

THE AMERICAN MUSLIM IDENTITY: FUNDAMENTALLY CONFLICTED OR JUST  
MISREPRESENTED?

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A Thesis  
Presented to  
The Faculty of the Department  
of Sociology  
University of Houston

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In Partial Fulfillment  
Of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Arts

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By  
Patrick Michael Casey

May, 2013

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## ABSTRACT

Popular media accounts of the experiences of American Muslims have characterized this population as fraught by conflicting allegiances to both country and religion (Woodruff 2006; Fisher 2011). Academics write about the distress particular to American Muslims as a result of their “identity crisis” (Peek 2005) and “hyphenated identities” (Sirin and Fine 2007). Much of the research on American Muslims has been predicated upon the taken for granted assumption that they are conflicted individuals; research methods and data gathered are therefore reflective of that assumption. This study questions the appropriateness of viewing American Muslims as holders of what I term *fundamentally conflicted identities*, as doing so engenders a gross mischaracterization that may produce erroneous theoretical assumptions and taint research validity. Through the use of in-depth interview data, I demonstrate a more authentic image of American Muslims, one that better reflects their lived experiences and personal identities.

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## Chapter One: Introduction

The successful integration of Muslims into American society is an issue of growing importance. The Pew Foundation (2011) predicts that the number of Muslims living in America will double by the year 2030, many of which will be 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> generational. This issue is complicated by the prevalence of Islamophobia. There has been increased attention on Muslims and their presence in American society post 9/11, and recent research has only begun to untangle the myriad factors shaping the formation of their identities (Peek 2005; Selod 2010). How well are Muslims integrating into society, or are they at all? How are they able to carve a place for themselves in American life, given the plethora of negative stereotypes and damning presentations ubiquitous in American news and popular media?

Much of the research that has sought to answer such questions has returned less than encouraging results. American Muslims have been typecast in media as the villain, and in academia as the victim. In both cases they are caught between their allegiances to God *or* country. Torn between two worlds, they are said to suffer perpetual displacement; permanently Other. The ‘identity crisis’ trope is perhaps the most popular, appearing as it does in numerous characterizations both academic and lay. Viewed collectively, these dismal portrayals construct what I term a *fundamentally conflicted identity*. The adoption of such a framework is fraught with problematic implications, as it conceptualizes American Muslims as so at odds with themselves it is a wonder they can even function. In light of this, the focus of this study soon shifted from a less generalized question of how American Muslims negotiate their identities to a more focused inquiry as to the feasibility and validity of the *fundamentally conflicted* framework.

On September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2011 *The Houston Chronicle* published a story on children born on the same day ten years prior. One of the featured children was a second-generation American

Muslim named Saarah. Her story is significant in that not only does her date of birth demarcate the point of origin for a sudden collective awareness of the approximately three million Muslims living in the US, it also underscores the seemingly paradoxical intersection of an American identity with a Muslim one.

The story left me wondering what life must be like for a child whose birthday coincides with a day infamous for its tragedy; a day when their own religious heritage was irrevocably vilified. I wondered how a person could negotiate and reconcile these disparate halves of their identity? How does any American Muslim handle their plight? According to much of the available research, they do not; or at least they do so poorly, and are mangled in the process.

Not satisfied with this bleak and dismal characterization, I was certain there was more to this dynamic population than the one-dimensional victims I read about. To investigate, I conducted a series of 23 in-depth interviews with American Muslims. The interviews explored topics which previous research suggests are salient to gaining a better understanding of the lives they lead.

### **Literature Review**

Though some speculate that the first Muslim Americans arrived as African slaves, documentation supporting such a claim is lacking. Muslims first began to arrive in the US in large numbers in the late nineteenth century. This first wave lasted until the Johnson-Reed Immigration Act of 1924 prevented Asians from entering the US. Immigration reforms in the 1960's once again opened the doors to Muslims, not only from the Middle East but South Asia as well; however, Muslim migration was severely curtailed after the September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001 terrorist attacks. This second generation of Muslim immigrants caused division within the burgeoning American Muslim community. Schumann (2007) identifies three characteristics of the 1960's

wave that affected overall integration. First, these new immigrants had no real intention of integrating into American culture, but rather to complete a university education and leave. Although many would change their minds and end up staying they retained their 'homeward orientation'. Second, they adopted English as the preferred language of communication. This had the effect of better facilitating communication between Muslim groups of differing national and language backgrounds. Third, this new wave of immigrants brought with them a variety of identities and ideologies, causing division within the American Muslim community. This division will be explored in a discussion of relevant Islamic discourse.

Today, the American Muslim community is quickly growing, though its actual numbers are a matter of debate. Smith (2002) argues that America's Muslim population is dramatically overestimated, and that the true number in 2001 was less than 2 million. Bagby (2011) claims that American mosques were attended by at least 2 million individuals on major Islamic holidays during the same time frame and that in 2011 the number had increased to 2.6 million. Bagby (2011) estimates the total American Muslim population to be around 7 million. In his discussion of the Muslim American population, Sirin (2008) cites several sources, among them: an American Jewish Community survey claiming 2.8 million and a Council on American Islamic Relations survey claiming 7 million. Kosmin and Keysar's (2009) American Religious Identification Survey provides the lowest number, estimating the population to be about 1.35 million. In recent reports, The Pew Research Center has placed the number at 2.35 (2007), 2.6 (2011), and 2.75 million (2011a). In addition, the American Muslim population is projected to rise to 6.2 million by 2030 (Pew 2011). Although the true numbers are difficult to nail down, the growth of this demographic is readily apparent. Kosmin and Keysar (2009) provide data on the percentage increase in the Muslim population in America. They find that Muslims went from .3

percent of the population in 1990 to .6 percent in 2008, but note that growth in the total number of Muslims seems to have slowed in recent years. Furthermore, Bagby's study (2011) found that the number of mosques in America had increased from 1,209 in the year 2000, to 2,106 in 2011, a finding that arguably represents tremendous growth within the demographic. Bagby (2011) found that Latinos constituted about 12 percent of new converts, whites constituted 22 percent, and African Americans 64 percent. The designations 'American Muslim' and 'Muslim American' are used interchangeably here, and refer specifically to foreign or domestic born Muslims who have citizenship or at least permanent residency in the United States.

