Figen Cetin – Monmouth College

International Studies Major

804 North 2nd Half Street

Monmouth, IL 61462

Tel.: (309) 299-3688

Email: fcetin@monmouthcollege.edu

Abstract: Piety of Young Muslim Adults in the Midwest

This paper examines the overall relationship between American Muslim youth and their Muslim identity. It investigates the correlation between their degree of piety and accessibility, along with attendance to Muslim institutions. The purpose of this research is to understand how second generation Muslim youth are in conflict with their place in American society and how they go about adapting to the non-Islamic context that differs from the one their parents were brought up in. The methodology used to collect data was done through selective sampling of Muslim youth between the ages of eighteen to twenty-five. Two types of participants with specific religious characteristics were selected in order to compare with each other; one group being more pious, attending masjids and constantly interacting with other Muslims, and the other group not being active Muslims. The questions asked were surrounded around the experiences of the participants as they grew up, went to school, and interacted with the mainstream culture of the United States. My hypothesis asserts that with smaller towns there is a low density of Muslims dedicated to practicing the fundamental pillars of Islam is hard to find extremely devout young Muslims at a large distance to the closest religious institute. Therefore, the distance to a mosque influences distance to some of the practices. Additionally, there are many other factors in which I will investigate that contribute to the formation and protection of a Muslim identity - being relatively near an Islamic community or center is not enough to build a strong pious character.

Piety of Young Muslim Adults in the Midwest

At the age of 16, I was sent to a five week long Islamic summer school in Turkey to gain a deeper knowledge of what is to live Islam and be a Muslim. Coming from a semi-conservative family, and having a hajjiyah (a female who has gone to Makkah and done the obligatory Hajj ritual) mother, I was stubborn to believe that the level of knowledge I possessed was impressively well, especially for someone who had grown up in the U.S. and had only highly dedicated Christian friends. Quickly I learned that I knew nothing. The toughest moment I experienced was when one of the teachers, sisters, as they were called, called on me to recite a verse from the Qur’an. My answer of “I don’t know” earned a special session with her after class. She was in furry and disparage of my lack of Islamic knowledge. Her words, I recall still all very clearly, so belittling and contemptuous, “why haven’t your parents taught you anything, you are almost an adult yet know nothing, you should be ashamed of yourself! If you’re parents weren’t able to teach you, they should have at least taken the courtesy of having someone else teach you or send you to an Islamic studies.” Our conversation was in the middle of the classroom catching the attention of all the students that preoccupied the room, leading to an unavoidable humiliation on my part. The justifiable explanation I gave while struggling to hold back hysterical tears was that I was born, raised, currently live, and go to school in a Christian dominated, barely existent, tiny town in the United States where the closest metropolitan area is at least an hour away, and the only Muslims I know are the ones in my family. I then asked myself; although I lived in the U.S., had I associated with devout Muslims of my cohort would my degree of religiosity be different?

Introduction

I am investigating the degree of piety among Muslim youth in rural areas of the Midwest; how they identify as Muslims in this context. I am interested in how accessibility and distance to Islamic communities, mosques, and other organizations affect the religiosity of Islamic young adults, especially for those who have grown up in the smaller communities of the United States. I hypothesize that with the shrinking size of some towns and low density of Muslims dedicated to practicing the fundamental pillars of Islam, although there are sure to be exceptions, is hard to find extremely engaged in practicing Muslims at a large distance to the closest religious institute. Therefore, the distance to a mosque influences distance to some of the practices. Additionally, there are many other factors in which I will investigate that contribute to the formation and protection of a Muslim identity - being relatively near an Islamic community or center is not enough to build a strong pious character. My research, being a very specific question, did not give me the opportunity to find many articles related to my thesis.

Literature Review In an article with the title Muslim American/American Muslim Identity: Authoring Self in Post-9/11 America, provides valuable information and related to my topic was the article by Muna Ali. This paper focused on whether Muslim American identity is forged or forced as a result of the American experience. Ali, who examined Muslims in Phoenix, AZ, have found that participants believe that the Islam practiced in America is much more genuine than that practiced in a predominantly Muslim country. I have somewhat mixed feelings about this statement; first, from what I have read in other articles Muslims who live in the Middle-East often take their religious practices for granted and when they migrate to the United States they feel as if they need to concentrate heavily on their practices. Second, I would argue that the authenticity of practicing Islam would greatly differ from highly Muslim populated areas to those who have a low density of Muslim population.

