courage to resist these expectations to avoid suffering themselves, as they recognize this suffering as unjust and hope to break the generational cycles of oppressive expectations. Mai B reflected on how she gained the courage to leave her partner

by thinking about how her mom had suffered in a harmful relationship as well, and she did not want to suffer in the way her mom had suffered:

> I did not expect myself to be in the same situation as my mom…I just had to keep dealing with it until I did muster up the courage to just leave…Just thinking that…my mom didn't go through everything that she did for me to end up in the same situation.

Noor expressed a similar sentiment when discussing her mom's suffering in her own marriage, and Punjabi women's experiences of suffering because of expectations more generally. She reflected on how Punjabi moms are expected to "give up more of [themselves]," especially in a Canadian context where they are required to work to make ends meet and have no domestic support. This suffering encourages Noor to resist gender role expectations pertaining to chores, marriage, and having children.

Jessica also described Punjabi women's experiences of suffering more generally, explaining how she gains the courage to resist expectations pertaining to marriage by reflecting on "older generations" of women who stay "stuck in cycles…of domestic violence" as a consequence of the expectation to marry and stay married. Aria reflected on how her mother and grandmother's experiences of following norms, or fulfilling expectations, has led them to a life of total reliance on their husbands, something she does not want for herself:

> I'll see some girls that [are] very dependent on their families and their partner. And, they are so living to those norms that were a thing back in the day. Even looking at my mom or grandma, they're so dependent on [their husbands]. I just know that I don't want that for myself.

Reflecting on women's experiences within her own family, and the incompatibility of that experience with what she hopes for herself, gives her the courage to resist the expectations that

have led women to said experiences. Similarly, Sandeep reflected on her *bhua's* (dad's sister) experience of the expectation to have a son, and how the "horrible" nature of this experience encourages her to resist this expectation:

> My *bhua*…has twin daughters. And I remember when they were born, they told me about so many people who cried. So many people cried…Isn't that horrible?

She expressed that she never wants her daughters to feel unwanted or "less than" and that she is vocal in resisting the expectation to have a son, motivated not only from her own experience of being expected to have a son, but also from other women's unjust experiences within her family and community. Overall, all participants reflected on other Punjabi women's suffering because of familial and cultural expectations, and drew courage from this to fuel their resistance.

Taking Action: Setting and Communicating Boundaries. All participants expressed taking action to resist expectations they perceived as unfair and/or harmful by setting and communicating boundaries. The first two sub-themes exemplify the strength employed in making the decision to resist expectations, and this sub-theme highlights strength in the process of taking action to resist expectations. All participants discussed this process of resistance as challenging and uncomfortable, thus, demonstrating their strength in facing the discomfort involved in setting boundaries. For some participants, setting boundaries involved removing themselves from situations where expectations were set and enforced by extended family and community members. Noor discussed how she set boundaries by "[spending] less time and less energy in those environments that [were] not good for her." Similarly, Jessica expressed how she spends less time around extended family that enforces expectations. She stated that she does not hope to fully cut off the sources of expectations, but she does set mental boundaries if she is around them so that she is not as impacted by the expectations they set:

I think that a lot of the work that I've done personally is removing myself from extended

family. And interacting less and being okay with, not burning down those bridges but just

keeping everything very surface level.

Where Noor and Jessica expressed being okay with creating distance from the sources of

expectations to set boundaries, Mai B expressed how removing herself from the contexts that

perpetuate expectations did not feel like a healthy way of setting boundaries:

I just completely removed myself from the situation, and what I thought was a good idea

at the time actually wasn't, because it was just basically me *avoiding,* avoiding everything

at all costs.

Where Noor and Jessica discussed their acceptance of creating distance from extended family

and community members, Mai B's discomfort with creating distance to set boundaries was

pertaining to situations with her immediate family. Mai B felt that setting boundaries within her

immediate family context required greater communication:

I have to deal with [expectations] in a way that's actually healthy and appropriate. So I

need to make it *verbally clear* instead of just removing myself in the situation. I need to

communicate the fact that I'm not gonna be able to help them with every single thing in

their life and that they need to figure it out on their own and just set those boundaries.

This is not so different from Noor and Jessica's experience, as they expressed that

communicating boundaries verbally is their preferred way of navigating expectations within their

immediate family context as well. For example, Jessica described how "being able to talk to [her

parents]" supports her ability to set boundaries when navigating expectations within her

immediate family context. Noor also described how she feels "empowered" when she can

assertively set boundaries by communicating with her parents. However, she also reported that

this experience is "tiring," "unsettling," and "uncomfortable" because she feels she has to "really work hard to get [her] point across" in the process of setting boundaries. This mix of discomfort and empowerment in setting boundaries was present for multiple participants.

Mai B described the process of communicating boundaries with her mom as an "ongoing battle" wherein she has to work to justify her decisions that do not conform to expectations. She expressed initially feeling "guilty" when setting boundaries, but now "[feels] good" about "taking care of [herself]" in this way. Similarly, Aria expressed how "speaking up" and communicating her mind is how she sets boundaries, a process that also involves a mix of guilt and empowerment:

> There's also the guilt factor that I face. "Shit. Should I have done that? Should I not? Am I a bad person? Am I mean?" But then, I get back to my senses. No, I would not feel comfortable doing this. I'm not gonna do this.

The process of setting boundaries seemed to involve this evaluation of whether they were making the right choice, as participants navigated the guilt of rejecting their family's expectations contrasting with their desire to live on their own terms. Sandeep expressed how "saying no and setting boundaries" is especially challenging for her when it comes to her immediate family because it makes her feel like a "bad daughter" if she resists their expectations. In extended family and community settings however, like Jessica and Noor, she felt able to set boundaries, stating "I have boundaries with people that are not family, that's for sure." Thus, it seems as though the discomfort in setting boundaries is less in extended family and community settings. There can be greater guilt when resisting expectations within immediate family contexts, creating a greater need to communicate and explain themselves in the process of setting boundaries. This communication of boundaries within immediate family contexts is something

all participants experienced, with some experiencing less emotional discomfort (e.g., Jessica) and others experiencing more emotional discomfort (e.g., Noor, Aria, Sandeep, Mai B) during this process. Overall, the willingness to overcome this discomfort to actively resist expectations through setting and communicating boundaries was a strength for all participants.

Engaging in Strategies to Alleviate Distress and Improve Emotional Wellbeing

All participants engaged in strategies to alleviate distress and improve their emotional wellbeing through reflecting on, and meeting, their emotional needs, whilst accepting the strategies they use in doing so. The participants reported drawing on supportive relationships for guidance on navigating expectations and to remind themselves they are not alone in their suffering because of oppressive expectations. They also reported engaging in independent self-reflection where they process and work through their complex emotions associated with navigating expectations, often through journaling, therapy, and other mindful self-reflective practices. In their own way, each participant expressed reflecting on the positive aspects of their experience, and drawing strength from gratitude for their circumstances and/or hope for a more positive future for themselves and others. Lastly, most participants discussed how they embrace and accept imperfect coping to meet their emotional needs.

Drawing on Supportive Relationships. All participants expressed that they draw strength from supportive relationships with friends and family to manage the emotional distress associated with navigating expectations. Mai B described her relationship with her *masi* (mom's sister/cousin) as a source of strength, as she provides Mai B with reassurance that following familial expectations is not the only right way of doing things. Her masi's "[willingness] to share [her] lessons" helps alleviate Mai B's guilt in resisting "harsh expectations." Jessica described her relationships with her parents and brother as a source of strength, stating that having the

ability "to speak [openly] and freely to [her] parents about expectations and how they make [her] feel" makes her feel "emotionally resolved" or "emotionally safe." Their willingness to listen to her perspective and adjust their expectations accordingly is a source of strength for Jessica.

Several participants also discussed how connections with individuals that share their cultural identity and experience supported their ability to cope with the emotional distress of navigating expectations. For example, when asked what helps her cope, Noor stated:

Realizing how much it is a shared experience. As unfortunate as that is, it helps me cope because once you know it's a shared experience, it reduces some of that loneliness. And then of course, you have conversations with people and when you vent, they already know what you're talking about. You don't have to over-explain, you can just tell them what happened and they'll already know all the feelings that come with it. So that helps me cope.

When describing this common humanity, Noor specified that the experience of navigating such expectations is unique to her cultural community and other people of color, so relationships with such individuals give her strength. Similarly, in a follow up interview, Mai B reported feeling a deep connection with a woman she had just met who shares her cultural identity and her experience of expectations. She expressed that communicating with this new person provided her with comforting "relief" as she realized she was not alone in her experience. Aria's experience further exemplifies the strength in connecting to those with shared cultural experiences:

All my friends are Canadians, Indians, Indo-Canadians. So we all deal with pretty much similar things. Like at this age, the marriage factor, career factor. I think growing up we all had similar [expectations]. A lot of my friends are older siblings as well. So…we all can relate to each other. So, relating to one another and talking about it with a friend

actually makes you feel like, "Okay, I'm not the only one in the world struggling with

this. We're all dealing with this." It makes you feel like you're not alone.

When expectations led to suffering, participants drew strength from connecting with supportive

relationships with individuals who understand their experience personally. Jessica further

described how it was more beneficial when the individuals she connected with also engaged in

similar resistance to the expectations they navigated:

> I think what really helps me is…having strong support systems of friends and other
>
> family members around that same age that are also going through the same thing and
>
> maybe feeling the same emotions…especially friends that have also put in the same level
>
> of work to break away from cultural expectations.

All but one participant discussed how the common humanity in suffering because of expectations

caused them some emotional benefit, motivating their decision to actively draw on supportive

relationships with those who share their experience. Sandeep did not touch on this aspect of

supportive relationships; however, she did report drawing on her connections with family and

friends, specifically her husband, mother-in-law, and brothers. She expressed that "[her] brother

was always really helpful" in supporting her resistance against expectations. She provided

examples of how her brother would sneak her out to parties when she was younger, an act that

was in direct violation of expectations pertaining to her social life. There was an implication that

she would be unable to engage in such resistance without his support, highlighting how her

connection with her brother enhanced her ability to resist unfair expectations. Overall, all

participants expressed drawing on supportive relationships with friends and family members to

better cope with, and resist, oppressive expectations.

Engaging in Independent Self-Reflection. In addition to talking to supportive friends and family members, all participants reported engaging in some form of independent self-reflection practice wherein they work through their feelings regarding the process of navigating expectations. Jessica reported using therapy and journaling as tools to cope with the distress of expectations. She described how "[writing] down [her] feelings as they come about" through journaling helps her "work through [her emotions]." Additionally, she reported how seeing a therapist helps her gain emotional clarity as she is better "able to put into words what [she is] feeling." When discussing her use of therapy, she expressed the value of seeing a therapist who understands her cultural experiences:

> I actually just started seeing somebody last year and it was really good. [I made] sure it was somebody that was a person of color from the same cultural background so she was able to understand those cultural expectations, so that was really nice.