It is common in the West to think of Muslims as one monolithic entity, but diversity is the norm for Muslim societies worldwide; and in America even more so. "There is no singular, monolithic, category of people called 'Muslim Americans'" (Sirin 2008:37). In a 2009 Gallup report, Muslim Americans were found to have higher levels of racial diversity than any other religious community in the US. Schumann (2007) argues that American Muslims are forced to continuously redefine their identity in the US and find a balance between their affiliations to both the US and the Islamic World. Using voter registration and party affiliation as a measuring stick, Read (2008) found American Muslims to be politically involved, a finding supported by Sirin (2008), and Bagby (2011), who found that high levels of involvement in political life are likewise encouraged by most Muslim religious and community leaders.

Further, a 2011 Gallup poll labeled 44% of Muslim Americans as 'integrated' and another 48% as 'tolerant' after asking them questions regarding their acceptance of people of other faiths. The same poll also found that those Muslims who attended a mosque at least once a week had lower levels of stress and anger, a finding that contradicts the personal opinion of those who fear mosques as radicalization hotspots. On this last note it is worth mentioning a further

finding of the 2011 Gallup poll, although often suspected of harboring secret sympathies for terrorist causes, 89 percent of Muslim Americans agree that violence against civilians is “never justified”. With the exception of Mormons, this makes Muslim Americans the religious group most likely to denounce violence against civilians.

### **Assimilation**

Scholars of immigration have moved away from the classical view of assimilation, the assumption that integration is a one way street, and begun to acknowledge that there are in fact multiple paths to integration (Portes and Rumbaut 2001; Waldinger and Feliciano; Vermeulen 2010). This newer approach is perhaps especially appropriate when discussing the children of more recent immigrants, be they 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup> or 1.5 generational. The designation ‘1.5 generation’ is used to describe immigrants who were not born in the US but arrived here as young children, usually before the age of twelve (Kasinitz *et al* 2008). Today’s favored model is that of *segmented assimilation*, in which immigrants and their children are thought to adopt some aspects of American culture but not others.

As the paths are divergent, so are the outcomes; some lead to upward mobility as immigrants and their children make use of the human capital they have brought with them, as well as the resources and opportunities provided by their ethnic community and the host country, to propel themselves up the social ladder (Waldinger and Feliciano 2004). Conversely, others follow a path of downward assimilation in which they adopt attitudes and values of lower SES groups, thus restricting their own opportunities for advancement (Portes and Rumbaut 2001; Vermeulen 2010).

Upward mobility is cultivated by *selective acculturation*, the process by which immigrants pick and choose the aspects of culture they prefer, leaving behind the rest. In this process the culture and language of the sending country are often retained while the new culture is cautiously adopted. Downward assimilation is accompanied by *dissonant acculturation*, in that the children adopt values and attitudes separate from both their parent's sending country and from the social class into which their parents are attempting to integrate, causing a rift in the family and worsening life chances (Portes and Rumbaut 2001; Vermeulen 2010).

Much attention has been paid to the phenomenon of downward assimilation, evoking scholars such as Waldinger and Feliciano to note: "the recent scholarship on the 'new' second generation has begun on a note of inflected pessimism" (2004:394). Indeed, prominent immigration scholars Rumbaut and Portes envision a bleak future for America's "national homogeneity" as new immigrants are observed identifying more with their particular ethnic group than with America more generally (2001:301). Yet, equally relevant to the ensuing discussion of American Muslims are the complimentary processes of selective acculturation and upward mobility. Many immigrant Muslims come to America with college educations and a proficiency in English, the 'human capital' conducive to an easy transition into the American middle class (Rumbaut and Portes 2001). Also of note here is the concept of *adhesive identities*, described by Yang (1999) as the ability of immigrants to hold two identities simultaneously, as opposed to favoring one over the other during assimilation.

### **Identity**

Individual identities are social identities. That is, they exist in social contexts, in direct relation and opposition to others. Individual identities are the result of interaction with others

both individually and in groups, which are in turn reflective of the influence of larger social structures. Understanding the ways individual selves are shaped by social structure is the foray of identity theory (Stryker 1968; Burke and Stets 2009). Individual identities are also multiple, changing and adapting to situation or circumstance, as the structural forces acting on them are themselves numerous, varied, and shifting (Ajrouch 2004; LeBoeuf, Shafir and Bayuk 2010). These identities manifest at different times and are contingent upon current surroundings and relationships. Not only do identities change with the passage of time and context, but their meanings change as well (Moore 2011).

Through the continuous, intertwined processes of internal and external interactions, identities are constructed and negotiated (Cahill 1986, Nagel 1994). A multitude of diverse interactions demands various ways of thinking about and describing these processes. Scholars may turn to frameworks such as the subjective perceptions of Goffman's (1973) self-presentation and impression management, in which social actors are thought to make a conscious effort to foster a particular affectation, especially one they suspect will be well received by those around them. Cooley's looking-glass self (Jacobs 2006) describes how identity is formed and re-formed through a complex interaction between internal self-perceptions and the perceptions of others. Others may favor an external focus on group membership or social status, or on stereotyped characterizations and categorizations and their implications for and influence on identity formation (Peek 2005). Identity is further influenced by personality traits and behaviors, and group and societal perceptions of said traits (Peek 2005), as well as the impressions garnered in reference to the social roles individuals fill (Kuhn and McPartland 1954). The contexts in which these interactions take place are crucial to the way these identities are perceived (Moore 2011).