The idea for my senior thesis came to me while studying a specific article in a book of Asef Bayat and Linda Herrera. This article was Being Young, Muslim, and American in Brooklyn, by Moustafa Bayoumi, where he inquires into what is like to be young, Muslim-especially Arab, and male in present day Brooklyn, New York. His research inspired me go on a quest to inquire of Muslims in my own area. He discusses the outcomes of the three years he spent associating with young Arab Muslim Americans living in Brooklyn, in an endeavor to make sense their lives and explains that his rationale for choosing this borough is due to the large Arab population that consists of newer immigrants. Bayoumi, also from an Arab and Muslim background, emphasizes the divergence between the current American Muslim youth and the antecedent generation. Contemporary young American Muslims comprehend that they possess much more responsibility to present themselves, as Muslims, and their beliefs to both non-Muslims and Muslims appropriately through being knowledgable of and applying the articles of Islam to their daily lives. The perspectives on Muslims, particularly Arab American men, became vastly prejudice after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, watching them closely with skepticism. With all this attention drawn on Islam, today’s Muslim youth, who have come of age after September 11, understand their role as youth differently as they see “themselves as the vanguard of Islam in the United States” and are a part of a ongoing “progress in the spread of Islam globally” (Bayoumi, 173).

The ways in which the two generations, those who immigrated to the United States and their children who were born here, contrast is more than being a youth before or after the 2001 terrorist attacks. Many of today’s young Muslim men see themselves as part of an Islamic revival and considerably more pious than their parents’ generation, which was largely made up of immigrants to the nation (Bayoumi, 170). They indicate that their parents were not very knowledgeable about their faith, their practices were based on cultural traditions. The masjid was just a place to gather, but for the new generation it is a place to be a part of a religious movement. The current Muslim youth also stress the importance of Islamic dress more than the older generation did. For some the use of the Islamic wardrobe is important as it separates a Muslim individual from the rest of the society, presents one’s piety, and catches people’s attention, motivating them to ask questions about Islam (Bayoumi, 179). Being Muslim in a world that does not understand what Islam is and what it stands for is hard as it is, but being Muslim in a country that holds strong prejudices and ignorance towards one’s belief is even a harder task to manage. There has probably always been a reserved mental state in the West towards Muslims, but after the act of terrorism on September 11, 2001, the stereotypes and prejudice significantly increased in the United States. Muslims, regardless of gender, were viewed as potential terrorists and Islam was seen as a religion that promoted violence and terrorism, as many referred to the Jihad, perhaps the most misunderstood religious concept, as a bloody war on those who do not believe in Allah.

Educating Muslim American Youth in a Post-9/11 Era: A Critical Review of Policy and Practice by Sally Wesley Bonet, explores how federal politics and policies have leaked down into secondary schools, and what the effects of these policies have been on secondary schools, giving extra attention to the effects on Muslim American youth. Although this event took place nearly a decade ago, it is still marked in the consciousness of Americans and people worldwide. The literature suggests that living in a post 9/11 America has been an increasing challenge for Arabs, Arab Americans, and Muslims as they are often seen as the “ other,” a threat to the nation, and inherently linked to terrorism and violence (Ajrouch, 2004; Akram & Johnson, 2004; Jamal & Naber, 2008). Arab American youth face much more challenges as they navigate education in this post-9/11 context. Public schools have intense effects on the ability of students to negotiate their sense of nation, belonging and citizenship (Banks 2004, 2008; Suarez-Orosco, 2001; Wingfield, 2006).

The main research questions this article examines includes what federal and state policies have affected secondary schools, the effects of this policy on Muslim American youth, and what “pedagogical practices can be changed to engage these youth in active citizenship in a post 9/11 context for meaningful inclusion and participation in their societies” (46). The Patriot Act, a federal law designed and implemented after the terrorist attacked of 9/11, is closely examined to understand how the law has contributed to the growing national anti-Muslim sentiment. Results suggest that this law has “contributed to the over-targeting of Arabs and Arab-American families and students, and has had damaging effects on their educational outcomes, psychosocial well-being and sense of nation and belonging” (53).

The article by Pia Rebello Britto, Who Am I? Ethnic Identity Formation of Arab Muslim Children in Contemporary U.S. Society, was not as informing as I would have guessed from reading its title. The text covered what research had been done to understand how identity of Muslim children are formed, and how the data collected is not sufficient enough to have a clear understanding of this development. Britto brings to our attention that the terms Arab and Muslim are used synonymously to show the relationship between the Arab ethnicity and religion. I believe that many non-Muslims associate the these terms interchangeably, but in reality these terms do not carry the same meaning. Therefore, if an individual responds to the question of identity as being an Arab, they are holding their ethnic characteristic; but if they respond as being Muslim, they are displaying a closer identification with their religious characteristic more so. This article iterates that research has been mostly done on the interaction between development and the child’s environment; it is believed that the microlevel or local context, has a dominant role in the identity development children. This said, the foundation of a well Muslim identity, I believe, would start at home. There there exists ecological contexts that influence the development of identities which are schools and peers.