Like Jessica, Noor also reported the use of "therapy" and "journaling" to cope with the stress of navigating expectations but did not delve into a further discussion on this matter. Sandeep expressed that she "[goes] to therapy regularly" which, combined with the use of selective serotonin reuptake inhibitor (SSRI) medication, "[has] been life-changing for [her]" in helping her "cope and navigate all [her] relationships" involved in familial expectations. She conveyed that she feels "[she] would drown" without such coping mechanisms. She specifically discussed how therapy helped with consciousness raising, wherein she started to question the unfairness of the expectations she faced growing up. For example, therapy made her question why her father expected her to "help [her] mom with dinner" instead of "studying for an exam." She explained how previously she experienced "anxiety" and "depression" in response to the magnitude and difficulty of expectations she would face, but therapy now helps her cope better with them.

Aria expressed mostly engaging in self-reflection by "talking to herself" to reassure herself when the process of resisting expectations becomes emotionally challenging. She also discussed her use of therapy when the distress becomes too significant, but did not describe therapy as positively as the other participants. She expressed that exploring the impact of the expectations she has faced throughout her life can feel too difficult, indicating the severity of this impact:

> I'll reach out to a therapist and we'll go through…the trauma. We'll go through every layer, but then I feel like I get to the point where I'm like, this is too much, I need to shut down and completely not think about it because if I start thinking about it too much - because therapy's heavy.

Aria expressed meeting her need to work through the challenges of navigating expectations, even though this is heavy and difficult work. Her strength is evident in the willingness to engage in this difficult process to an extent that she can endure, so as to alleviate her net distress and improve her emotional state in the long run. Mai B did not report using therapy or journaling, instead reporting mindful self-reflection as a coping tool to cope with the emotional distress associated with expectations. Prior to her dog's death, she expressed how going on walks with him "gave [her] time to reflect and process" in a way that was helpful in her navigation of expectations. Overall, all participants discussed reflecting on their thoughts and feelings pertaining to the process of navigating expectations, through therapy, journaling, mindful self-reflection, and/or reassuring self-talk, so as to alleviate distress and improve their emotional wellbeing.

Focusing on the Positive. All participants discussed how focusing on the positive aspects of their experience of navigating expectations provided is a source of strength. This

involved focusing on what they are grateful for and cultivating hope for a better future. For example, Mai B expressed how grateful she was that she had the freedom to communicate with her parents to set boundaries, and did not face severe consequences for resisting expectations in the same way previous generations of Punjabi women had:

> Dealing with the expectations in general, I feel so lucky. Because, as a community, as a culture, we've already progressed and developed so much. Even 10 years, 20 years, 30 years, there's been so much progress. I have *way more* freedom to express myself than any generation of women before me. If I ever think that I have it hard, the fact that I can even say to my parents straight up, "This is your issue, go solve it," or "I'm not gonna do this," "I'm not gonna do that." I'm grateful for that…because I cannot imagine my mom doing that with her parents. She would probably get slapped you know, that's just how it was back then.

This was her response when asked how she felt about engaging in the challenging process of resisting expectations, indicating how she gains the strength to resist by framing this process as positive compared to what previous generations have endured. Similarly, Jessica expressed that she feels grateful for having "greater freedom than previous generations" to resist expectations, and can expect to not face as much harm as was previously acceptable for engaging in resistance. Aria reiterated this element of comparison to previous generations, expressing how changes in generational patterns of expectations provide her with hope:

> I think our generation has already allowed a breaking of a lot of these cultural norms. They've already broken. I feel like by the time of the next generation, like our kids, they aren't going to face these types of traumas and expectations that we had.

As the "black sheep" of her family, she expressed that her ability to resist oppressive cultural expectations is in service of generational changes wherein the next generation will benefit from her resistance. Focusing on this positive impact of her actions provides her with the strength to engage in resistance.

Similarly, Noor reported how focusing on the positive outcomes of her resistance to expectations provides her with the strength to stand up for herself. Being able to successfully reject expectations will allow her to live with greater autonomy and freedom, something she actively envisions:

> [I envision] what I'm gonna do, and what I'm gonna spend my time on, and how I'm gonna dress, what kind of things I like, how I want to do my hair, like, things like that that give you more independence. That is helpful coping.

Actively focusing on the positive impact of her resistance fuels said resistance. Sandeep similarly explained how her resistance will improve her children's experience of navigating expectations. Focusing on this positive outcome strengthens her resolve to fight oppressive expectations. She expressed how she "[does not] want [her] kids to go through" the same things she went through as a consequence of expectations. For example, when discussing the expectation to maintain her silence regarding sexual assault to preserve her family's honor, she resolutely stated that "all hell [would] break loose" if her children experienced such a thing. Her desire to protect her daughters from harm, and ensure they have a more positive experience than herself, gives her the strength to reject this expectation of silence. Sandeep also discussed how she draws the strength to navigate the abundance of expectations she faces by focusing on her blessings compared to others who might not have as much. She stated how fostering this gratitude gives her strength:

I think the strength comes from, you know what, I am really blessed. I have two beautiful

kids, I have my own house, my husband is really great, really supportive, and he has a

good job. Stuff like that helps because you look out and you see people who are

struggling financially, or they're struggling with other things.

Each participant discussed a different way of focusing on hope and gratitude as sources of

strength. Where Mai B and Jessica focused on how lucky they were to have greater freedom to

engage in resistance than previous generations, Aria, Noor, and Sandeep discussed how they

draw strength from reflecting on the positive impact of their resistance against oppressive

expectations. Sandeep also reflected on how the expectations she faces do not feel as challenging

when she compares her social, emotional, and economic capital to others who might not have as

much. Overall, all participants drew strength from fostering a positive outlook associated with

the process of navigating and resisting salient familial and cultural expectations.

Understanding and Embracing Imperfect Coping. All but one participant expressed

that they engage in some form of coping they do not perceive as "healthy," but accept it as

something they need to make themselves feel better when the stress of navigating expectations

becomes too much. Mai B reported that she "[scrolls] on Instagram," "[reads]," and "[watches]

TV" to cope. She expressed that she understands this behavior can be "bad" but fulfills her need

for it nonetheless, as it helps her feel better in the moment. Sandeep and Noor both reported

engaging in "unhealthy" eating habits. Sandeep expressed how the expectations of being the

default parent to twin toddlers has been very stressful, leading her to "stress eat." Noor described

engaging in "binge-eating" as an "escape" from the accumulation of stress associated with

expectations she has navigated throughout life. She expressed feeling that "part of self-care is

engaging in unhealthy coping because it [is] coping" regardless of whether it is "healthy" or

"unhealthy." This sense of acceptance over perceived unhealthy behaviors was evident in all four participants' discussion of their imperfect coping strategies. Sandeep expressed "dead-scrolling," "online shopping," engaging in the "escape of reading," and watching her comfort TV shows on repeat to cope:

> I'll have my reruns on…A lot of the time I need it, because that literally is the only time where I feel really good. A lot of the time when I'm having a long day, I just wanna laugh. I just wanna escape. And I think that really actually helps me. And people will say things like, "I don't really watch a lot of TV." You're not better than me because you don't watch TV, okay. If anything, you're missing out on life!

Here Sandeep expressed how watching TV might be perceived as unhealthy by others, but she accepts this as something that helps her when she is overwhelmed with navigating expectations on a day-to-day basis. Noor similarly discussed how "avoidance through the use of comfort activities" like "binging social media," or watching movies or shows "for hours at a time" have been a necessary form of comfort in response to overwhelming stress. Aria did not discuss her use of social media, comfort shows, books, or food like other participants, however, she did report the use of "avoidance" as necessary for temporary relief when the distress of navigating expectations becomes too much to handle. She stated that "[she does not] mind [using avoidance]" as a coping strategy, stating that she has "little tabs in [her] brain that [she] can just turn off." This "works" for her to temporarily manage her feelings pertaining to navigating salient expectations when they become significantly distressing. Overall, four of five participants reported an acceptance of using avoidance to escape the distress of navigating expectations, acknowledging and addressing their need to alleviate distress and enhance their emotional state. This acceptance, as opposed to self-blame for engaging in imperfect coping, is a strength.

Balancing Care for Self and Care for Family

Several participants engaged in a mindful process of responding to familial and cultural expectations in a way that balances their care for themselves and for their families. Participants demonstrated this through how they (1) had empathy and understanding for their families as sources of expectations, (2) factored in their care for their family in the decision-making process of navigating expectations, and (3) chose when it made more sense to accept rather than resist expectations, out of care for themselves and care for their family. In the previous themes, it is evident that participants recognize expectations as unfair and harmful and feel the need to resist them for their own sake. In this theme, it becomes evident that participants counterbalance this self-preservation with their care of family members in the process of understanding and responding to expectations.

Having Empathy and Understanding for Sources of Expectations. All participants expressed that their immediate family is a source of familial and cultural expectations. They all also recognized how these expectations were unfair and harmful. Although they acknowledged the role that their families played in causing this harm, none of the participants seemed to blame their families for setting and enforcing expectations. Rather, they all demonstrated empathy and understanding for why their family members perpetuated such expectations. For example, Mai B expressed empathy for her mother's expectation that she manage everything for her. She reflected on how her mom's "anxiety" makes her "*very* reliant on [her] to help her with even the littlest things," and that her mom relied on her growing up because she "had no other adult in her life to give her support." Mai B also expressed understanding for why Punjabi parents put so much pressure on their kids to succeed in their academics and career. She expressed that Punjabi parents understand that being Punjabi in Canada puts them "at a disadvantage," which makes

them "put so much pressure on [them] to be better." In these reflections, it is evident that Mai B spent time contemplating why certain expectations are enforced, and in this process, she had empathy and understanding for the sources of expectations regardless of the harm they might cause.

The most salient expectation Aria currently faces is to get married. Although this expectation causes her distress, she has empathy and understanding for why her grandparents have this expectation. She expressed that she understands they are "worried about their old age" and "want to be there for [her] big moment" because "they have spent so much time raising [her]." Similarly, Jessica expressed how she understands why her parents have specific expectations pertaining to the type of man she marries. She understood that their expectation that she finds someone "from the same background culturally" would "[make] it a little bit easier" as such a partner would be more likely to have similar "values" and "[understand] cultural differences." This does not mean that Aria and Jessica agree with the aforementioned expectations, however, they do not blame their family members for having them. Sandeep further exemplified this point:

> My mom had my brother when she was 24 and I can't imagine having a kid at 24. Like I had my daughters at 32 and I just-I can't imagine. So a lot of the time when I look back I just kind of give them a little bit of leeway. It's true and it's not funny but yes, our parents have really done a number mentally. Personally my parents have done a number on me. But it's not their fault, I can't blame them.

This was a part of Sandeep's discussion on how she understands why her parents set and enforced expectations that have been unfair or harmful. She felt her parents were so young when they set these expectations and were "growing up with [their kids]." There was a sense of

forgiveness in her understanding towards her parents, as she explained how she is also not the same person she was when she was younger and could not expect that her young parents would make all the right decisions. In their process of reflecting on why they faced certain expectations, Aria, Jessica, and Sandeep showed understanding and empathy towards their family members rather than blaming them for the harm caused by the expectations they set.

Noor expressed understanding for why older Punjabi women feel the need set and enforce the same gendered expectations for younger women in the community:

> So you said "give up more of yourself" and that's what our mothers do and have done. And they've done it to a point where it's so internalized in them that they're going to have us do that as well…because that's what they know…They do give more of themselves and then since we are women, we are gonna inherit that gender role.