Within the context of this study and its focus on the negotiation of “conflicted” identities, certain aspects of identity theory will be of special relevance. As noted, identities are not static but changing; thus, identity is better thought of as an ongoing process rather than a fixed reality (Mir (2007). Identities are not singular but multiple, and depending on the environment individuals may choose to emphasize or ignore particular aspects as they see fit (LeBoeuf et al. 2010; Moore 2011). Furthermore, *identity salience* expresses the notion that in certain contexts one identity becomes of greater importance than others (Peek 2005a). For immigrants, national identity is of less importance (Waters 2000) and cultural/ethnic identity may become compromised during acculturation (Johnson 1997). Among the everyday struggles and ambiguity of identity negotiation, religious identity may become more salient (Read and Bartkowski 2000; Akresh 2013).

#### *The salience of religion in American Muslim identity*

Though many studies have been carried out to analyze the role of religion in *maintaining* immigrant identity (Haddad and Lummis 1987), few have looked more specifically at the *development* of a religious identity amongst American Muslims (Haddad 2011; Selod 2011; Williams 2011). There is a paucity of research considering how the second-generation of American Muslims form and negotiate their identities. Such research is necessary, as religion is thought to play an important role in helping individuals balance incongruent ethnic and American identities (Peek 2005a).

Religion plays an important role in shaping American Muslim identities. Ajrouch (2004) studied the influence of religion on identity formation amongst Arab American teens. Even in families where religion was of little everyday consideration, individual perceptions of appropriate moral behavior were strongly tied to those of their parents’ country of origin. Thus,

religion plays a greater role in identity formation for immigrants and their children than may be the case had they not immigrated (Peek 2005a). Furthermore, the teens in Ajrouch's (2004) study are confronted with expectations that they reject American culture in favor of their parent's traditional way of life. This is especially evident for females. In her interviews with teenage Arab American girls Ajrouch (2004) found evidence of gender policing. Their brothers, male cousins and friends "monitor" girls to make sure they conform to certain social and religious expectations. Hasan (2000) decries this emphasis on the chastity of American Muslim girls as a "barometer of their success" (p.115). While many scholars argue that women experience more pressure to maintain home-country practices like covering, others have argued that male pressure is not a primary reason for increased religious observance among American Muslim women (Read and Bartkowski 2000). All of this indicates that identity negotiation among American Muslim women and men may be subject to different social pressure and constraints.

Peek (2005a) provides a model of American Muslim identity formation, delineated in three stages: *ascribed identity*, in which children born into Muslim families exhibit little to no self-reflection of their religion, though do sometimes attempt to present themselves in traditionally normative American ways. In the *chosen identity* stage, young adults are in a position to think critically about their identity and construct what being Muslim means to them. This typically occurs in conjunction with other Muslims going through a similar process, often while at college, an environment where they encounter both a greater Muslim population than in high school and also a university's Muslim Student Association (MSA). As they learn more about Islam, they have a tendency to identify with it more and more, and it often becomes the primary aspect of their identity. This is somewhat contrasted by the work of Mir (2007), who argues that the college environment is detrimental to many minority students engaged in identity

work. She finds that the expectations and norms of college life weigh heavily on the minds of minorities, as the identities they are attempting to carve out for themselves often do not reflect these constructions of normative behavior, and are therefore distressing. This may be an area in need of further exploration and study. Regardless, Peek (2005a) argues that this chosen identity stage is critical in that these young Muslims become aware of the impact of cultural norms on their parent's conception of the religion, and therefore engage in critical thought about what it means to be a Muslim in America. The third stage, *declared identity*, is thought to be in response to a crisis or threat. This stage is twofold: first, as American Muslims felt threatened post 9/11 they experienced higher levels of solidarity with their marginalized group. Secondly, the barrage of accusations and negative portrayals following the aforementioned terror attacks initially put American Muslims on the defensive, spurring many to seek a deeper understanding of their faith in order to come to its defense in everyday situations. Overtime, this is thought to have solidified 'Muslim' as a key part of their identities.

### **Media portrayals**

Media analysts note the role media outlets play in framing issues in ways that reflect popular beliefs and attitudes. More specifically, this framing reflects the perceptions and expectations of the targeted audience. Media consumers are presented with information, and analysis of that information, that more or less complements their own ideas and attitudes (Jackson 2010). Muslims have received a considerable amount of media attention post 9/11, much of which has been highly negative and stereotypical (Jackson 2010). These portrayals both draw from pre-existing negative perceptions of Islam and Muslims and also reify them. The skills necessary to critically analyze such portrayals, much less to counteract them, are rarely

taught in school, and many media consumers are ill-equipped to contextualize the bombardment of negative information (Tindongan 2011). These stereotyped depictions are not limited to news reports but occur in other forms of media as well, such as television sit-coms and films, where there is little to no expectation or pretense to journalistic objectivity (Jackson 2010).

### *Characterization of Muslims*

Typical media portrayals of Muslims invoke images of suspicious, shady characters, who are unreasonable and reactive (Jackson 2010). Muslims are characterized as especially violent and inclined towards terrorism or at least complicity with terroristic means (Tindongan 2011). They are quintessentially un-American (Alsultany 2007), with a lifestyle in direct contradiction and opposition to American values (Rauf 2004). Such depictions reflect a very narrow portion of Muslims, yet they are by far the most prevalent in mainstream media. In fact, the Muslim most commonly depicted in American media post 9/11 has been Osama bin Laden. This recurrent portrayal serves to perpetually associate Islam and Muslims with terrorism and fear (Jackson 2010).

The nature of these media representations fit into popular narratives about Muslims, drawing on prior expectations to provide context, and subsequently fixing them as definitive. This justifies these negative and stereotypical portrayals and facilitates their continuation (Said 1997). The concept of the “Muslim terrorist”, and the relative absence of such concepts as Christian, Jewish, or atheist “terrorists”, has largely been created and perpetuated by the media. Violent activities carried out by Muslims are necessarily equated with religion; similarly violent activities by non-Muslim groups rarely have religion attached as a primary motivation (Usman 2006).