In the article An Exploration of Cultural Identity Patterns and the Family Context Among Arab Muslim Youth Adults in America, Mona M. Amer and Pia Rebello Britto researched the cultural identity patterns and the sociodemographic and family contexts of Arab Muslim American youth. Through the results they interpret that the family context contributes to a stronger sense of cultural identity for those youth who are at the crossroads between American and Arab culture and Muslim faith. Although this text slightly discusses identity in reference to religion, it explores cultural identity and the family context in more depth. The article was challenging to understand as it was heavily statistical, making it a challenge to compare to my own research. What I did agree with was their hypothesis that older youth would have a much more distinct sense of identity compared to those of younger participants and that youth living in states with the largest Arab populations would have a powerful sense of Arab identity than those who lived in other states.

El-Sayid el-Aswad’s The Dynamics of Identity Reconstruction among Arab Communities in the United States projected a bit of light on to my research as he provided insight into the dynamics of identity construction. He argues for Arabs in general, not just children, that an Arab American identity is formed through many factors and through the interplay of how they see themselves and how they are perceived by others. El-Aswad focuses on first-generation immigrants and how they adapt within their host country while trying to preserve their own ways. He explains that immigrants develop a new identity enclosing a “double perspective”, which is bred out from their knowledge of what they have “left behind and what is acutally here and now” (El-Aswad, 112). This would be an incentive to protect their heritage of their origin, however, their children who are born and raised in the United States are not aware of the context that their parents grew up in so they can not have this double perspective. It would be easier for them to assimilate into the mainstream due to the absence of this perspective.

Another article that was very useful as it strongly adheres to my hypothesis is by Hasan Kaplan. In Muslim in America and the Question of Identity: Between Ethnic Heritage, Islamic Values, and The American Way, reviews the challenges that emerge through living in the United States in immigrant Muslim communities. Kaplan argues that the most important issue is the difficulty faced by the second-generation’s assimilation into the American mainstream. As he evaluates the identity crises of those youth, he uses an approach of Erik Erikson’s psychological theory, which brings about the idea that “identity crisis that children of Muslim immigrant experience can bring about a unique American Muslim identity synthesizing Islamic and American values” (Kaplan 4). This synthesis Kaplan discusses ties into what I would like to investigate while I interview participants. I would like to find some kind of correlation between the degree of piety and the level of assimilation into the American mainstream. As I draw from what I have reviewed thus far, the result of having a negative correlation between the two may be inevitable. By growing up in a dominantly Christian context which has different expectations from their own culture and religion, Muslim youth may have confusion of where they ought to fit in. Failure to negotiate a way of holding both an American and Muslim identity may result in what Kaplan “predicts is identity confusion and possible alienation of from both communities” (Kaplan 7). Kaplan states that the second-generation American Muslims will be the ones who will play a strong role in bridging the gap between the West and Islam. In order to assist in creating this bridge between the two cultures, it is important that the Muslim youth do not become extremely affiliated with religious organizations that they marginalize their participation within the larger American society.

Ilhan Kaya investigates, in the article Identity and Space: The Case of Turkish Americans, the spaces where construction of Turkish American identity occurs and how those spaces function in the preservation and reformation of this identity, especially in terms of how certain identities are discouraged while others are emphasized. Although the text covers Turks in general and not a specific cohort, it provides valuable insight to compare with those from other predominantly Muslim countries. This article seems to emphasize the importance of keeping or developing a Turkish identity more so than establishing a Muslim identity. While Middle-Eastern immigrants place importance on Islamic values, many Turkish immigrants seem to put Turkish values first. This is also true of identity. This article asserts that Turks are highly nationalistic and identify with their Turkish identity more so. Kaya reports that Turkish American are upset of the misrepresentations of Muslims through the media, especially since they see themselves being secular. One interviewee stated that when a Muslim does something terrible it is Islam that is judged, but when a Christian engages in an unacceptable behavior, it is only his actions that are blamed. In order to minimize the uncomfortable impacts of the unwanted image of Muslims, Turkish Americans most often proclaim their differences from other Muslims, in particular Arabs, and also associate themselves closer to Europeans. This is much more visible when one investigates the Turkish mosques in the United States. These mosques are established particularly to separate them from other Muslim groups as well as from the non-Muslim mainstream. The mosques function as a place to hangout and to interact with other Turks, more so than a place interact with other Muslims.