Noor, like other participants, was able to understand and empathize with the sources of expectations as products of their social and cultural environment. This empathy and understanding are strengths participants drew on to help themselves make sense of the expectations they navigate in a way that prevents them from forming resentment against the sources of expectations as they acknowledge expectations as a consequence of social and cultural systems rather than specific individuals in their families.

Factoring in Care for One's Family. All participants factored in their feelings of care and consideration for their family members in how they decided to respond to familial and cultural expectations. For all participants, care for their family increased their willingness to fulfill challenging expectations. For some participants, this care was apparent in how they chose to resist expectations. Jessica and Aria discussed how their care for their parents made them want to fulfill expectations when they were younger. Jessica expressed that her care for her parents'

feelings prevented her from "moving away" for school when she was younger, as they expected

her to live at home at the time. Mai B expressed how she fulfilled expectations because she

wanted her mom to be happy:

> I think in a sense I liked it because my mom could be like, "My daughter is always there
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> for me, she always supports me. She's always there for me." To an extent I felt proud that
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> I could always be there for her. And I think, I just always wanted her to be happy.

Similarly, Sandeep demonstrated how her care for her parents fuels her enthusiasm to fulfill

expectations that help them meet their needs:

> I want my parents to come to me and say, "Can you do this for me?" I want them to feel
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> comfortable, I want them to feel happy. They deserve to feel like [they] can rely on
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> [their] child...I don't want you to take away from this that I don't want the expectations
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> put on me. I think it depends on what they are for sure, and [it] has to be reasonable. Even
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> if it's unreasonable, if it's something they really need, I will do it. And I'll continue to do
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> it. The boundaries are for things that are just ridiculous. But when it's something that
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> they have a need for, I'm gonna happily do it because I wanna be there for them.

The evaluation of the extent to which the expectations are reasonable influences the

decision-making process of several participants. For example, Noor discussed how her

willingness to fulfill expectations involves an evaluation of whether it "is within reason" for her

to carry out the expected task/behavior, stating that her "care for [her] family factors into the

decision-making process" of how she will navigate expectations. Similarly, Aria expressed how

her care for her grandparents influences her decision-making process in navigating expectations.

Pertaining to the expectation of marriage, her care for her grandparents makes her contemplate

whether she should just "get married to the next guy so [her grandparents] can see [her]

wedding." Although this concern for her grandparents factors into her decision making, her care for herself keeps her from fulfilling the expectation to settle down soon, as she explained she is steadfast in waiting for "[her] Bollywood love story."

It is also worth noting that some participants' care for their families buffered their rejection of expectations they did not wish to fulfill. For example, Mai B explained that she initially resisted expectations without any explanation for her family. This made her feel "guilty" as she felt she was hurting her family members. Care for them motivated her choice to start patiently communicating boundaries with her family, whilst providing them reassurance and emotional support, so as to prevent emotional harm to them in her rejection of expectations:

> My mom…feels like the one person, the one kid that I could rely on, is now starting to say no to me. So sometimes she has a hard time dealing with it and I always tell her, "I still love you but I just need you to handle stuff yourself. Because I find that you're relying on me way too much for pretty much everything now." So, I make it very clear to her I'm drawing this boundary because I need to focus on myself. And she'll try to be understanding.

Mai B's willingness to communicate boundaries with her mom in a way that helps her understand demonstrates how her care for her mom impacts how she chooses to resist expectations with kindness. Similarly, Noor explained her willingness to compromise in how she chooses to engage in resistance because of her care for her mother, and parents in general:

> I actually care quite a lot about her, and I would like to have them in my life and I actually really want to have them have a very nice retirement…So because of that, I feel like I would have to compromise more rather than just be like "Nope, that's it. That's what I'm doing and you have to completely deal with it. And I'll cut you off, if you don't

want to deal with it." I would try. I would try to compromise or I would try to really talk

them through something that they don't agree with, or I would put in effort before I would

just a hundred percent be like "No that's it."

This willingness to go through the effortful process of communicating with the sources of

expectations is because of care for such familial relationships. Although Mai B and Noor were

the only participants who most directly expressed this sentiment, it was implicitly evident in all

participant interviews. Jessica, Aria, and Sandeep touched on how they communicate with their

parents to help them understand their decisions pertaining to resisting expectations, rather than

rejecting expectations with no explanation or consideration for others' feelings, demonstrating

how their care for their family factors into their navigation of expectations.

Choosing When Acceptance is Easier than Resistance. Part of balancing their care for

family with care for themselves involved choosing when it was in their best interest to fulfill

expectations, because trying to resist would be more difficult than just doing what was expected.

In such situations, resistance would lead to upsetting family members, potential conflict, feelings

of guilt, and an overall expending of more effort than what would be required to simply fulfill

the task. Four of five participants discussed how they sometimes give in to expectations for their

own sake, because resistance can involve too much emotional and mental work. For example,

although Mai B expressed wanting to resist the expectation that she mediate familial conflict, she

explained how she will start to "drop hints" to facilitate conflict resolution if the cost of staying

uninvolved becomes too significant. Similarly, Sandeep discussed how she attempts to gain

support from her husband in domestic responsibilities to resist the expectation that she handle it

all herself, but finds that the effort and guilt involved in the process of resisting makes it more

difficult than simply fulfilling domestic expectations herself:

A lot of the times I'd rather just do it myself because I know it'll get done well and it'll get done right. And that's probably not the best way to go about it but for my own mental health I sometimes feel like it is, because I just can't deal with having to explain everything, and then having to feel the guilt...A lot of the time I don't have time to explain. I have two jobs, I have two kids, I have a house, I have families to take care of, and it's a lot, it's actually just genuinely a lot.

Noor further explained her care for herself and unwillingness to cause trouble with family sometimes makes "acceptance" or "submissiveness" easier than resistance. She described this idea of picking her battles, discussing how years of trying to resist bigger expectations reduces her capacity to engage in resistance for other smaller expectations:

It took me years and years and years to get my own family to lay off on the weight stuff so that I can focus on it for myself. So, how long would it take me to change these other things? I just don't have the energy or the capacity to take that on as well. So honestly, a lot of it is acceptance and submissiveness to the expectations…So when people come over, I will change my outfit. If my hair is out, for example, because I have very curly hair, to my parents sometimes it looks wild. I think it looks nice. But I will still put it back or do whatever they want because it's less energy.

Jessica's experience of choosing to just accept expectations was slightly different, wherein she would "[nod] along" with extended family members when they would discuss their expectations of her, giving them the impression that she was in agreement with them while still resisting expectations through her actions. When engaged in discussions with the sources of expectations, however, she would not show any form of resistance so as to save herself from the "emotional burden" of explaining herself and having to manage their negative emotional response to her

resistance. Overall, the majority of the participants factored in both, their care for themselves, and their family members, when choosing to accept certain expectations rather than engage in active resistance.

Summary

In this chapter, I first presented participant vignettes that captured their experiences of salient familial and cultural expectations. Then I presented participant experiences of strengths and coping in the form of GETs, including (1) recognizing expectations as unfair and harmful, (2) gaining the courage to resist expectations, (3) engaging in strategies to alleviate distress and enhance emotional wellbeing, and (4) balancing care for self and care for family. These GETs were further broken down into sub-themes, with each reported claim supported by transcript extracts. In the following chapter, I will contextualize the present findings within existing literature, and discuss implications, limitations, and further directions.

Chapter 5: Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore and highlight Sikh Punjabi Canadian women's strengths and coping strategies in navigating salient familial and cultural expectations. In the discussion, I start by briefly discussing participant experiences of expectations in relation to existing research. Then I discuss the four GETs and sub-themes in the context of existing literature, suggesting a fitting framework for conceptualizing Sikh Punjabi Canadian women's strengths and coping. Lastly, I discuss implications, limitations of the present study, and future directions.

Experiences of Expectations

Participant experiences of expectations were mostly consistent with existing literature on Sikh, Punjabi, Indian, and South Asian women's experiences of expectations in Western contexts. As presented in the participant vignettes, participants reported navigating expectations related to excelling in academics and career, handling domestic responsibilities, maintaining harmony within their families, preserving culture, ensuring their marriageability, marrying the right man at the right time, and having and raising children. Family members who had the greatest role in raising the participants (as presented in demographic data) were often cited as the sources of familial expectations. Participant lived experiences of expectations are presented in context of existing research as follows, parallel to the format presented in the literature review.

Academics and Career

The expectation to do well academically is not only associated with its ability to lead to a high achieving career, but also with upholding the family's honor or izzat (Dupree et al., 2013; Somerville, 2019). All but one participant reported experiencing the expectation that they do well in school, with the remaining participant recognizing that her parents' lack of

academic/career expectations are unique to her family's circumstances. Two of the participants directly linked their academic expectations to being the expected perfect daughter, a sentiment that is central in South Asian women's experiences of being the holders of honor (Mehrotra, 2016). The other two participants linked their academic expectations to their parents' expectation that they have a high achieving career, which is also consistent with the experience of South Asian women (Baggulay & Hussain, 2014; Chaudhary, 2024).

Koehn's (2021) research revealed that education can be a protective factor for Punjabi women. Study findings were in agreement with this protective aspect of academic/career expectations, as there was participant reflection on how having an education increases financial independence and lowers South Asian women's abilities to be stuck in cycles of domestic violence in which they rely on their husband and in-laws for survival (Koehn, 2021). Research also reveals that South Asian women tend to experience the expectation to work long hours in Western contexts to support their families financially (Mustafa et al., 2020). This was not a salient expectation for most of the participants of this study, likely in part because of their current stage of life. Majority of the participants live with their parents or independently, not yet having to take on the financial responsibilities of other family members. The one participant who financially supports her family alongside her husband expressed how working two jobs in addition to navigating familial and cultural expectations is overwhelming, which is consistent with existing literature on South Asian wives' and mothers' experiences (Mustafa et al., 2020).

Managing the Household: Domestic Responsibilities, Harmony, and Cultural Preservation

Existing literature is clear that women from South Asian cultural groups experience more expectations than their male counterparts pertaining to handling domestic responsibilities (Chaudhary, 2024; Dupree et al., 2013; Mehrotra, 2016; Srinivasan, 2018). Participant lived

experiences were consistent with this research, as they revealed the significantly high expectations they have navigated pertaining to cooking, cleaning, pet-care, child-care, and additional chores compared to the men in their lives. This division of labor tends to start at a young age, and ties into the process of shaping women to be ideal wives and daughters-in-law (Dupree et al., 2013; Mehrotra, 2016), which was consistent with participant experiences. Two of the participants explicitly tied domestic expectations to "feminine" responsibilities as reported by Mustafa and colleagues (2020), explaining how these expectations are directly related to being a woman. Mustafa et al. (2020) further claim that this expectation is enforced through an internalization of gender roles through socialization, which was consistent with reported participant experiences of internalizing the gender roles they witnessed growing up. Neupane (2024) revealed that expectations to be a homemaker supersede the expectations to do well in academics and career. This was also consistent with the findings as a participant revealed that her homemaker responsibilities were prioritized over her education and career, especially because of her "past-marriageable" age. Thus, findings pertaining to handling household responsibilities were consistent with existing literature.