These media representations come with a consequence. A 2004 report by the Media and Society Research Group (MSRG) found that public support for restrictions on American Muslims correlated positively with the amount of television news the respondents watched. Those who spent the most time watching TV news consistently called for greater restrictions on American Muslims, including: the profiling of American Muslim citizens, forced registration like that of sex offenders, the monitoring of mosques and the infiltration of Muslim civic organizations (Nisbet and Shanahan 2004).

Even positive portrayals of Muslims often put them in defensive postures, always explaining what they are not (ex: terrorists, conspirators, etc.), never explaining who they are. This fits into the overall negative framework in which information about Muslims is presented in the media. All of this can contribute to negative self-perception on the part of American Muslims, what Barrett (2007) calls a “daily sense of humiliation and frustration” (p.280).

Thus, the essential difference between American Muslims and other immigrant groups becomes clear: In the US, Muslims are regarded with fear and apprehension, a dilemma their children inherit at birth. They are perceived as dangerous and secretly anti-American, even when America is their home country. Therefore it may be reasoned that the assimilation and identity formation processes they undergo are generally different in terms of lived experiences and self-perceptions.

### **Categorizing American Muslims**

#### *Traditional sociological categories*

The American Muslim population is 45% female and 55% male, and about 36% are under the age of thirty. Estimates of their education and income levels place them on par with the

general public, but with a larger percentage (26% vs. 13% respectively) currently pursuing higher education (Pew 2011a). As noted, estimates of the American Muslim population are difficult to come by, yet a tremendous amount of growth is projected. About 35% of American Muslims were born in the US; by 2030 the percentage is expected to be closer to 45% (Pew 2011). As many American Muslims are African-American, the current proportion of American born Muslims with immigrant parents or grandparents is perhaps only a small part of the above mentioned 35%. Yet, this small population is constituted by a multitude of different national and ethnic backgrounds (South Asian, Arab, African, Iranian, etc.) and their children are attempting to harmonize these ethnicities within an American identity. Although often conceptualized as a monolithic, homogeneous “other”, it must be recognized that American Muslims are extremely diverse in terms of their racial/ethnic and national differences (Kaya 2007; Read 2008). The sheer diversity of this population renders considerations of race/ethnicity complex. Though religious and other identities are shaped within the context of race (Moore 2011), disentangling this web goes beyond the scope of this study.

A strict focus on the aforementioned sociological categories does not provide insight into the role of Islam in forming American Muslim value systems, and by extension, American Muslim identities (Barzegar 2011). The role of Islam in shaping cultural norms, even for those American Muslims who are not particularly religious, cannot be overstated. Islamic components of one’s identity are highly visible in the US, and notions of what it means to be a Pakistani, Turk, or Arab are intertwined with notions of what it means to be a Muslim (Ajrouch 2004). Therefore, though the values of American Muslims and the general American public may be similar, the question remains: what role does Islam play in the formation of those values?

### *Islamic discourse as a category*

Martin and Ernst's publication entitled *Rethinking Islamic Studies* is an open call to scholars to rethink the methodological approaches implemented thus far in the study of Islam and Muslims (Hughes 2012). In light of this work, it may be appropriate to question the reliance upon traditional sociological variables such as age, race/ethnicity, SES and so forth in the study of American Muslims. This advice is considered in the current study due to the fact that the targeted population is at once both incredibly small and incredibly diverse.

How then can American Muslims be categorized? The answer may be found in the work of Barzegar (2011), who argues for a focus on popular Islamic *discourses* as a more reliable indicator of how American Muslims can be meaningfully categorized. Rather than asking about the values and beliefs of American Muslims with a family heritage from Pakistan as compared with those from Turkey or Palestine, Barzegar calls for an emphasis on the Islamic discourse to which they adhere. Barzegar (2011) argues that American Muslims identify more strongly with an Islamic discourse that "focuses upon patterns of language, rhetoric and practice that underlie the many ways in which Islam is constituted in the United States" (p.524) rather than a particular racial/ethnic or national heritage.

Not to be confused with wholly separate ideologies, Islamic discourses are competing viewpoints which intersect with one another (Read and Bartkowski 2000). They reflect the different ways Islam is conceived and implemented by Muslims and, considering the way that Islam shapes the cultural practices and identity formation of Muslims, the adherents of a particular discourse no doubt share certain characteristics of thought and behavior. A sharing of characteristics is "what ties people together in a particular group" (Moore 2011:120), and therefore Islamic discourse may indeed prove to be a useful means of categorizing American

Muslims. Drawing on (yet augmenting) the work of Barzegar (2011), the second-generation of American Muslims can be divided into three main categories by discourse: *traditionalists*, *salafis* and *progressives*. *Traditionalist* discourse calls for a revival of traditional Islam, looking to the religion's proud history of scientific achievement and social egalitarianism as a model that should be re-implemented in modern times. *Salafi* discourse takes a very different perspective, actively rejecting a tremendous amount of traditional Islamic scholarship and practice, and replacing it with de-contextualized, often literal interpretations of the Quran that ignore socio-historical realities. Salafis believe that their relatively new approach to the religion is in fact a return to the "pure" Islam of the early days, making Salafism reminiscent of both ultra-Orthodox Judaism and Evangelical Christianity. Lastly, *progressive* discourse is concerned with re-interpreting the Quran and Islam in light of modern, progressive ideals. This viewpoint holds that the oppression of women in Islam is due to patriarchal interpretations of the Quran, not to some inherently sexist quality of the book itself. Progressive Muslims argue that if freed of the cultural bias of 7<sup>th</sup> century Arabia in which it was initially received and understood, Islam is wholly compatible with modern, progressive societies (Bagby 2011; Barzegar 2011).