Fait Muedini, discusses many issues that touch on how Muslims are often misrepresented in the United States; how the U.S. schools fail to meet the needs of children from diverse backgrounds; and are misunderstood based on their appearance, wardrobe, and religion. Muslims and/or Middle Eastern peoples who enter the United States are set up by a variety of television shows or exaggeration of news coverage to be easily “Othered”. The media has the been primary contributor to an erroneous image of Islam by stereotyping all Muslims as being extremists or terrorists. Western media can be highly selective of what it airs, choosing to cover violent acts of Middle Easterners burning the American flag while yelling ‘death to America‘ instead of highlighting the accomplishments or findings of Muslims that represent the genuine and humane reality of the religion. For instance, some Americans think Islam is a cult, that women are oppressed and empowered by men, some believe all Muslims are terrorists or have four wives. As a result, the misconceptions about Islam due to a lack of correct or sufficient information about the basic teachings of Islam. The majority of U.S. citizens that are not knowledgable of Islam or how it is situated in the world are prone to misunderstand this global faith and its followers. Muslim students face rough obstacles based on who they are, where they come from, and what they believe in. As if being categorized and even outcasted on your religion isn’t harsh enough,“in today’s climate Muslim immigrant students are faced with a complicated cultural milieu. The impact of 9/11 on the lives of Muslims in the U.S. has been far reaching and includes their misrepresentation in the media” (Muedini, 73). The second generation Muslims born in the United States are in conflict with their place in American society. As asserted by Peter Skerry, the children of immigrants born and raised in the United States are unhesitatingly absorbed and embrace the ‘mainstream’. As a result, many lose the cultural, ethnic, and religious identifications associated with their origin and homeland. Skerry proposes it is when these youth attend college, they begin to interrogate why they have strayed from their origin and begin a quest to ‘recapture the cultural identity’ they no longer have (Meudini, 40).

How the Muslim American youth see themselves within the Western context and the formation of their identity is due to several factors. Some of these factors can be pinned as being the reason of a reserved mental state towards an acceptance and assimilation of a Western lifestyle. It can be the rationale why many Muslims view themselves differently from the mainstream. Being the offspring of recent immigrants of the United States, many youth were brought up within a ‘Western society’ that has depicted believers of Islam as “the enemy or threat to America” in the previous thirty years (Meudini, 42). As a counteract to the negative portrayals of Islam, an ‘international Islamic ideology’ that addressed political and religious aspects was formed. It was because of this Islamic ideology that children of Muslims were influenced to embrace the culture of their parents while repudiating the United States’ culture. The problem with endeavoring to embrace a culture one is not directly associated with or has not lived in may arise difficulties in fully adopt and implementing the teachings and ways of that culture. Marcia Hermansen discusses the issues faced my American Muslim youth:

One can well imagine the identity dilemma of a Muslim teenager brought up largely in

the American environment who has been encouraged by parents, Islamic groups, and

extended family to dis-identify with American cultural and political contexts and to

imagine himself or herself as being from somewhere else (Pakistan or Palestine, for

example) as a critical or opposition stance. At the same time, this young person is probably never going to make it as an authentic citizen of the imagined homeland, since

he or she faces substantial inadequacies in language competency, historical knowledge,

and even cultural and social assumptions about the idealized place of origin (Hermansen, 2003).

According to Hermansen, many American Muslim youth adopt a “culture-free, global Islamic militancy” as a products of the alienation they face from the Western culture and the failed attempt of embracing the culture of their parents (Meuedini, 42).

Muslim immigrant communities in all their varieties of origin and practice have been othered or seen as the enemy by the West. Following September 11, Muslim immigrants, along with their children, have been irrevocably impacted by the responses and reactions by much of mainstream America to the attacks in New York, Washington, and Pennsylvania. This creates a problem for Muslim immigrants because the events of 9/11 have changed the way Muslim peoples identify themselves and are identified by others. They must negotiate multiple identities, for example, as residents who function much as every other citizen even as they are perceived as threatening outsiders. Meudini states that understanding “how multiple identities are managed by Muslim youth and perceived by others is crucial because as young first-generation immigrants their identities as Muslims and as American students are sometimes in conflict” (75). What this means is these American Muslim children are caught between the two cultures that dominate their everyday lives! Being one of those children raised in this context, understanding my heritage as a Turkish-Macedonian-American Muslim was very troublesome. At home the Muslim child is immersed in the cultural and religious attributes of the family, often speaking a language different from the one spoken by the larger community. At school they speak English and are taught with the customs of American culture. These children acquire a dual identity, in which they blend together hence creating an integrated self.