Being the default parent and caregiver to elders within the family are additional domestic expectations in the literature on South Asian women (Mehrotra, 2016; Somerville, 2019; Witenstein, 2020), which was consistent with the experience of the participant with children and aging parents. Although the other participants in their late 20s reported foreseeing the expectation to be the default caretaker given their understanding of their own culture, their current stage of life did not align with caretaking expectations. The participants in their early 20s minimally discussed such expectations, demonstrating the evolving nature of salient expectations depending on individual factors such as age and stage of life.

Existing literature also conveys that women from South Asian cultures experience the expectation to maintain peace and harmony in their families, including conflict mediation, problem solving, and the maintenance of silence in the face of actions that could bring dishonor to the family (Grewal et al., 2005; Sabri, Bhandari et al., 2018; Somerville, 2019). Findings were consistent with this research, with two participants experiencing highly salient expectations pertaining to family management, problem solving, and conflict mediation. Furthermore, research has found that women from South Asian cultures are expected to be representatives of their culture (Ahluwalia, 2002; Chaudhary, 2024; Witenstein, 2020). This was consistent with findings as participants reported the expectation to appear culturally in line, make Indian food, teach their children Punjabi, and so on, as preservers of Punjabi culture. Overall, there was high consistency in the participants' reported lived experience of expectations pertaining to domestic responsibilities, family harmony, and cultural preservation with existing literature.

Marriageability, Marriage, and Children

Beyond domestic responsibilities, expectations pertaining to dressing modestly (Dupree et al., 2013; Mehrotra, 2016; Somerville, 2019), maintaining a restricted social life, not being involved with boys until marriageable age (Mucina, 2018; Somerville, 2019), and maintaining a thin, light-skinned, and young appearance (Mehrotra, 2016) have been linked to boosting the marriageability of South Asian women in existing literature. Findings were consistent with marriageability-related expectations evident in existing research, as participants reported not being allowed to show skin, go out late, go on trips, date, or even play in the sun where they might get tanned. Not all participants experienced the same exact expectations pertaining to marriageability, with individual factors determining what was more salient in their lived experience. For example, the expectation to maintain thinness was most salient for the

participant who reported that she did not meet the Indian standard of thinness, and the expectation to appear young was salient for the participant who was starting to get gray hair but was not yet married. This indicates that the salience of expectations is likely reliant on individual proximity to a culturally predetermined "ideal," wherein individuals who are further away from said ideal face more intense expectations in that area.

Not all participants experienced salient expectations pertaining to marriage overall, with one participant reporting that her parents wish for her to prioritize her school and career over any relationship. This is not consistent with existing research on South Asian women, who are often encouraged to prioritize marriageability and marriage over their education and career (Baggulay & Hussain, 2014). This participant reported that her mother's suffering in her marriage likely motivates her lack of marriage-related expectations, demonstrating that individual family dynamics contribute to women's experiences of familial expectations regardless of cultural norms. Given that families, especially parents, are the greatest source of expectations (Mehrotra, 2016), parents' lived experiences also influence how cultural expectations transcend generations.

Existing literature supports the claim that South Asian women are expected to either get an arranged marriage or find themselves an acceptable groom within their 20s (Srinivasan, 2000; Yeung et al., 2018), with current generations of women having more autonomy in who they choose to marry (Koehn, 2021). Even with the ability to choose their own partner, they are expected to find someone deemed acceptable by their family, specifically a man with the same cultural and religious background (Mehrotra, 2016; Koehn, 2021; Srinivasan, 2018). Findings were consistent with the literature in this regard as participants expressed their parents' expectation that they find someone who shares their cultural and religious identity. Sandhu and Barrett (2024) conveyed how women from South Asian cultures experience gendered

expectations pertaining to decision making in their romantic relationships, leading them to feel coerced to make relationships last even if it is not in their best interest. This was corroborated by participants who felt that they were expected by their family and cultural community to see unhealthy relationships through, even if the relationships were not ideal or caused them harm as a result.

Existing research also suggests that there is an expected timeline for South Asian women to get married (Mehrotra, 2016), which was especially salient for the unmarried participants in the latter half of their 20s. These two participants expressed that finding the right partner to get married soon is one of the biggest expectations they currently navigate, demonstrating how the salience of marriage-related expectations might increase as Punjabi women approach 30 years old. These were the same participants who foresaw the expectation to have children as the next step after getting married, suggesting that childbearing expectations likely gain salience alongside marriage expectations. These findings are consistent with existing research, which suggests that women from South Asian cultures are expected to have children soon after marriage, preferably a son (Dupree et al., 2013; Grewal et al., 2005; Srinivasan, 2018; Witenstein, 2020). This son-preference was evident in the experience of the one participant with daughters, who felt her lack of sons made this expectation more salient. This provides further support for the idea that proximity to the "ideal" likely influences the salience of various expectations, as having only daughters seems to contribute to greater salience of the expectation to give one's in-laws an heir.

Summary

Overall, the participant experiences of expectations fit within existing literature, but varied individually depending on specific factors like family dynamics, values, age, and so on. It

was necessary to engage in a discussion of participants' navigation of salient familial and cultural expectations prior to delving into the strengths and coping strategies because there are no specific research studies that directly focus on Sikh Punjabi Canadian women's experiences of expectations as a whole. It is the weight of combined conflicting expectations that cause pressure and distress for women from South Asian communities (Mehrotra, 2016), thus presenting them in a cohesive narrative provides necessary context and justification for why it is inevitable that navigating such expectations involves strength. Focusing on this strength and resilience as the topic of research while recognizing the challenging nature of expectations is part of the strengths-based approach of this study, which aims to support the self-empowerment of the Sikh Punjabi Canadian community.

Strengths in Navigating Expectations

Interpretative phenomenological analysis of participant transcripts revealed four GETs that capture the strengths and coping strategies in navigating salient familial and cultural expectations. The themes include (1) recognizing expectations as unfair and harmful, (2) gaining the courage to resist expectations, (3) engaging in strategies to alleviate distress and enhance emotional wellbeing, and (4) balancing care for self and care for family. The first two themes intuitively go together, as recognizing expectations as unfair and harmful likely precedes and motivates the resistance of expectations. They exemplify the identification of the need to protect oneself from something perceived as harmful, and the resultant self-protective action. The third theme is concerned with actively improving wellbeing to counter the distress caused by expectations. The fourth theme is concerned with factoring in care for oneself and care for one's family in understanding and responding to expectations, such that harm to both parties is minimized. The findings indicate the presence of personal strengths and external resources,

consistent with Peterson and Seligman's (2004) character strengths and virtues, and social ecological models of resilience (Ungar, 2012). Additionally, there seems to be a common thread that unites the four themes when considering the results holistically. The common thread is compassion, including self-compassion and compassion for others.

Self-compassion involves recognizing and acknowledging our own pain, feeling connected to others who suffer like us, and understanding and supporting ourselves when we are faced with adversity or life challenges (Neff, 2023). It can take the form of fierce self-compassion, wherein we aim to protect ourselves, meet our needs, or take action that motivates change (Neff, 2021). It can also take the form of tender self-compassion, wherein we engage in self-acceptance and self-soothing in the face of distressing emotions (Neff, 2023). The first two GETs exemplify fierce self-compassion as they capture the process of recognizing harm done to oneself, and taking self-protective action to mitigate further harm. The third GET exemplifies tender self-compassion as it captures the process of self-soothing to alleviate distress and enhance wellbeing. The fourth theme exemplifies the co-existence of self-compassion and compassion for others as it captures how participants balance care for themselves and their family members in how they understand and respond to expectations.

Compassion as a concept, or *daya*, is central in Sikhi (Jammu, 2016; Mehta, 2020). According to Sikhi, compassion is a divine trait that elevates the human state (Jammu, 2016). In Sikhi, compassion starts with ourselves (Burmeister, 2014). The Sikh principle of recognizing our oneness with all living beings (Nesbitt, 2016) is strongly aligned with how Neff (2023) explains self-compassion. Given how the concept of compassion holistically aligns with the findings and with the principles of Sikhi, it seems fitting to guide the discussion of Sikh Punjabi Canadian women's strengths by these principles. Additionally, the transactional model of stress

and coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), the concept of consciousness raising (Friere, 1970), social ecological model of resilience (Ungar, 2012), and other relevant literature will supplement the conceptualization of the GETs and sub-themes in the subsequent sections. The cultural relevance of compassion and related literature will then be discussed further in the implications section.

Recognizing Expectations as Unfair and Harmful

Participant recognition of the unfairness and harm of expectations involved them (1) recognizing the discriminatory gendered nature of the expectations, (2) comparing their own experiences to the experiences of their peers with more freedom, and (3) naming the harm caused by expectations. Previous research on South Asian women in Western contexts implicitly suggests that recognizing expectations as harmful and unreasonable is a strength, as this provides the courage to reject them (Goel et al., 2021; Sandhu & Barrett, 2024). The research does not, however, explore this in any depth. I take three separate but interconnected lenses to explore this strength in greater depth, fierce self-compassion, appraisal within the transactional model of stress and coping, and the concept of consciousness raising.

Recall that part of fierce self-compassion is recognizing situations that are causing harm so that one can engage in self-protective action (Neff, 2021). This motivates the formation of boundaries, adaptive coping, self-preservation, post-traumatic growth, and improved wellbeing, demonstrating how fierce self-compassion is a strength (Neff, 2021; Neff, 2023). Furthermore, recognizing the unfair and harmful nature of their experience can also be seen as the process of appraisal in the transactional model of stress and coping. This model posits that situations must be perceived and evaluated as stressful within one's individual context as a prerequisite to

effective coping (Folkman, 2013). This is consistent with the concept of consciousness raising discussed as follows.

The concept of consciousness raising (Friere, 1970) provides another way to conceptualize this theme within existing literature. Through reflecting on their own experiences of expectations in comparison to males within the Sikh Punjabi community and to peers from other cultural groups who experience greater freedom, participants demonstrated their recognition of how the expectations operate at the intersection of their gender and cultural identity. Through naming the specific harm caused by the expectations, including unhappiness, anger, frustration, anxiety, distress, depression, burnout, and physical challenges, participants demonstrated their recognition of the multifaceted emotional, psychological, and physical consequences of expectations. Together, the sub-themes capture participants' understanding of expectations as oppressive. Recognizing one's own unjust oppression in the context of broader systemic factors such as gender and cultural identity is the first part of consciousness raising (Yu, 2018). Consciousness raising is the process of developing a critical consciousness in which individuals recognize the oppressive nature of their experience so as to gain the motivation to take anti-oppressive action (Friere, 1970).