It should be noted that the traditionalists far outnumber both progressives and Salafis. Bagby's (2011) American Mosque Survey found that only 3% of American mosques identified as Salafi. Nevertheless, his study does lend credence to the use of discourse. Dividing American mosques into African-American, South Asian, Arab, South Asian and Arab mixed, and finally Other (which included Iranian mosques among others), Bagby (2011) found that these mosques claimed to adhere to various discourses which were similar to (but not exactly the same as) those delineated above. And they did so at relatively comparable rates, with the exception of African-American mosques, which had a surprisingly high percentage of Salafi mosques. This suggests

several things: first, that amongst American Muslims, Islamic discourse is indeed a salient component of identity and, second, racial/ethnic identity is not a strong predictor of Islamic discourse. Furthermore, Bagby (2011) found that discourse functions as a predictor of political participation. Fifty-seven percent of Salafis “strongly disagree” with political participation, while 65% of traditionalists and 78% percent of progressive leaning mosques “strongly agree” that their members should engage in political participation. Coming as they do from so many different countries and ethnic groups, there may not be a common identity applicable to all American Muslims (Waters 2000). Yet still there remains the need to identify and categorize this emerging population (Waters 2000), which may in part be accomplished through the use of Islamic discourse.

### **Fundamentally Conflicted Identities**

#### *American identity redefined as oppositional to Islam*

In *The Stranger*, Georg Simmel theorized that outsiders help a community develop and maintain a social identity by providing a clear example of what they are not, thus enabling the community to define who they are and what they have in common (Wolff 1950). Simmel’s theory provides an initial reference point for viewing both the mainstream American media’s perception and portrayal of American Muslims and, also, American Muslim’s perceptions of themselves as a result. As will be shown, the language of an identity crisis is a prominent feature of both popular media and academic accounts of the lives of American Muslims. When taken as a whole, these portrayals contribute to the concept of what I term a *fundamentally conflicted identity*. Taken either as a personal self-concept or a collective identity, it is a self-perception so

at odds with itself, so torn in competing, contradictory ways that it could scarcely exist, much less be employed to characterize the majority of American Muslims.

*A fundamentally conflicted identity* is constructed by using the two grand narratives which guide characterizations of Muslims in America; that they are at once villains and victims. They are villains in that popular thought holds them to be wholly oppositional to American freedoms, life and thought to the extent that they are willing to kill and maim in their hatred of America. Conversely, they are victims in that they are for the most part good people, unjustly lumped in with terrorists and hatemongers; an unfair characterization that invites unwarranted prejudice and suspicion. These contradictory narratives compete with one another in the public sphere, and American Muslims are thought to be internally divided by their conflicting allegiances to country and religion. Thus, the holder of such antagonistic self-perceptions may be described as *fundamentally conflicted*, that is, oxymoronic in their most basic sense of self.

Post 9/11 the American media resurrected orientalist notions of Islam and the Middle East as backward, barbaric and inherently violent. Conversely, audiences were reminded that America stood for modernity, freedom and democracy. This binary was exemplified in speeches given by President Bush in the aftermath of the attacks, calling the US led war on terror a war between good and evil (Alsultany 2007). Juergensmeyer refers to the war on terror as a *cosmic war*, a war of ideas that can never truly be won (Juergensmeyer 2003; Aslan 2009). A cosmic war is a perpetual struggle of “us” versus “them” in which notions of “the Other”, that is, the enemy, are developed and invoked. The Other (in this case ‘Islam’) is a manifestation of everything the US is not, and exists conceptually as a means of collective identity formation and maintenance for Americans (Aslan 2009), much like Simmel’s stranger (Wolff 1950). Muslims have been framed as the Other in this war of ideas and cultures, and American Muslims have

been lumped together in an imagined monolithic community that belies its very real diversity (Tindongan 2011). Thus, American identity is not an Islamic one, and Islam is not American.

### *Framing a fundamentally conflicted identity*

The loyalty of American Muslims to the US is often called into question (Kaya 2007), and their presentation of self, which may include visible identifiers of their religious orientation (ex: beard, headscarf, or Muslim name) (Selod 2011), is often regarded as verging on excessive (Ramadan 2010). By presenting themselves as Muslim they establish “Islam” as a salient component of their identity, thereby inadvertently adopting the designation of Other (Moore 2011). The effect of this Othering is found in the lives of young American Muslims, males in particular, who Sirin and Fine (2007) describe as “angry, frustrated, displaced, split, almost contradictory” (p. 156). In a culture that rejects them, Muslims may undergo a process called *downward assimilation* in which a discriminated group adopts attitudes and values that directly contradict those of the dominant culture (Portes and Rumbaut 2001; Vermeulen 2010). These values and behaviors become an important part of their identity, what Waters (2000) refers to as *oppositional identities*. In her study of Arab American females, Ajrouch (2004) found that her respondents actively tried not to identify too closely with Americans, especially white American girls, who they characterized as morally suspect. On both sides, this construction and amplification of external differences works to promote and reify a kind of internal solidarity (Jenkins 2008).

Benet-Martinez and Haritatos’ (2005) work on bicultural identity integration suggests that American Muslims may face a difficult challenge integrating what are arguably two disparate identities. They measure *identity integration* through two variables: *conflict* and

*distance*. Both function as a gauge of the compatibility of the cultural identities in question. Individuals who are unable to resolve the contradictions of their bicultural identity may be left feeling torn between two separate cultural identities. Cheng and Lee (2009) expanded upon this research to include multiracial identity integration. They predict higher levels of conflict among bicultural and multiracial identities when they reflect both a Western and Eastern orientation due to vast differences in cultural values and the challenge of harmonizing them in one individual. Therefore, individuals who were raised simultaneously as Americans and as Muslims should likewise face the same challenge, but perhaps compounded by the added elements of fear and suspicion with which their Muslim identity is sometimes met.

American and Muslim identities are in conflict (Tindongan 2011), and those who hold both are engaged in a struggle to come to terms with what it means to be an American Muslim (Mubarak 2004), and one made all the more difficult in the wake of 9/11 (Cainkar 2004). American Muslim are caught in the “double-bind of being threatened and being perceived as threatening” (Tindongan 2011:78). They live fragile lives “under siege”, with a developmental process suffering from discrimination and stress (Sirin and Fine 2007:152). American Muslims lack a cultural support system (Hasan 2000), and are stuck in the “difficult and painful” position between the cultures of their parents and their peers, “cross[ing] the boundaries everyday” (Kaya 2007:31). The problem is compounded for women, who must contend with their “marginalized position in certain Muslim societies” as well (Kaya 2007:31). These narratives are reflected in popular media accounts of American Muslims, who are said to “struggle with identity” (Woodruff 2006) and experience “perpetual displacement” (Mubarak 2004), living “under a cloud” (Elias 2006).