Lori Peek’s Becoming Muslim: The Development if a Religious Identity proposes that as the participants in her research, Muslim students, progressed through certain stages of religious identity development, their association with Islam and being Muslim became intense as their religious practice escalated. She classifies the three stages of religious identity development as the following: religion as ascribed identity; chosen identity; and declared identity. The first stage, religion as ascribed identity, religion is formed as the participants grew up in Muslim households, and a result were “much likely to adhere to their assigned identities” (Peek, 224). It is during this stage that Muslim youth begin to notice the pressure to assimilate to American norms and values. I strongly agree with Peek’s assessment of how the urge to fit in is much more intensified in Muslim children who raised in predominantly Judeo-Christian towns than those children that grew up in an urban setting. This validates my perception of how Muslim youth of small towns, being the minority, are much more inclined to the social pressures to blend in with the crowd; where as Muslim students in more diverse areas face minimal pressure to assimilate. What I also found interesting and had not thought of before is that “stigmatization, in combination with peer pressure, pressure to assimilate, and lack of personal religious understanding” may result in ignoring or concealing one’s Muslim identity. In the religion as chosen identity stage, Muslim youth begin to understand and grasp their religion due to maturing and many by entering college. Many colleges have a large diversity which enables Muslim students to associate with other Muslim students that was not possible when they were in lower grade schools. As I have stated before, many Muslim youth who attended schools in rural areas were most likely to be the only Muslim in the institution, which made it harder to conform to Muslim norms. The pressures to assimilate to non-Muslim society seemed to decline as students interacted with peers of the same religion and norms. Through involvement Muslim organizations in college, religious development and commitment increased. The third stage is characterized by the religious development as it occurred as a result of a crisis, particularly in the event of September 11, 2012. Peek’s findings were that many Muslims had become stronger in their religious identity. This is a similar argument to that of Bayoumi; the tragedy influenced many Muslims to learn more about Islam in order to reflect its correct image onto the larger non-Muslim society.

The article, Protecting Muslim Civil and Human Rights in America: The Role of Islamic, National, and International Organizations by Aisha Penna, focuses in the civil and human rights of Muslims in America and the bias and prejudice that they face in their local communities. This article did not contribute to my research, but it was interesting to gain information about the different organizations created especially after the 9/11 attacks in order to protect the rights of Muslims in the United States. There are organizations established to teach Muslims learn ways to protect their constitutional rights in the United States while also providing educational and community outreach programs regarding the laws that protect Muslims’ civil liberties. Other significant roles these organizations hold include offering opportunities to educate Muslims and non-Muslims to encourage cooperation and advocate understanding through dialogue within and between communities. Their involvement and contributions to the organizations are very much emphasized. The lack of presence of Muslims in the public sphere gives those who are unfamiliar with Islam and Muslims a chance to negatively stigmatize them. Muslims are encouraged to fully utilize and take advantage of the services provided by the organizations in a proactive manner in order to help reduce the marginalization they currently confront. These organizations and affiliations, such as the American Muslim Alliance (AMA), American Muslim Voice, Islamic Society of the North (ISNA), Muslim American Society (MAS), and many more help protect the civil liberties of Muslims in the US by developing a political context that is beneficial to the protection of human rights and promotion of justice.

Post-9/11 Arab and Muslim American Community College Students: Ethno-religious Enclaves and Perceived Discrimination, by Diane S. Shammas investigates whether the post 9/11 backlash against Muslims has affected community college campuses, focusing on the “inter-relationship among the level of perceived discrimination, the degree of diversity of Arab and Muslim students’ campus friendships, and their sense of belonging to the college.” What this study found was that there was a relatively small but positive relationship between perceived discrimination levels and the percentage of campus friends who share the same ethnicity but have different religion. This shows that not only Muslims, but those who resemble or come from the Middle East are subjugated to discrimination and that these groups who feel rejection from the American society tend to come together regardless of having the same religion. It isn’t surprising to see that those who are not of Islamic faith are also targeted and discriminated against just because their appearance reflects those of the Middle-East.

Hyphenated Selves: Muslim American Youth Negotiating Identities on the Fault Lines of Global Conflict, an article by Selcuk R. Sirin and Michelle Fine discuss the conflicts that Muslim-American youth living in multiple cultures face after the events of September 11. The term hyphen, used by the authors to describe Muslim selfhood refers to the “identities that are at once joined, and separated, by history, the present, socio-political climate, geography, biography, longings and loss” (152). In the after math of the events of September 11, Muslim-American youth found that the dual cultures within which they live were suddenly and alarmingly in conflict. The study conducted in this article examines how Muslim youth negotiate their identities in these challenging times. The results show that Muslim youth experience discrimination, sometimes to an extreme degree. Results also show that the way in which males and females negotiate their identities differ. Diversity was observed in how youth dealt with the challenges of growing up Muslim in post 9/11 US, ranging from "telling nobody" to policing each other within the Muslim community. This text helped me change my perspectives on how Muslim individuals reacted to the events of September 11. What I had hypothesized was that many would try to hide their Muslim identity, but I have learned from this article is that many Muslims did not chose to hide their identity.