Consciousness raising involves reflection, motivation, and action (Diemer et al., 2023). This GET exemplifies the initial reflection-based step in developing a critical consciousness, which is a necessary prerequisite to resistance (Yu, 2018). Recognizing their experience as unfair and harmful is step one in the journey from oppression to liberation (McGirr & Sullivan, 2016). Consciousness raising can be linked to Peterson and Seligman's (2004) virtue of wisdom, which includes strengths such as curiosity and perspective, and is essential in marginalized communities, as it leads to anti-oppressive action and is positively associated with personal and

social benefits (Hailes et al., 2021). It allows individuals to move from a position of

powerlessness and internalized oppression to empowerment, and individual and social change

(Lundy, 2011). In their mixed methods study with women survivors of domestic violence

McGirr and Sullivan (2016) found that consciousness raising increases self-efficacy, which

involved an increased confidence in their ability to deal with challenging situations. In addition

to consciousness raising predicting greater self-worth and willingness to challenge the status quo,

the associated increase in self-efficacy also predicts improved psychological and physical

wellbeing (McGirr & Sullivan, 2016). Therefore, consciousness raising, through recognition of

one's experience as unfair and harmful, is a source of strength for the participants of the present

study.

Resisting Expectations: Gaining the Courage to Take Action

The process of resisting expectations involved (1) drawing courage from a sense of self-

preservation, (2) drawing courage from the experiences of other women, and (3) engaging in

active resistance through setting and communicating boundaries. Courage, one of Peterson &

Seligman's (2004) core virtues, is supported by strengths such as bravery, persistence, and

honesty. Choosing to engage in resistance required courage, because participants were aware of

the potentially severe consequences of resisting expectations. Consequences of deviating from

expectations could include shame, embarrassment, humiliation, a sense of failure (Gill & Aujla,

2014), familial ruptures, intergenerational conflict (Mafura & Charura, 2021; Mehrotra, 2016;

Somerville, 2019), and even full-blown violence and abuse (Mucina, 2018; Sandhu & Barrett,

2024). The need for courage is thus inevitable if one is to engage in resistance. Participants

gained this courage from a sense of self preservation and by reflecting on the experiences of

other women, especially previous generations of women.

Drawing Courage from a Sense of Self-Preservation. This sub-theme exemplifies the participants' evaluation of stress caused by expectations as requiring a coping response to preserve their wellbeing, as per the transactional model of stress and coping (Folkman, 2013). Drawing courage from self-preservation involved participants reaching a point wherein the harm of fulfilling expectations became greater than the potential harm of resisting expectations. This gave rise to a self-preservation instinct that gave them the courage to stand up against expectations. Self-preservation is a mechanism by which individuals avoid death or destruction when faced with threats (Brown et al., 1999). Self-preservation is aimed at self-protection and is often also a consequence of fierce self-compassion, wherein individuals' feelings of warmth and kindness towards themselves motivate them to fiercely protect themselves from threatening situations (Neff, 2021). The threat in this scenario is the mental, emotional, or physical distress caused by fulfillment of an oppressive expectation. The drive to preserve one's own well-being in the face of such threats is a strength as it encourages taking action to protect oneself.

Drawing Courage from the Experiences of Other Women. Existing literature acknowledges South Asian women's strength in drawing courage from reflecting on the experiences of other women, especially previous generations of women (Ahmad et al., 2013; Reyes & Constantino, 2016). In their qualitative study, Ahmad and colleagues (2013) reported that the desire to break generational cycles of harm encourages South Asian women survivors of partner violence to stand up against oppression. They explored this more in the context of women wanting to raise their children in a family with greater gender equality (Ahmad et al., 2013). This aligns well with Sandeep's expressed desire to break generational cycles for her children. The same principle can also be applied to the participants' expressed desire to protect themselves from being harmed by the same generational cycles of gendered expectations that

have harmed previous generations of women. Knowledge of other women's suffering because of gendered expectations provided a source of strength for participants as it encouraged them to take self-protective actions of resistance against such expectations to save themselves from a similar fate. Furthermore, having access to other women's experiences presents a social resource for the participants, which can facilitate resilience according to social ecological approaches of resilience that emphasize social and physical resources that promote wellbeing (Ungar, 2012).

Feeling the need to protect oneself from anticipated threats based on what other Punjabi women have endured not only captures the participants' sense of self-preservation and fierce self-compassion, but also demonstrates their depth of understanding of Sikh Punjabi women's experiences of oppression. This relates back to consciousness raising, as participants demonstrate their critical consciousness through reflecting on their perceived universality of Sikh Punjabi women's suffering as a function of their gender and cultural identity. As explained in the previous GET, the development of critical consciousness is a strength as it motivates action to overcome oppression (Friere, 1970). Younger generations of South Asian women exemplify this critical consciousness in their activism to fight oppressive ideologies and gender inequality (Srinivasan, 2018). Although participants did not directly discuss such activism, it was evident in their enthusiastic participation to further this anti-oppressive research serving to support the empowerment of Sikh Punjabi Canadian women.

Taking Action: Setting and Communicating Boundaries. After drawing sufficient courage to engage in resistance, participants were able to stand up against expectations through setting and communicating boundaries. Communicating with the sources of gendered expectations to negotiate a beneficial and balanced outcome has been cited as a strategy used by second generation South Asian American women (Chaudhary, 2024), which is consistent with

participants' report of setting and communicating boundaries. This 'action' stage captures the desired end-result of developing a critical consciousness, which is associated with empowerment, personal and social benefits (Hailes et al., 2021), increased self-efficacy, self-worth, and psychological and physical wellbeing (McGirr and Sullivan, 2016). This stage also captures the enactment of fierce self-compassion, wherein individuals take action to protect themselves, often through setting and communicating boundaries (Neff, 2021). Such action enhances resilience for individuals facing adversity (Neff, 2023), such as the harmful consequences of oppressive expectations. The process of setting boundaries can also be conceptualized as problem-focused coping in context of the transactional model of stress and coping, wherein the participants are directly tackling the stressor, gendered expectations (Folkman, 2013).

Boundary setting processes varied for participants, with some preferring creating distance from the sources of expectations, or removing themselves from contexts that perpetuate expectations, while others preferred verbally communicating their boundaries. Although the choice of boundary varied individually, the experience of discomfort in setting boundaries was universal, as participants reported how boundary setting led to feelings of guilt and was often a tiring process. Their response to the difficulty of boundary setting often involved shifting their focus to meeting their own needs and the empowerment they felt standing up for themselves. Snyder and Luchner's (2020) quantitative research on compassion and flexible relational boundaries argues that the ability to set boundaries within relationships in order to attend to one's own suffering is an enactment of self-compassion. This further emphasizes how participants' strength in boundary setting might be conceptualized through a lens of self-compassion.

Existing literature on boundaries in non-Western cultural groups is limited overall (Allen et al., 2024). Interestingly, the research that does explore boundaries within the Punjabi community in Western contexts conceptualizes boundaries as the restrictions that guide individuals' behavior within the cultural group (Mucina, 2018; Sekhon & Szmigin, 2011). This conceptualization likens boundaries to the familial and cultural expectations that guide women to act within the 'bounds' of their cultural script. The present study provides an alternative conceptualization of boundaries as a source of strength for Sikh Punjabi women resisting and altering this cultural script to protect themselves from its potentially harmful consequences. It is necessary to emphasize, however, that boundary setting was used as a tool by the participants to resist what they perceived as harmful oppressive aspects of familial and cultural expectations, rather than a tool to reject expectations entirely. They described going through a process of evaluation prior to setting boundaries, wherein they made the decision based on their own values, the reasonability of the expectation, their care for themselves and their families (further explored in the final GET). The willingness to withstand emotional discomfort in setting boundaries against oppressive expectations is a clear strength, exemplifying participants' abilities to engage in self-protective action.

Engaging in Strategies to Alleviate Distress and Improve Emotional Wellbeing

Findings revealed that participants engaged in several strategies to actively alleviate distress and improve their emotional wellbeing, including (1) drawing on supportive relationships, (2) engaging in independent self-reflection, (3) focusing on the positive, (4) and understanding and embracing their imperfect ways of coping. This theme best exemplifies tender self-compassion, as participants engage in strategies that facilitate self-soothing and self-acceptance in response to distress (Neff, 2023). The strategies demonstrate compassionate self-

responding which is indicative of feelings of warmth and kindness towards oneself (Neff, 2022). This theme further emphasizes how the participants draw on self-compassion as a strength in response to the salient expectations they navigate, and also corresponds to Peterson and Seligman's (2004) virtues of transcendence and humanity, which are supported by strengths such as gratitude, hope, love, and kindness. Additionally, this theme exemplifies how participants engage in emotion-focused and meaning-focused coping within the framework of the transactional model of stress and coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Folkman, 2013). Emotion-focused coping strategies help manage distress and approach acceptance of stressful events, and meaning-focused coping strategies are intended to sustain well-being (Folkman, 2013).

Drawing on Supportive Relationships. Supportive relationships present a social resource within participants' cultural contexts, providing a source of resilience according to social ecological perspectives (Ungar, 2012). Moreover, seeking social support is considered an adaptive emotion-focused coping strategy that helps alleviate distress (Folkman, 2013). Existing literature on South Asian women in Western society is clear that drawing on supportive relationships is a source of strength and resilience (Ahmad et al., 2013; Reyes & Constantino, 2016; Sabri, Simonet, et al., 2018; Singh et al., 2010). The participants reported two distinct benefits to having supportive relationships, the first being having individuals who provide emotional safety and support in their resistance of expectations, and the second being a sense of common humanity with others experiencing the same oppression as themselves. In alignment with the first reported benefit, Ahmad and colleagues' (2013) found that drawing on relationships that enhanced one's sense of emotional safety and support was a strength for South Asian women. Participants shared this sentiment through their reports of feeling emotionally resolved and safe as a result of reassuring conversations with supportive family members. The

strength in common humanity, the second reported benefit of supportive relationships, will be further explored through the lens of consciousness raising and self-compassion.

In their qualitative study with South Asian women survivors of childhood sexual abuse, Singh and colleagues (2010) reported that sharing their stories with community members who shared their experiences provided a sense of liberation and fueled the desire to support women who have suffered in the same way. This is an example of consciousness raising, which is often done through discussing one's own oppression with others who share their experience (Friere, 1970). As discussed earlier, consciousness raising motivates action and is associated with several positive outcomes (McGirr & Sullivan, 2016), indicating how it is a strength for this community. The study participants corroborated that discussing their suffering and resistance with those who share their experience, mostly other South Asian women and women of color, provided a source of strength. This can be further explored through a lens of common humanity.

Common humanity is a defining characteristic of self-compassion (Neff, 2023). It involves feeling connected to others who share our experiences. Broadly, it means to remember that being human means experiencing challenges and vulnerability (Neff, 2023). In context of the current study, it meant remembering that being a Sikh Punjabi Canadian woman involves facing challenging expectations. The participants reported that connecting to others who share their experience made them feel less lonely and isolated, which is exactly how one might describe a sense of common humanity. When individuals feel that their experience of suffering is not shared with anyone, they can feel disconnected, lonely, and isolated (Neff, 2023). When they recognize the universality of the pain they experience, although different in nature and intensity, their sense of suffering decreases, promoting emotional wellbeing (Neff, 2023). Participants thus

drew on a sense of common humanity in coping with the emotional distress of navigating expectations.