To be fair, the experiences of 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> generation American Muslims are arguably different than other immigrant groups, as the popular conception of Islam in America is almost wholly negative. Mohamed and O'Brien (2011) argue that the most ubiquitous and enduring myth about Islam amongst Americans is that the religion is intrinsically connected to extremism and terrorism. Acculturation is a difficult process for immigrants and their children (Berry 1997), yet the case of Muslims is especially troubled in that their faith is so often reviled.

### *Questioning the conflicted framework*

When academicians present such a bleak view of American Muslims, such as when Sirin and Fine (2007) write “Muslim youth in the US carve their identities under surveillance and collective suspicion” (p.152), do they inadvertently do them an injustice, by contributing to the dismal portrayals of this young community? Does this framing place them into the stereotype of the monolithic Muslim identity, that Other to which Americans must stand opposed (Tindongan 2011)? Portraying American Muslims as victims is not much better than portraying them as victimizers. In both cases they are a one-dimensional community characterized by conflict and oppression, forever trapped between their two disparate halves. The question is: do these two halves have to conflict, or may they be viewed as complimentary in that it is difficult to understand the significance of either one on its own (Besheer 2011)?

The negative portrayals so common in both academia and the mainstream media stand in stark contrast to that found in a 2011 Gallup Poll, which suggests that American Muslims are not only well integrated and adapted to American life, but “thriving” as well (Younis 2009). Furthermore, many American Muslims find it easier to live as Muslims in the US than in other so-called Muslim countries, as those countries may not enjoy the same freedom of religious

expression as in America (Rauf 2004). Thus, many Muslims work not to dismiss one culture or the other, but instead to integrate the better aspects of each (Rauf 2004). It has been said that American Muslims are “victims of mistaken identity” (Hasan 2000:10), yet it does not follow that researchers accept the crisis and conflict framing, as religious and national identities are constantly being renegotiated and reinterpreted (Galloway 2011).

Does labeling this population as conflicted have the unfortunate side effect of encouraging them to see themselves as victims; a message that is almost surely at odds with what they are hearing from their parents? As immigrants to another country, their parents do not represent the average Turk, Pakistani, or Jordanian. Rather, they no doubt have much in common with the thousands of other immigrants who voluntarily relocate to this country each year. They are ambitious, motivated go-getters, willing to take risks yet unwilling to take no for an answer. These are people who leave behind the familiar and start anew in an unfamiliar place. These people are not victims, and it is safe to assume that they have tried hard to instill the same values in their children, the new generation of American Muslims on which this study is focused. What good is it then to speak of their offspring as hapless victims of society? What is the point of thinking of them as characterized by conflict and crisis? These labels come from without; they come from the media, from academia, from stereotypes and projections. Is it easy to be visibly Muslim in America? My guess is no. Yet, I postulate that this group is and better adapted and more resilient than for which they are given credit. Therefore, I question if the fundamentally conflicted identity is a social construct and a label that ill-defines American Muslims as a whole. If this is so, then it is necessary for researchers to move past this framing and embrace less stigmatizing conceptions of this population.

## *Harmonizers*

There is plenty of evidence to suggest that American Muslims are handling the acculturation difficulties they face much better than popular representations acknowledge. In his well-received book *American Islam*, journalist Paul Barrett (2007) provides in-depth interviews with American Muslims. He found them to be relatively prosperous, highly educated and more or less politically involved, all of which are arguably indicative of a successfully integrated minority population. This is due in large part to the fact that many Muslim immigrants are highly educated and hold higher paid technical positions rather than manual labor jobs. Furthermore, the children of American Muslim immigrants may be better able to synthesize the value systems of America and Islam than they are given credit for. Kaya (2007) notes how their US upbringing enables them to function as a “bridge” between the parent’s culture and America’s. Hasan (2000) argues that the values of “self-respect, an emphasis on family, and the importance of education” (p.12) are characteristic of both, and that both value systems can benefit from each other.

Even proponents of conflicted identity framing report encouraging findings. The work of Sirin and Fine (2007) suggests a much more positive integration outcome, especially for females. Although they experienced similar levels of perceived discrimination and anxiety, females were found to enjoy a greater ability to negotiate their identities:

Young Muslim women see and live in a much more fluid, intertwined world where Muslim and American are not two contradictory influences on their identity but are rather complementary currents... [they see] both of these worlds as equally important parts of their identity... feel empowered by choices... [they are] transnational...citizens of the world” (Sirin and Fine 2007:159-160).

The new generation of American Muslims is figuring out what being American Muslims means to *them*, and their agency in doing so should not be ignored. As Americans they are citizens of a relatively young yet idolized country, to which many people around the world look for leadership, and as Muslims they are adherents of a major world faith that traces its roots back

several millennia. In this position, precarious as it may be, American Muslims are poised to redefine Islam by combining the best aspects of the religion with the best of American freedoms and values (Hasan 2000).

The initial research question is simple enough, how do American Muslims negotiate the two seemingly very different sides of their identities? What does it mean to be both a Muslim and an American at the same time, especially in light of the events of 9/11? And looking to the future of this community, what does it mean to the Muslims who were born and raised here? As this brief review of the literature has hopefully demonstrated, the response given by academia to this question has been almost stark in its negativity. A sense of gloomy pessimism pervades this research and, I suspect, precedes it. The findings of these studies are possibly shaped by the taken for granted assumptions of what are surely well meaning researchers, which leads to another set of questions: How well do the lived experiences of American Muslims fit into the fundamentally conflicted framework described above? And, furthermore, does the use of such a framework help or hinder our attempts to develop an accurate and honest portrayal of this population?