Research Methodology

Within the period of three months, I interviewed twelve individuals whose ages ranged from eighteen to twenty-five. The participants in this study, with the exception of one, were first generation United States born citizens who were primarily raised in the Midwest. The sample population’s education level is as the following: two high school students, one high school graduate, one associates degree holder, three college students, and five college graduates. The participants were of a variety of ethnicities including; two Lebanese, one Syrian, four Turks, two Albanians, two Macedonians, one Pakistani, and one Iraqi. Although the limited number of interviews provides limited applicability to draw certain conclusions for a wide range of Muslim youth residing in small towns, these interviews have been sufficient enough to reveal a correlation between the density of Muslims within a given area and the level of religious adherence. I used the convenience sampling method to choose my study participants. Two types of participants with specific religious characteristics were selected in order to compare with each other; one group being more pious, attending masjids and constantly interacting with other Muslims, and the other group not being active Muslims. In order to inquire whether or not the effect of having access to a Muslim community played a role in the religious upbringing and identity of youth, I interviewed eight individuals from the Bettendorf, Iowa mosque whose ages ranged from eighteen to twenty-five. These participants were asked to participate in the survey because they had always been present at the mosque the days I was there to observing. Participants at the other end of the piety spectrum were selected based on their place of residence. These individuals included Muslims, also aged from eighteen to twenty-five, who, from their own perspective, perceived themselves as not conforming to Islamic morals. Throughout my project I used two fieldwork methods: formal interviews and participant observation. The interviews were conducted in various methods, but recorded in the same way-through typing notes on my computer with permission from the interviewee. Interviews of the mosque-attending youth were conducted individually in the banquet area of the mosque after the weekly tafseer (a commentary or explanation of the Qur'an or a verse of the Qur'an) program. Three interviews were administered through e-mail, as the interviewees answered the questions on their own time and returned their responses via e-mail. The remaining participants were interviewed in a public space of the mosque. Although many of the participants decided to disclose their name, their names will be changed for the sake of anonymity. The participants were asked the same questions. All questionnaire included twenty-two questions that ranged from simple yes/no questions to background and demographic questions. The questions were also relative to the experiences of the participants as they grew up, went to school, and interacted with the mainstream culture of the United States.

Interview Responses

When I asked specific details about experiences that my participants had as they grew up or still have today as they go about their daily lives, I received an array of answers that covered different situations that came in conflict with divergent aspects of Islam. Meliha, an Albanian college student shared how her family had downplayed their Muslim identity to avoid being mistreated like the other Muslim family in the town of Bushnell.

Growing up in the US, in a small town was very hard. My family was forced to pretend as if we were Catholic to prevent any torment that we would be put through by rest of the community. We had an Arab family living in the same town that showed their beliefs strongly by wearing scarves. They owned a pizzeria. People would write death threats to them, break in to their restaurant, and throw rocks in the middle of the day to scare their customers. They lost their business and ended up losing their home. This was an alert signal to my family and this was the main reason why we hid our Muslim identity. We would be limited on what we celebrated and how. We would hear comments from others about Muslims and instead of speaking up to defend ourselves we kept our silence and hoped that our secret wouldn’t get out. Living in such fear was horrible. We grew up lying about our beliefs because of the possible consequences.

The daily bullying and hazards faced by an Arab family in Bushnell is described by Meliha,

My siblings and I were hesitant about giving our beliefs away. But the other Arab Muslim family had so much trouble. They were 3 siblings of different ages that were judged by their looks, beliefs and what they ate. They were avoided by their classmates and were never invited to take part in any after school activities. Other students did not allow them to sit with them for lunch; they would always have to sit on the old seats or in the back of the bus. It was noticeable that they were not happy and going through so much misery just because they were growing up in a family of such belief.

The interviewees who grew up in predominantly Christian towns frequently described perceived demands to be normal and to “fit in” than those who grew up around a Muslim community. Asana, an Iraqi high school student from Davenport, Iowa said that going to elementary school was hard, she got picked on for not eating pork or anything of that sort. Not celebrating Christmas made the kids in her class think she was lame and some kind of alien.