Engaging in Independent Self-Reflection. Participants engaged in independent self-reflection to work through their feelings regarding the process of navigating expectations through therapy, journaling, and other individual self-reflective practices. This sub-theme can be conceptualized as a combination of emotion-focused coping and meaning-making coping, as participants seemed to rely on self-reflective practices for emotion regulation and to reappraise or reframe situations in adaptive ways (Folkman, 2013). Utilizing culturally sensitive services, including therapy, has been found to be a source of strength for South Asian women (Ahmad et al., 2013; Sabri, Bhandari, et al., 2018). In her doctoral research, Jheeta (2023) explored South Asian women's experiences of therapy in the UK through an IPA study. Relevant to the present study, she found that therapy was a positive experience that allows South Asian women to express and explore their emotions (Jheeta, 2023). This is consistent with participant experiences as they discussed therapy as a space to reflect and explore their feelings, so as to make sense of their experience of navigating expectations. The experience of self-reflection through therapy was multifaceted, however, as some participants found it overwhelmingly positive while others found it heavy and difficult. Pertaining to the participant who struggled with therapy, she reported scaffolding her process of working through trauma at a pace that minimizes harm. The warmth, understanding, and kindness she shows herself in how she responds to her pain is indicative of self-compassion.

Journaling and other self-reflective practices, such as going on mindful walks, also provided participants with the opportunity to understand their emotions, and consequently, meet their emotional needs. In their review, Crane and colleagues (2018) report that self-reflective

processes in response to stressful situations increase resilience. They argue that self-reflection specifically enhances resilience through engaging in self-awareness, evaluation of relevant factors, and self-driven adjustments. Although participants did not delve into such depth in their discussion of self-reflective practices, it is possible that self-reflection enhances their resilience through the same mechanisms reported by Crane and colleagues (2018).

Focusing on the Positive. In discussing their sources of strength, participants demonstrated their sense of hope and gratitude as a way of positively reframing their experiences. Participants reported having hope that the oppressive nature of cultural expectations is decreasing generationally and expressed their own commitment to support this decline in harmful gendered experiences. They also reported feeling grateful for the fact that they could resist expectations without fearing as severe consequences as previous generations. This sub-theme exemplifies meaning-focused coping, as participants seemed to be promoting their wellbeing through intentionally reframing their experiences in a more positive manner (Folkman, 2013). These meaning-focused coping strategies center hope and gratitude, which also sustains other coping efforts as participants discussed relying on such strategies to alleviate distress and regulate their emotions, demonstrating emotion-focused coping as well (Folkman, 2013).

Existing literature within South Asian communities identifies hope as a strength in response to abuse or illness (Ahmad et al., 2013; Kristiansen et al., 2013; Singh et al., 2010). A longitudinal study with Sikh Punjabi individuals in Scotland revealed how hope for improved circumstances provided them with the strength to cope with life limiting illness (Kristiansen et al., 2013). In this study, hope was shaped by intersecting identities and motivated the formation of goals that would improve their future (Kristiansen et al., 2013). Participants in the present study experienced hope in a similar way, as focusing on hope provided them with the strength to

engage in action that would improve their own, and future generations', experiences. Fostering a sense of hope is associated with decreased depression and anxiety, and improved psychological adjustment, wellbeing, and life satisfaction (Witvliet et al., 2018).

Hope and gratitude go hand in hand, with a quantitative study on Pakistani young adults finding that hopefulness mediates the relationship between gratitude and wellbeing (Ali et al., 2022). Another study exploring the relationship between gratitude, hope, and happiness found that gratitude accounts for variance in hope and fostering a sense of gratitude increased one's sense of hope (Witvliet et al., 2018). Regardless of directionality and causality, it is evident that gratitude and hope both positively and significantly relate to one another, and to positive psychological outcomes (Ali et al., 2022; Witvliet et al., 2018). Participants expressed that feeling grateful for their blessings, including their support systems, resources, and greater freedom compared to previous generations, provided them with the strength to deal with expectations. Focusing on, and feeling grateful for, the positive aspects of their experience of navigating expectations indicates adaptive coping. Gratitude is linked to increased hope, happiness, life satisfaction, improved emotional state, and better social and physical health outcomes (Witvliet et al., 2018). Gratitude, hope, optimism, life satisfaction, and psychological wellbeing are all positively correlated, with gratitude being the most predictive of wellbeing, followed by hope (Kardas et al., 2019). Thus, existing literature supports participants' use of gratitude and hope as a strategy to enhance their emotional wellbeing.

Understanding and Embracing Imperfect Coping. In alleviating their distress associated with expectations, participants reported engaging in what they considered "unhealthy" ways of coping that allowed them to temporarily escape their current realities. These included unhealthy eating habits, excessive scrolling on social media, binge watching TV shows and

movies, reading, or online shopping. Studies in South Asia indicate the use of such "distracting" activities as self-reported coping strategies in response to distress, indicating that this may not be uncommon in South Asian populations (Aggarwal et al., 2014; Bentley, 2020; Weaver, 2017). The transactional model of stress and coping might conceptualize this sub-theme as maladaptive emotion-focused coping (Folkman, 2013). However, when discussing these strategies participants conveyed a sense of self-acceptance, as they reported recognizing their need to alleviate distress by whatever means necessary to comfort themselves. This self-acceptance exemplifies tender self-compassion, as participants reported engaging in self-soothing behaviors to comfort themselves and were accepting of their means of doing so (Neff, 2023).

Unconditional self-acceptance, as opposed to negative self-evaluation, is a determinant of mental health and wellbeing (Pramanik & Khuntia, 2023). Rather than engaging in self-criticism because of their perceived unhealthiness of their coping strategies, participants practiced self-kindness, which is known to increase feelings of validation, support, and self-worth (Neff, 2023). It is important to note that participants also engaged in several other strategies to enhance their emotional wellbeing aside from these "imperfect" coping mechanisms and were aware of how engaging in "unhealthy" practices over the long term could cause harm. This indicates an acceptance of their own imperfections, which is a defining trait in self-compassion (Neff, 2023; Zhang et al., 2020) that is associated with reduced stress responses (Breines et al., 2015), enhanced personal wellbeing (Neff, 2011), and improved coping and resilience (Zhang & Chen, 2016, 2017).

Balancing Care for Self and Care for Family

In responding to expectations, participants balanced their care for themselves as well as their family members. This involved (1) having empathy and understanding for the sources of

expectations, (2) factoring care for their family into their decision making, and (3) choosing when acceptance of difficult expectations is easier than resistance, for themselves and their families. In this theme, they balance their need for self-preservation and self-protection with their care for their family members and interpersonal relationships, demonstrating the co-existence of self-compassion and compassion for others. Parallels can be seen to Peterson and Seligman's (2004) virtues of moderation, justice, and humanity, which include strengths such as forgiveness, fairness, and social intelligence.

      Having Empathy and Understanding for Sources of Expectations. In demonstrating their empathy and understanding for the sources of their expectations, specifically their family members, participants showed their care and compassion for them. When individuals experience oppressive expectations that lead to harmful and distressing consequences, it makes sense that they would feel blame, anger, resentment, or general negativity towards the perpetrators of such oppression. Although the participants acknowledge the harm, they also understand why their families set and enforced such expectations, demonstrating greater empathy and understanding than blame and/or resentment. This involved perspective taking, which underlies empathy and compassion for others (Goetz & Simon-Thomas, 2017). Empathy towards one's offender is causally linked to forgiveness, which is associated with decreased anger, anxiety, and depression, and increased self-esteem and ability to find meaning in one's suffering (Cornish et al., 2020). There is limited research that examines empathy as a strength in South Asian populations, with none specifically exploring it within Punjabi Canadian women. That being said, quantitative research from South Asia has found that empathy is positively and significantly correlated with happiness, and this relationship is moderated by self-compassion (Inam et al., 2021). This signifies a relationship between empathy and self-compassion in some South Asian populations,

pointing to the possible role of self-compassion in promoting empathy in the present study's participants, especially given the trend of self-compassion throughout the findings. More generally, coming to terms with difficult expectations by empathizing with the sources of expectations exemplifies meaning-focused coping, which helps sustain positive wellbeing in the face of ongoing stressors (Folkman, 2013).

Factoring in Care for One's Family. Participants factored in care for their families in the decision-making process when responding to expectations. The overall process of factoring in their families' and their own concerns in the decision-making process of navigating expectations can be framed as problem-focused coping, as participants reported negotiating the needs of multiple parties when solving the problem of how to navigate certain expectations (Folkman, 2013). Additionally, their recognition of their family members' struggle contributed to the desire to fulfill expectations that would help alleviate their suffering, exemplifying their compassion for their family. Compassion for others is a feeling that comes up when witnessing others suffering that motivates a desire to help (Goetz et al., 2010). Compassion evolved as a caregiving response to offspring and other kin to promote survival (Goetz et al., 2010). It facilitates interpersonal connection and increased positive affect (Klimecki et al., 2012; Mongrain et al., 2011). As per social ecological perspectives, interpersonal connectedness can be conceptualized as a social resource that facilitates resilience (Ungar, 2012). Although their feelings of compassion towards family members played a role in their decision making, they also factored in their concern for themselves by evaluating the reasonability of the expectations. This indicates the co-existence of self-compassion and compassion for others, which is a significant strength as the presence of one does not necessarily ensure the presence of the other, however, both are linked to positive outcomes (López et al., 2018). Participants' willingness to fulfill

challenging expectations for their families whilst negotiating their own wellbeing also demonstrates their strength in seeking outcomes that benefit all parties involved, which likely requires significant effort and energy.

   Choosing When Acceptance is Easier than Resistance. In balancing care for self and care for family, participants reported sometimes fulfilling expectations because the cost of resistance outweighed the potential benefits. This is because resistance would involve upsetting family members, potential conflict, and expending significant effort and energy. In such a situation, several participants reported that simply fulfilling the expectations would benefit all parties involved more so than resisting expectations. They considered their own wellbeing by avoiding expending unnecessary energy, and their family's wellbeing by fulfilling their desired expectations, demonstrating a balance of self-compassion and compassion for others. As discussed previously, both traits are strengths implicated in emotional and psychological wellbeing (López et al., 2018). In addition to exemplifying the balance of self-compassion and compassion for others, choosing acceptance over resistance also demonstrated participants' strength in strategizing the best course of action based on an evaluation of costs and benefits. This can be framed as problem-focused coping similarly to the previous sub-theme, as participants reported negotiating the needs of multiple parties to solve the problem of how to navigate a given expectation (Folkman, 2013). The decision-making process captures the participants' sense of agency in their cultural relational context to make choices that are personally valuable, which is associated with empowerment and improved wellbeing (Donald et al., 2020).