This study aims to delve into the lives and experiences of American Muslims without the encumbrance of preconceived notions or assumptions. In pursuit of this objective, a schedule of interview questions has been devised focusing on four themes. Some questions deal with issues pertaining to self-presentation and master status; others deal with issues of cultural and national identity; still others focus on interpersonal relationships, including incidents of discrimination; the final interview question inquiries into the possible clash of values between American culture and Islam. The employment of these themes and their constituent questions grapple most directly with the central questions of this thesis.

# Chapter Two: Methods

## Research Questions

Originally conceived, the intent of this study was to better understand how American Muslims were able to negotiate the apparently contradictory sides of their identities. However, as noted, not only has this been done thoroughly, in most cases the findings were dejecting and seemed to present a very one-sided story. Much work remains to be done on the second and third generations, but the results and implications of such research cannot be well understood until it reflects a broader spectrum of this emerging population at different stages of their lifespans. Thus, the focus of this study shifted to a question of the fundamentally conflicted identity framing that encapsulates much of the previous research. Working from this new vantage point, the essential questions driving this research have become: Do American Muslims find the values of Islam and America to be incongruent? Given the existence of negative stereotyping and portrayals of conflicted identities, how do American Muslims perceive themselves and their place in American society? Do the experiences of these American Muslims fit into the “fundamentally conflicted identities” framework? Does the use of conflicted identity framework help or harm researcher attempts to understand American Muslims?

## Measurement

### *Sample frame*

The initial sample was drawn from American Muslims known by the researcher. Thereafter snowball sampling was utilized to gain more respondents. All respondents interviewed for this study were legal adults, whose ages ranged from 20 to 43. To be considered

for the study a subject simply had to meet two broad criteria: they must be *American citizens* and they must be *self-identifying Muslims*, born into Muslim families, whether practicing or not.

Respondents were not asked to provide proof of US citizenship or Muslim identity; rather they were taken at their word. Asking for documentation to prove they were a citizen may have conjured up negative associations and made the respondent uncomfortable and defensive. Likewise, any potential respondent that self-identified as Muslim was taken at their word.

American converts to Islam were not considered for this particular study with the understanding that as converts they were not raised in a “Muslim family”. Also, African Americans were not considered, as their experiences as American Muslims do not closely mirror those of the children of immigrants. Furthermore, the characterization and framing of American Muslims that occurs in the media and academic publications, and which is an important reference in this study, is rarely, if ever, extended to African American Muslims, whose unique experiences are beyond the scope of this study.

As the primary method of data gathering was in-depth interviews, practical considerations dictated a low number of respondents. A sample size of 23 was obtained, with 10 male (43%) and 13 (57%) female respondents. Sampling through the snowball technique was a constant endeavor throughout data collection to ensure an adequate response rate. The majority of respondents (74%) were of South Asian descent, no doubt a consequence of the sampling method. The high number of South Asians may be less confounding than it at first appears, as Houston is home to a great many Muslims from India, Pakistan and Bangladesh; making this sample more representative of Houston’s Muslim population than America’s in general (City of Houston 2010; US Census 2010). All respondents were American citizens, many of them 1<sup>st</sup>

generation immigrants (43%), though sometimes 2<sup>nd</sup> (22%) or 1.5 generation (35%). Even among the 1<sup>st</sup> generation respondents many had spent a substantial period of their life in the US.

### *Interview methods and themes*

Interviews were recorded with the respondent's consent and transcripts played a key role in data analysis. All respondents were given pseudonyms to protect their confidentiality. These pseudonyms were typically chosen by the respondent. Interviews lasted between 30 minutes to one hour. Interview questions allowed for the exploration of certain themes specific to the negotiation of identity amongst American Muslims, as well as the handling of the seemingly incongruous value systems that shape that identity.

Mary Waters' (2000) work on West Indian immigrants and their children provided the initial framework for the interview questions. Interview themes covered four broad categories: self-presentation and master status; assimilation and the American Muslim identity; interpersonal interactions and experiences of prejudice; and finally, the so-called clash of values between America and Islam.

### *Measurement instruments*

One set of interview questions was used to guide the discussion (See Appendix). Interview questions were not framed in a way that would purposefully illicit reports of discrimination; rather, questions were written to probe issues of identity and values, but not necessarily a conflicted identity. However, evidence of such conflicted identities was looked for in the analysis, and everything from brief mentions to long elaborations of troubled identity work were acknowledged and addressed in the analysis. The idea was to see if respondents

characterized or perceived themselves as conflicted without first being prompted to do so. In sum, my intention was to use open-ended, respondent guided interviews which were then open-coded for themes related to identity.

### *Special problems and solutions*

Problems with obtaining respondents, gathering data, garnering truthful, honest and open responses and objectively analyzing the findings were anticipated and accounted for as well as possible. Barzegar (2011) points out that research on Muslim groups is often stifled by the limited access granted researchers. As a white American male I anticipated my skin color (signifying a typical American, or typical white guy to respondents) to be a salient factor in respondent perceptions of me. This could easily mark me as an outsider, especially considering that some questions directly address their relationships with and perceptions of “typical Americans” (Selod 2011). Overcoming this perception and the influence it may have had took considerable effort. My hope was that this could be overcome by using snowball sampling, gathering potential respondents through a network of American Muslim friends and acquaintances. I communicated this concern to my contacts and encouraged them to vouch for, or, put in a good word for me; that is, to impress upon potential respondents the notion that I could be trusted. Early in each interview I made an effort to establish an initial sense of rapport and trust in an attempt to put them at ease.