There were times where my friend asked me if I could go to her church group on Wednesdays and I tried to avoid it. I lied to her saying I was busy taking care of my sister, when actually I didn't want to go because I'm not a Christian. There was this church play that the same friend was in and I went to support her, it made me feel uncomfortable as being a Muslim going into a church.

One of my interviewees has been exposed to both communities; one with Muslims and another with non-Muslims. Before moving to another town, 26 year old Macedonian Arijeta of Pontiac, a rural town of 11,300 inhabitants in Illinois, who is also a mother of two, talks about how her school was accommodating to the needs of the Muslim community.

Actually I went to Walsh elementary school in Summit, IL where 60% of the students where Muslim up to 5 grade so I didn't really have to deal with being a "Muslim" until

6th grade. At eleven years old, I think I was more prepared to answer questions and talk about my religion than let say my daughters who will have to deal with it at a much earlier age. The school was very accommodating they never served pork at lunch, we didn't have Christmas parties, and there was school dress code which stated that you could not bare your shoulder or knee cap. I feel really lucky that I didn't have to go through the bullying early in life.

During elementary school, junior high, high school, and even college, the participants were not even a handful of Muslim students. After going to school and associating with only Muslims students, transferring to a new school without any Muslims was not a simple transition to get used to. Not having other Muslims to relate to often caused feelings of frustration. Arijeta continues;

I moved to Coal City that had a population of 2,500 in sixth grade, where 90% of the townspeople were Christian, and it was very difficult for me. I was not used to no one not knowing what a Muslim was, what it meant to be a Muslim, and why I was so different from everyone else.  My friends couldn't understand why I couldn't eat pork, or wear shorts and tank tops, or why I didn't celebrate Christmas.

Townspeople in Arijeta’s new place of residency, who had not interacted or dealt with Muslims before, were not accustomed to their traditions, hence did not know how to comprehend Islamic values;

Most of the staff and parents didn't even know what Islam was or what Muslims were. I remember the first Ramadan in Coal City; I was called into the nurse's office and was asked if I was anorexic because the lunch lady noticed I had not eaten anything for lunch in a week. I tried to explain to her that it was part of my religion not to eat from sunrise to sunset. She couldn't understand how parents would make their child starve all day. So she decided to call DCFS. Thankfully nothing came of it, but it's just another example of small town ignorance.

The involvement of Muslim youth within the community has a visible affect on their religious development and commitment because the associations have provided more than religious education, they also foster a social context in which they have developed a religious identity. Growing up and living in Bettendorf, Iowa, Muhammed, a Syrian sophomore at Black Hawk College explains how being apart of the mosque has contributed to his development;

I come with my father to congregation, and I attend the mosque daily. To me, it’s the biggest reminder of how I need to act and what I need to do in order to be a good mumin (a faithful and religious believer in Islam and its laws). It is the best imaginable gathering place to gain, strengthen, and enhance your spirituality. This is the place where I see people and become integrated into the community. Being apart of the mosque as small as this one gave me the advantage of being comfortable around adults. I am also a Sunday School mualim (teacher) for first graders, teaching Arabic, and from this I have gained experience in interacting with children as well. The umma keep me accountable for my actions; one year I assumed to stop doing cross country because it was hard during Ramadan, I preferred to quite sports instead of not fasting. In the end I decided to not quite, and found the strength to fast while doing cross country.

Having other Muslims as close friends around to associate with plays a significant role in constructing and reinforcing the religious identity of the participants. Those who have close Muslim friends, like 24 year old Amina of Bettendorf, say that they better understand me than my non-Muslim friends do. When she used to work in retail she spent most of her time with non-muslims and was not but once left job was able to attend mosque and interact with the community she felt the group solidarity amongst Muslims. She feels that it is important have friends of the same belief and to be apart of a Muslim community because it strengthens Muslim personality.

On the issue of abstaining from certain food products, such as pork, 22 year old Burak of Monmouth, IL shared an experience he had when he was in elementary school. He described the frustrations he felt of being pressured, and at times taunted, by his friends for not eating at their house or going out to eat with them.

Trying to be cautious of what you consume so you don’t eat something restricted by Islam was a very important task that I had to master when I was younger. I was always told by my parents not to eat anything that contained meat when I would go over to my friends’ house to avoid the probability of devouring pork. I was also not allowed to tag along when my friends would invite me to go out to eat with their families and that really irritated me.