Research and Clinical Implications

The purpose of this study was to take a strengths-based approach to exploring Sikh Punjabi Canadian women's lived experiences of navigating salient familial and cultural expectations. Existing research on women from South Asian cultures in Western contexts has focused on their experiences of suffering, violence, and abuse, often emphasizing the patriarchal culture's preoccupation with honor as the culprit (e.g., Ahmad et al., 2013; Mucina, 2018; Mustafa et al., 2020; Sabri, Bhandari et al., 2018; Sabri, Simonet, et al., 2018; Singh et al., 2010; Wanigaratne et al., 2023, etc.). Such research often paints this patriarchal use of honor as an intrinsic cultural value rather than something that has been internalized from surrounding majority groups. The present study recognizes the patriarchy as something that was internalized from the oppressive contexts in which Sikh Punjabi culture has existed (Ahluwalia & Alimchandani, 2013; Aujla-Bhullar, 2021; Rana & Lara-Cooper, 2021). Gendered expectations are situated within this internalized patriarchy, and thus are framed as a response to a Sikh Punjabi cultural history of oppression. In addition to this reframing, focusing on Sikh Punjabi women's strengths and coping strategies in navigating expectations highlights the resilience and resourcefulness of this group. Taking a strengths-based perspective is a central aspect of psychology's commitment to social justice (Hailes et al., 2021). Such anti-racist intersectional feminist research has implications in systemically supporting the self-empowerment of the Sikh Punjabi Canadian community.

Pertaining to clinical and counselling implications, the findings of the current study provide clinicians with guidance for drawing on the community's existing strengths and coping strategies in navigating presenting concerns that relate to familial and cultural experiences. Although the generalizability of qualitative findings is limited, if a Sikh Punjabi client's

experiences seem to fit within a framework of familial and cultural expectations as presented in this study, the strengths revealed here might be explored as potential avenues for intervention in collaboration with the client. Practitioners might look into supporting clients in consciousness raising, exploring their motivations and/or barriers pertaining to resisting expectations, promote their use of supportive relationships, self-reflection, hope, and gratitude, promote self-acceptance for imperfect coping, and explore their family dynamics in context of decision making. Clinicians might also benefit from taking a general inventory of, and capitalizing on, individuals' existing emotion-focused, problem-focused, and/or meaning-focused coping strategies consistent with the findings, as per the transactional model of stress and coping (Folkman, 2013). Each strength and coping strategy provides an avenue for intervention in clinical and counselling contexts, especially for individuals whose experiences have been particularly challenging.

Given the centrality of self-compassion throughout the reported strengths, self-compassion might be explored as a central resource for Sikh Punjabi Canadian women. This warrants a deeper examination of existing literature on self-compassion as a strength and resource for Sikh, Punjabi, South Asian, and broader populations.

Centrality of Self-Compassion

Compassion, especially self-compassion, seems to be the common thread linking participant strengths in navigating salient familial and cultural expectations. Therefore, it would be fitting to explore existing literature on self-compassion within this population. Unsurprisingly, there is only one study that focuses on self-compassion in the Sikh Punjabi Canadian community. In her dissertation research, Dhillon (2021) explored the mediating role of self-compassion in the relationship between parental bonding styles and mental health outcomes in the Sikh Punjabi Canadian community. Although this study revealed that self-compassion levels

in the Sikh Punjabi Canadian population were consistent with other populations, it only explored self-compassion in context of its role in parental attachments (Dhillon, 2021) rather than as a strength and resource for Sikh Punjabi Canadian individuals within their cultural relational contexts. Although the research on Sikh Punjabi Canadian women's experiences of self-compassion is limited, there are several studies on South Asian communities' strength in self-compassion, in both, South Asian and Western contexts.

Quantitative research on Indian young adults found self-compassion is positively and significantly associated with improved mental health outcomes (Saksena & Sharma, 2018; Sijwali & Sharma, 2023), and negatively and significantly associated with mindlessness, anxiety, and depression (Gupta & Mishra, 2016). In their multiple case studies research, Pant and Kaur (2023) argued that self-compassion provides a solution focused coping strategy that decreases perfectionism in Indian populations. Samanta (2020) conducted a quantitative study in India that framed women's empowerment through the lens of self-compassion, arguing that the two go hand in hand. Quantitative studies based in Pakistan found self-compassion to be implicated in decreased anxiety, depression, stress (Sadiq et al., 2022), psychological distress (Khaild et al., 2023), and increased happiness (Inam et al., 2021), mindfulness, resilience, emotional wellbeing (Sabir et al., 2018), psychological wellbeing (Shaukat et al., 2015), and marital quality (Sadiq et al., 2022).

Research in Western contexts that explores self-compassion in South Asians within the broader Asian population has found that self-compassion is positively and significantly related to subjective wellbeing (Chong, 2020; Zhang et al., 2021). Additionally, Chio and colleagues' (2021) meta-analysis found that self-compassion is positively associated with mental wellbeing cross-culturally. Self-compassion has also been implicated as a central factor in resistance and

recovery against internalized oppression, and promoting belonging, empowerment, social change, and reconciliation in racialized individuals in Canada (Munjee & MacPherson, 2023). Self-compassion research in general has revealed its positive association with secure attachment, healthy relationships, constructive conflict repair (Lathren et al., 2021), increased self-efficacy (Liao et al., 2021), increased motivation, (Neff, 2023) increased health-promoting behaviors (Phillips & Hine, 2021; Wong et al., 2021), greater posttraumatic growth (Winders et al., 2020), adaptive coping strategies (Ewert et al., 2021), and so on.

In her review of self-compassion research, Neff (2023) presents significant evidence that interventions boosting self-compassion are effective in promoting the aforementioned positive outcomes. Although self-compassion has not been explored as a central strength in Sikh Punjabi Canadian women, existing literature on South Asian and non-South Asian populations in multiple contexts, combined with the results of the current study suggest that self-compassion may be a fitting area to target culturally appropriate interventions for Sikh Punjabi Canadian women. Additionally, self-compassion is known to directly reduce shame (Neff, 2023). Given the centrality of honor in Sikh Punjabi women's gendered experiences of their cultural script (Mehrotra, 2016), and the prevalence of shame in resisting honor-related expectations (Mucina, 2018), it would make sense that Sikh Punjabi women engage in strategies that counter shame when navigating expectations. The Mindful Self-Compassion training program provides several informal and formal practices that can be provided as self-compassion boosting tools in counselling (Neff & Germer, 2018). Compassion focused therapy also provides several specific strategies to promote compassion towards oneself and others that can be explored in a counselling context (Gilbert, 2010).

Since self-compassion focuses on the self, and thus seems to be individualistic, one can argue that it might not resonate as a strength with collectivistic cultural groups. In terms of Sikh Punjabi Canadian women however, degrees of individualism and collectivism vary depending on how strongly individuals align with different aspects of their cultural identity. Even though Punjabi culture may be collectivistic in nature, there are individualistic aspects to Sikhi that likely contribute to the Sikh Punjabi cultural identity. Recall that according to Sikhi, compassion starts with ourselves (Burmeister, 2014), as we hold the same divine spirit present within all living beings (Nesbitt, 2016). Practices in Sikhi are often self-focused, with meditation, prayer, and one's daily routine being an individual practice (Nesbitt, 2016). The ability to serve one's community starts with taking care of oneself. Furthermore, in a proposed Sikh Punjabi model of counselling, compassion has been promoted as a strength that enhances mental wellbeing (Singh, 2008), which emphasizes the cultural alignment of compassion-based interventions for this population. Moreover, acculturation in a Canadian context likely influences the fit of individualistic versus collectivistic interventions. The study participants' have individualistic and collectivistic aspects to their cultural identity given their upbringing in Sikh Punjabi and Canadian cultural contexts, and their strengths align strongly with the seemingly individualistic principles of self-compassion. Thus, clinicians would benefit from exploring one's individual relationship with Sikhi, Punjabi culture, or their Canadian identity, when contemplating the fit of self-compassion focused interventions for Sikh Punjabi Canadian women.

Limitations and Further Research

The present study was successful in identifying several strengths and coping strategies of Sikh Punjabi Canadian women in response to familial and cultural expectations. However, there were some limitations in the study design worth addressing. Firstly, the participant group was not

as homogenous as intended for an IPA study. Although there were universal patterns all participants experienced, there were greater similarities between the two in their early 20s and between the two in their late 20s than amongst all participants. With the latter pair's greater proximity to 30 years of age, their expectations of marriageability and ease of boundary-setting were higher than the younger two participants, who experienced greater difficulty in boundary setting and lower marriage-related expectations. The interconnectedness of marriageability and marriage with other expectations likely played a role in their differing experiences. Furthermore, only one participant was married with kids, thus, her current experience of expectations was different from all other participants. Focusing on participants' past, present, and anticipated future experiences helped enhance the homogeneity of the sample, however, future IPA research might benefit from focusing on participants with greater alignment in their life stages.

Secondly, I only started data analysis after all interviews were completed. Although I began with transcription of interviews immediately, which allowed for preliminary analysis, coding did not begin until after the interviews were complete due to time constraints. Thus, self-compassion was not identified as a common thread amongst participant strengths until I explored the results in context of existing literature. This prevented a deeper exploration of self-compassion and its tenets as sources of strengths for Sikh Punjabi Canadian women. In IPA research, it is beneficial to start analysis as soon as possible so as to draw on one's new understanding of the topic in guiding future data collection (Smith et al., 2022). Further research specifically focusing on self-compassion as a strength and resource in Sikh Punjabi Canadian women would enhance our understanding of self-compassion as a culturally sensitive and aligned intervention for this population.

Thirdly, this study neglects to explore the experiences of individuals that do not identify as cis-gender women. Sikh Punjabi individuals who do not identify as cis-gender women but are perceived as such within their cultural community likely experience significant distress associated with gendered expectations. Additionally, transgender Sikh Punjabi women's experiences of gendered expectations likely differs from cis-gender women in ways that are not yet evident in existing literature. Therefore, future research might focus on gender identity and its influence on gender roles and expectations within the Sikh Punjabi community, exploring whether the patterns of strengths and coping revealed in the present study transcend gender.

Fourthly, the recruitment advertisement did not specify that the study focuses on Sikh women's experiences within the Punjabi diaspora. Although all participants confirmed they were Sikh Punjabi women, this criterion was not clear during the recruitment process. In discussing their experiences, being Sikh was thus an implicit part of the conversation rather than being an explicit focus of the interview. This limited the discussion on how Sikhi and/or spirituality might provide a source of strength for participants. Future research will benefit from greater clarity in recruitment materials, and from directly exploring how Sikhi might play a role in participant experiences.

Lastly, existing literature on the Sikh Punjabi and broader South Asian communities is largely qualitative in nature, which although beneficial for providing depth of understanding, is limited in generalizability and its ability to provide statistical evidence supporting certain claims. Supplementing qualitative accounts with statistical data may serve to enhance the literature on Sikh Punjabi Canadian women's experiences. For example, determining if self-compassion focused interventions are statistically significant in enhancing wellbeing and decreasing distress pertaining to one's sociocultural experiences would be beneficial. Lastly, focusing on men's

gendered experiences with Sikh Punjabi Canadian culture might be worthwhile, given the emphasis on masculinity, power (Kaur, 2024) and warriorhood (Kaur, 2020) within this group.

