

The South Asian Perspective(s): Desi & disabled*

Podcast Dissertation by: Dr. Grishma Shah

Epilogue • 10:25 mins

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

interviews, dissertation, storytellers, stories, share, friend, box, trailblazing, Desi, passed, explore, lens, feelings, wanted, called, identified, june, influence, tumor, meant

SPEAKERS

Grishma

(Suspenseful, sitar music fades in)

Grishma 00:03

June 15, I get the news from the oncologist that my tumor is still stable. After almost three years of stopping chemo, after almost 16 years of being on chemo. I celebrate with white chocolate raspberry cake. It was good. June 17. I read a forwarded text from a friend. Sounds suspicious, but I do it anyway. It's the first thing in the morning. And it says that my friend of 20 years has passed away. I thought to myself, this has to be a joke. So I call them and it's not a joke. They passed away from a heart attack. And this friend was so young.

Two weeks before on May 31, I met this friend who passed away for lunch. And she was sharing with me fond memories of our college days. She spoke of friendships that meant so much to her, but ended up dissipating over time because, hey, life happens. She said that if she saw my ex fiance right now, she'd give him a big hug. And so, as her family was getting ready for the funeral, I called up those people. And I called up the ex fiance, and I let him know that the girl that we both cared about passed away.

(Suspenseful sitar music fades out)

Then I wrapped all the feelings that I had in a box. I taped that shit up and I put it on the side. Because on June 28, I had a dissertation to defend. What was the first thing that I asked them? Did I make them proud? So yes, I'm Dr. Grishma Shah now (chuckles). That box with the tape is still here. It's in pretty bad shape. And I know that the moment

I finish this last episode that you're hearing, it'll likely pop and I'll be flooded with emotions. That I think is more survivor guilt. I didn't think that I would outlive her. We've had a tumor since I was 16. I can honor my friend's legacy, by making sure stories of her trailblazing foodie, dancing like no-one is watching, loving like no-one is watching, days don't end up in the story graveyard. Which was why I wanted to do a non-traditional dissertation in the first place. I can still hear her voice when she leaves me voicemails. She says, "*Hey babe, it's me...*" So I dedicate this last episode to her in the form of a voicemail.

(Sound of Phone Ringing three times)

Automated message begins: "*Please leave a message*" Beep.

Grishma 03:50

Hey, babe, it's me Grish. I wanted to tell you that I defended my dissertation. And now you're gonna have to call me Dr. Grish, whether you like it or not (chuckles). Let me tell you about my study. I interviewed 11 people, six men and five women who self identified as Desi, meaning that they told me that they were Desi. And 10 out of the 11 people prefer to have their voice and name changed. While one person opted out. He said that he was proud of where he came from. I wanted to explore Desi because that's the word that's used a lot in our South Asian community. And I wanted to explore what it meant to be Desi. Even at a Walmart, someone will ask me if I'm Desi if they are trying to figure out if I'm from the same community as them. So I decided to explore how being Desi can influence how we see our worth, and other Desi people's worth with beauty and disability in mind. Pretty cool right?

After filling out all the paperwork, crossing my T's and dotting my I's I was given permission to carry forward with my study. I reached out to people and I let them know that I was doing this study. And that I'm looking for participants who I like to refer to as storytellers. And people said yes. And they even recommended other people I could reach out to, which in the world of psychology is called snowball effect. Consent forms were signed interviews conducted and recorded using a virtual platform, of course, because of COVID-19. And the interviews, they ranged anywhere from 90 minutes to 2.5 hours. Yeah, I mean, these conversations were longer than our conversations (chuckles). And believe it or not, the male interviews ran longer than the female interviews. To find the themes, I decided to use transcription software. And then I went through each transcribed interview to make sure that the telephone game wasn't happening. Meaning storytellers were saying one thing and the software was hearing something else. I think software still has a way to go. So then I took the transcribed interviews, and I broke

them down by interview questions. And I even color coded each storyteller's answers so that I could visually keep track of what was going on.

(Soft, piano music fades in)

And then I put aside that psychology hat, and I put on my artist hat. And I used an audio software to find the audio excerpts, clean up as much background noise as I could, change their voices, and began creating the episodes. I also had to create scripts for each episode pertaining to the lens that I wanted to explore the episode through. So gender I explored through power lens religion, through loss lens, skin tone through change lens, and cast through different lens. And I learned about all these lenses from Harvard Professor Marshall games. And then throughout, I added some of my own lived experiences, too. So I consider myself an honorary storyteller (chuckles).

Of course, as with any study, there's going to be limitations. South Asia has so many other countries other than India and Pakistan. So future research on Desis from other South Asian countries would be pretty cool. And none of the storytellers that I interviewed identified as LGBTQ. So it'd be really cool to interview Desi folks who identify as queer. And everybody that I interviewed was living in the U.S. So maybe the experience of living in the UK or other countries will come with new perspectives. But as they say, a good dissertation is a done dissertation (chuckles). So definitely great opportunities for future research. Now, the big question, now what Dr. Grish? Well, I'm going to open up that box I was talking about, and I'm going to process the feelings. And I'm going to continue doing what I've been doing for as long as I can remember, learning new ways of storytelling, and sharing these stories with as many people as I can. Because we both know, culture shifts take time. And stories of scrutiny and judgment can influence how we see ourselves and others. And it has influenced how we see ourselves. But stories that teach us that we matter and that we're worthy of love just as much as the next person, can remind us that we share more similarities than differences. And this understanding can influence how we live our lives, and how the next generation lives theirs. I'm sure whoever is listening right now, has had a loved one pass away and can understand what I mean by a box of feelings pushed to the side. Though this box doesn't physically exist. And yes, in this generation, I've also included your daughter, who has an auntie Grish, who will happily share stories with her about her trailblazing mommy. And how her mommy mattered and how she matters. The next time I talk to you, it's going to be looking up at the sky. I love you

(Soft piano music stops)

End of Epilogue transcript

###