He adds that,

Although my parents placed restriction on what I could eat, there were a few occasions that I had accidentally consumed pork without being aware that it was included as an ingredient. There was this one instance when I was over at my friend’s house while his parents were having a barbecue and after being offered to have some hotdogs I caved in and ate quite a few. I don’t know how my parents found out that those were pork hotdogs, whether they asked or not, but they really got upset over them. After that, hotdogs were never the same for me.

While attending high school in Monmouth, IL, Rasheed (age 21) became victimized by ignorance and misunderstanding. In between classes, while speaking to a friend, the words “and I blow myself up” were overheard by a Spanish teacher as she walked passed the two students. Without taking a moment to comprehend the rest of the conversation, she quickly informed the school’s principal, which then took him out of class to inquire of his statement. Rasheed explained to the principal that he was “explaining the plot of the short film, where I blow myself up in a subway station; I was speaking in reference to the character that I had portrayed in a short film meant for an artistic rendition of how terrorism tears families apart”. To prove this, he showed them the film, and after viewing it the faculty called the superintendent, who had called the school board’s lawyers and the lawyers said they had to call the FBI even after all of this was understood as a misunderstanding. The rest of the day he was taken out of school to avoid encounters of any retaliation from peers or even faculty due to the potential threat. Within 45 minutes after going home, the FBI appeared at Rasheed’s doorstep, asking a series of questions including the place of his birth, and most strikingly whether or not he had possession of the weapons displayed in the film. After a thorough search, the FBI did not find weapons of destruction or anything depicting an act of terrorism. This experience for him was “an attempt at coming to an understanding of Islam in a nuanced way as I’m dealing with being a Muslim American in a small town.” The reactions from both his schoolmates and from the towns toward the film taught gave him more sympathy for the way that he is reacted to in this part of the country because of the fact that many people are uninformed about Islam or Muslims. Fear and feelings of frustration appear when individuals are presented with things they are not familiar with, understood that the reason for the actions against him were out of fear and stereotypical concerns. Rasheed came to the understanding of what it is like to be “discriminated against and targeted because you are a certain type of person and to be judged with the generalizations of your ethnic group being forced upon you because you identify with that group”.

Through my own experience I would like to describe an observation I have noticed with my close acquaintances. My friend, Feyza and her family previously lived in Monmouth, IL. Her children knew not a single element of Islam up until she learned about the Islamic sunday school located about forty-five miles away in Bettendorf, Iowa and started taking them to it. At first, her daughter had trouble adjusting and relating to the rest of the girls her age because they were much more knowledgable than she was giving way to embarrassment. She was also put in a class with elementary students instead of seventh graders due to her knowledge level and she hated it. Her son’s problems stemmed from his fondness of Christian holidays and traditions. During the Christmas season, being a very outspoken individual, he would talk about how great Christmas is and what his wish-list was, even after he was told by the teachers that Muslims do not celebrate such holiday. After a while they both were able to adjust, began to learn, and started to practice what they learned. Her daughter discontinued wearing nail polish because she started praying five times a day, as did her brother. Seeing the shifts in her children the mother, pleased with these positive changes, would drive them twice a week to that mosque to continue their interactions with other Muslims, something they were lacking in their own town. This continued up until they relocated to another town. The mother started working full-time, not being able to provide the service of taking her children to a Islamic school on the weekend. Within the duration of a year, the children stopped praying and learning to read Quran.

Conclusion

This research illustrates that “stronger individual religious identification may result in enhanced group solidarity, cohesion, and collective identification,” therefore, those who do not have exposure to such affiliations may experience hostility and discrimination from the dominant population resulting with pressure to confirm to non-Muslim society (Peek 236).

The participants from at the mosque would be considered very involved in mosque affairs and daily communal practice. All of the participants interviewed from the mosque reported being active members of religious organizations, praying five times a day, abstaining from religiously prohibited activities such as drinking alcohol, fasting during the Holy Month of Ramadan, and reading regularly in the Holy Qur’an. The female interviewees displayed modest attire. All three of the female participants wore the hijab, two started wearing it in high school and the other in college. Through the responses of interviewees who lived in towns distant from a Muslim community the conclusion is that they are perceived as not being as active in religious organizations and involved with other Muslims or Islam. Although all of the participants reported abstaining from the consumption of pork, those who reported that at one point they consumed or do consume alcohol also reported that they do not regularly pray five times a day. This shows a negative correlation between the consumption of alcohol and practicing the daily prayers; higher prayer frequency was related to lower alcohol consumption. The four young women interviewed did not adhere to the Islamic dress code.

Although my sample was not randomly selected and is not representative, the narratives provided by the participants suggest important insights about other young Muslims in the area. The conclusions drawn from this research is based on a very small sample, therefore it is not a universal model and may not apply to every Muslim youth that lives in small towns.

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