Conclusion

The present study explored Sikh Punjabi Canadian women's strengths and coping strategies in their lived experience of navigating salient familial and cultural expectations through an interpretative phenomenological analysis of five semi-structured interviews with Sikh Punjabi Canadian women between 22 and 35 years of age. Findings revealed that participants navigate gendered expectations to excel in their academics and career, handle domestic responsibilities, manage family dynamics, promote cultural preservation, enhance their marriageability, get married to the "right" man at the "right" time, and have children. Participant experiences of expectations varied depending on their age, life stage, values, and family dynamics. Four GETs captured participant strengths and coping, including recognizing expectations as harmful and unfair, gaining the courage to resist expectations, engaging in strategies to alleviate distress and enhance emotional wellbeing, and balancing care for self and care for family. Reviewing findings in the context of existing literature revealed compassion, specifically self-compassion, as a common thread amongst participants' reported strengths. Self-compassion is recommended as an avenue for future research and intervention for women within the Sikh Punjabi Canadian community.

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Appendix A – Digital Recruitment Poster

Research: Punjabi-Canadian Women's Strengths in Navigating Familial and Cultural Expectations

Are you a Punjabi-Canadian woman between between the ages of 20 and 35? Have you lived in Canada for most of your life?

Come participate in an interview-based 1-1.5 hour study to share your experiences of navigating the familial and cultural expectations you face as a Punjabi-Canadian woman.

If interested, please contact Principal Investigator Naaz Hundal at harnaaz@ualberta.ca

Participants will receive a $20 Starbucks Gift Card!

This study has been approved by a University of Alberta Research Ethics Board Pro00131231

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Appendix B – Demographic Questionnaire

1. What is your age?

2. How long have you lived in Canada?

3. Who did you live with growing up?

4. Do you have older or younger siblings?

5. Which family member(s) do you believe had the greatest role in raising you?

6. What is your educational background?

7. What is your line of work?

8. What is your relationship status?

Appendix C – Participant Consent Form

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

Title of Study: Exploring Punjabi Canadian Women's Strengths in Navigating Salient Familial and Cultural Expectations

Contact Information
Principal Investigator:
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You are being invited to take part in a research study exploring Punjabi Canadian women's strengths in navigating familial and cultural expectations as a part of Harnaaz K. Hundal's (graduate student and principal investigator) thesis studies. Before you take part, a member of the study team is available to explain the project and you are free to ask any questions about anything you do not understand. You will be given a copy of this form for your records.

Why am I being asked to take part in this research study?
You are being asked to participate in this study because you are a Punjabi Canadian woman between the age of 20 and 35, and you have spent majority of your life in Canada. The goal of this study is to explore your experience of navigating expectations from your family and/or culture you have faced, and currently face, as a Punjabi Canadian woman.

What is the reason for doing the study?
The purpose of this study is to better understand Punjabi Canadian women's lived experience of navigating common expectations they face. From previous research we know that South Asian women face high expectations from their family and culture related to school, careers, marriage, domestic responsibilities, upholding family honour, etc. There is limited research on how Punjabi Canadian women deal with these expectations. Specifically, this study aims to better understand what strengths and/or resources Punjabi Canadian women rely on to navigate such expectations.

What will I be asked to do?
Prior to participating in the study you will go through this informed consent process with the principal investigator, wherein you will have the opportunity to ask any questions about the research process. Electronically signing a copy of this participant consent form will indicate your consent to participate. In this study, you will be taking part in an interview inviting you to discuss your experiences of navigating various cultural and familial expectations you face as a young Punjabi Canadian woman. The interview will start with brief demographic questions, followed by more detailed questions about your experiences of navigating expectations. The interview will require about 1-1.5 hours of your time in total. The interviews will be conducted either virtually via Google Meets or in person in a meeting room at the University of Alberta, whichever option you prefer. Interviews will be audio recorded (*not* video recorded) to ensure accuracy and to create a written copy of your interview. If you do not wish to be audio recorded, you may decline to participate.

For additional anonymity, you are welcome to turn your camera off during virtual interviews. During these interviews, Google Meets' transcription function will be used to create a written copy of the interview. You will be sent this typed transcript of your interview (after it is edited for errors) via email within a month of the interview. Any identifying information will be removed in this written copy of the interview. You will have two weeks from the point of receiving a copy of your interview to choose to withdraw your data from the study. With your consent, all research data including audio recordings, typed-up interviews, signed consent forms, and completed demographic questionnaires will be stored on secure/encrypted technological devices in password-protected files/documents, and will be deleted permanently in 5 years.

What are the risks and discomforts?
While there are no anticipated risks to you in participating in this research, it is possible that you may be reminded of experiences that are stressful or upsetting during the interview. You may refuse to answer certain questions, or even stop the interview at any time. You will be provided a list of mental health resources prior to leaving this interview. It is not possible to know all of the risks that may happen in a study, but the researchers have taken all reasonable safeguards to minimize any known risks to a study participant.

What are the benefits to me?
You may also find the interview to be very enjoyable and rewarding as you reflect on your strengths in navigating familial and cultural expectations. By participating in this research, you may also benefit others by helping people to better understand the strength and resilience Punjabi Canadian women have in the face of the expectations they face.

Do I have to take part in the study?
Being in this study is your choice. If you decide to be in the study, you can change your mind and stop being in the study up until 2 weeks after you receive a typed copy of your interview. After that point we cannot remove you from the study because data analysis and reporting will begin. To withdraw from the study please contact principal investigator Harnaaz Hundal at harnaaz@ualberta.ca.

During the interview, you do not have to answer any questions that you are not comfortable with. Even if you remain in the research study, you may choose to withdraw some or all of your responses by contacting Harnaaz Hundal within 2 weeks after receiving a copy of your typed interviews. We are unable to remove your answers after that time because data will be written up in thesis research reports.

Will I be paid to be in the research?
You will not be paid to participate in this study, however, you will be gifted a $20 Starbucks gift card as a thank you for your participation if you choose to take part in the study. If you choose to withdraw from the study partway through participation or after reviewing your typed interview, you are welcome to keep your gift card.

Will my information be kept private?
During this study we will do everything we can to make sure that all information you provide is kept private. No information relating to this study that includes your name will be released outside of the researcher's office or published by the researchers unless you give us your express permission. Sometimes, by law, we may have to release your information with your name so we cannot guarantee absolute privacy. However, we will make every legal effort to make sure that your information is kept private. There are certain situations in which it may be required to break confidentiality by reporting to law enforcement or another agency. These include: If you are at risk of imminent harm to yourself or someone else, or if a child is at risk for harm. If this type of information comes up in our interview, we will work with you to access appropriate support.

Several steps will be taken to protect your anonymity and confidentiality. In your interview transcript, we will assign a pseudonym (fake name) to protect your identity and remove all identifying information. If you would like to choose your own fake-name, please say so in the interview. After the study is done, we will still need to securely store your data that was collected as part of the study. Audio recording of the interview and any research documentation including interviewer notes, memos, typed-up copies of the interviews, signed consent forms or other electronic files will be stored on secure/encrypted devices. The consent forms and audio recordings will be stored separately from other research documents/files, to add another layer of protection to files containing identifying data. Identifying data will be removed from all other documentation, including the demographic questionnaire responses and interview

transcript. Any potential transfers of these files (to supervisor or other secure devices) will be done via University of Alberta's secure servers (Google drive) or encrypted USB drives. Only the main researchers, who are bound by confidentiality, will have access to any identifying data. During research studies it is important that the data we get is accurate. For this reason, your data, including your name, may be looked at by people from the Research Ethics Board. At the University of Alberta, we keep data stored for a minimum of 5 years after the end of the stud. After 5 years, the data will be permanently deleted.

Additionally, note that if you came to know of this study through snowball sampling (word of mouth), the participant who contacted you about this study will know you have been referred to this study. If you referred anyone to this study, they may also know that you participated in this study.

What if I have questions?
If you have any questions about the research now or later, please contact graduate student (principal investigator) Harnaaz Hundal at harnaaz@ualberta.ca or Dr. Rebecca Hudson Breen (supervisor) at the University of Alberta at hudsonbr@ualberta.ca.

If you have any questions regarding your rights as a research participant, you may contact the University of Alberta Research Ethics Office at reoffice@ualberta.ca or 780-492-2615 and quote Ethics ID Pro00131231. This office is independent of the study investigators.

The results from this study will be presented in writing in journals read by counselors and mental health professionals, to help them better understand the expectations Punjabi Canadian women face, and how they navigate them. The results may also be presented in person to groups of counselors or mental health professionals. At no time, however, will your name be used or any identifying information revealed. If you wish to receive a copy of the results from this study, you may contact one of the researchers at the telephone number or email address given above.

How do I indicate my agreement to be in this study?

By signing below, you understand:

- That you have read the above information and have had anything that you do not understand explained to you to your satisfaction.
- That you will be taking part in a research study.
- That you may freely leave the research study at any time.
- That you do not waive your legal rights by being in the study
- That the legal and professional obligations of the investigators and involved institutions   are not changed by your taking part in this study.

OR state the following verbally (out loud) to provide verbal consent, which will be audio recorded and stored in place of written consent:

 "I, *participant name*, consent that:
- I have read the participant consent form and have had anything that I do not understand explained to me to my satisfaction.
- I will be taking part in a research study.
- I may freely leave the research study at any time.
- I do not waive my legal rights by being in the study.
- The legal and professional obligations of the investigators and involved institutions are not changed by my taking part in this study."

SIGNATURE OF STUDY PARTICIPANT

_____   Pseudonym (if necessary)
Name of Participant

☐By checking this box and typing my name below, I am electronically signing this consent form.

_____   _____
Signature of Participant   Date

SIGNATURE OF PERSON OBTAINING CONSENT

☐By checking this box and typing my name below, I am electronically signing this consent form.

_____   _____
Name of Person Obtaining Consent   Contact Number

A copy of this consent form has been given to you to keep for your records and reference.

Appendix D – Interview Protocol

Interview Protocol

1. What expectations do you face from your family as a Punjabi-Canadian woman?

    a. Can you talk more about the most salient expectations you face from your family?

2. What cultural expectations do you face as a Punjabi-Canadian woman?

    a. Can you talk more about the most salient cultural expectations you face?

3. How do you navigate these familial and cultural expectations?

    a. What gives you the strength to navigate these familial and cultural expectations?

    b. What helps you cope with these expectations?

4. How does it feel to navigate these familial and cultural expectations?

5. How have these familial and cultural expectations changed over the course of your life?

    a. How do you expect these expectations to change going forward?

6. How have your ways of coping with these expectations changed over your life?

    a. How do you hope to deal with these expectations going forward?

Appendix E – List of Resources

List of Resources

- Emergency: Call 911 for immediate assistance

- Non-Emergency Sikh Family Helpline (available in English and Punjabi): Call 1-800-551-9128 and leave a voicemail to receive a call back within 24 hours for issues relating to domestic violence, bullying & school issues, sexual abuse, harassment, child abuse, and/or elder abuse. Visit http://www.sikhfamilyhelpline.com/ for more information.

- Distress line: Call 780-482-HELP (4357)

- South Asian Therapists: Visit southasiantherapists.org to find a South Asian therapist in your area.

- Momentum Walk-in Counselling: Call 780-757-0900

- YWCA: Call 780-423-9922 Ext. 222 (counselling services on a sliding scale)

- Sexual Assault Centre of Edmonton: Call 780-423-4102

- Access 24/7 (AHS): Call 780-424-2424 for interventions and treatment, support and navigation services, crisis outreach, information, assessment, and referrals.