Table 1 (See Appendix) is designed to provide a quick reference guide for the study’s respondents. Place of birth (POB) details which respondents are native born American citizens. Coupled with the columns featuring their age, and amount of time living in the US (T-US) along with time living outside the US (T-out) the reader is equipped with a more comprehensive

understanding than simply labeling them 1<sup>st</sup> generation, 1.5 generation, etc. The racial and ethnic (R/E) background of each respondent is also provided, with the majority (74%) categorized as South Asian (SA), denoting India, Pakistan and Bangladesh; several respondents (17%) were Arabs (Arab), with familial ties to Algeria, Syria and Egypt; further, one respondent was from Turkey (Turk) and one from Iran (Persian). The respondents' branch of Islam is provided purely for reference. The respondents' occupation (Occup) is meant to provide a loose indicator of SES. The religion category (Religy) attempts to apply a numerical value between one and five to each respondent's level of religious observation, with five representing the most practicing. Though a scale was provided and a simple framework established for conceptualizing religiosity, respondents often detailed widely differing levels of practice yet rated themselves similarly on the number scale. Therefore, numbers provided by respondents are highly subjective of their own interpretation and should be taken with a grain of salt. Visibility (Visy) refers to how readily a respondent's presentation of self reflected their Muslim status. Marital status (MS) is included as many respondents spoke of their spouses and children when formulating their answers. Integration (Int) is reflective of the level to which each respondent was assimilated into American culture. Finally, individual responses regarding the existence of an authentic American Muslim Identity (AMI) are provided.

# Chapter Three: Findings

## Presentation of Self in American Muslim Life

Goffman's (1973) self-presentation and impression management help researchers explain how social actors make a conscious effort to invoke a desired impression of themselves on those around them, especially one they suspect will be well received. Master status refers to the most salient social position that a person occupies. Though it is often reflective of one's occupation, master status may vary depending upon the situation. Further, this aspect of social identity is particularly significant because of its influence on the other roles an individual plays in their life (Johnson 2000). Because the status of 'Muslim' is clearly rather unconventional in America it can easily become the master status of American Muslims, whether they are particularly religious or not. For this reason I place great import on a respondent's presentation of self and visibility as a Muslim, as these are key indicators of how they wish to be perceived and known.

Several interview items sought to capture a respondent's presentation of self, master status, and visibility as a Muslim. Responses to these items were varied, but many stated they wanted to be recognized as Muslim, and many others dressed in such a way as to make it obvious. Respondents are arranged here in order of their visibility as members of the Muslim faith, from low to high. This determination was made through two avenues: their self-presentation at time of interview, and their answers to three questions directly related to self-presentation, two at the beginning and one toward the end, which were cross-referenced during analysis. It should be noted that visibility is not a zero sum category, but rather a continuum.

The purpose of this chapter and its arrangement is to introduce the respondents of this study and create impressions in the reader's mind that will facilitate their understanding of who

these people are and how they wish to be seen. Following each respondent's name in parenthesis are their age and general ethnic background: SA for South Asian, including Pakistani, Indian and Bengali; Arab for Arabian, including Algerian, Egyptian and Syrian; and Turk for Turkish. Again, this is provided to enable the reader with a clearer sense of who is speaking.

### *Low Visibility*

Twelve respondents (52%) are categorized as low visibility. These individuals are so categorized because their identity as Muslims is not obvious to the casual observer. Their presentation of self is free of markers indicating their religious identity.

Jasmine (20 Arab) is arguably the least conspicuous of all respondents. With a white American father and a very light-skinned Algerian mother, Jasmine finds that she can easily pass either way, "I don't look Arab at all...(but) the moment I put a scarf on people think I look completely Arab. It's an identity thing; I can switch identities whenever I want." Like most female respondents, Jasmine mentioned the hijab (head scarf) when discussing her presentation of self. The hijab can be a contentious issue, and many factors are involved in a woman's decision to cover or not. Jasmine's own attitude toward the scarf seemed to reflect these various, conflicting views, "I don't agree with the scarf, I don't think it's an obligation. I think it's highly recommended, I think we should." This statement is rather indicative of Jasmine's attitude toward her religion; she simultaneously reveres and criticizes certain aspects at her whim. The issue of the hijab is exemplary. In saying that she "doesn't agree with it" moments before stating that "we should", Jasmine seems to be alleviating her guilt over no longer wearing a head scarf while also giving voice to the social pressure coming from the Muslim community to cover.

For Latifah (36 Arab), a teacher who was born in Canada before moving to the US at age six, the choice to reveal or conceal herself as a Muslim was made by others. First, through misidentification by the people around her, and next by her father, who wanted to project a certain image of his family for relatives to see:

I was never identified as Egyptian; I was always identified as African-American, or Hispanic or a mix. My brother looks very African-American and he had the same issues as me growing up. My sister was always mistaken for Hispanic... any time that we have gone to visit (family in Egypt) my father has been very adamant that we look and behave a certain way, because that's what our family would expect. He wanted to maintain appearances. We were presenting a façade because that was the expectation.

Soft-spoken and thoughtful, Latifah's measured responses reveal that she and her siblings learned at an early age to be careful not to appear too American before their relatives in Egypt. As an adult Latifah has found a comfortable middle ground, valuing Islam and its place in her spiritual life, yet not self-presenting in such a way that may draw attention to the fact that she is a Muslim. "I don't use my religion as the primary point of contact between myself and others," she says, "I don't cover (my hair). I blend in, whereas if I were to cover I wouldn't."

Fadi (43 Arab) considers an outwardly religious self-presentation as something to be regarded with suspicion. Indeed, his own status as a Muslim is both a point of cultural reference and self-identification, yet also a minor irritation; something he feels is paid too much attention in modern life. Fadi does not present himself as a Muslim because he does not readily identify with Islam, or any religion for that matter. He explained:

Guys that grow their beard long, to me, I don't agree with it in a Muslim country, forget in America! When someone carries a big long beard, I'm like, 'Why do you care so much to let people know you're religious?' What you show on the outside is not necessarily reflecting the inside... Yeah, I'm Muslim, let's move on. I'm not a practicing Muslim.

For some, like Yahya (31 SA), the desire to hide one's Muslim identity was particularly strong. A self-described "chameleon", Yahya's family moved to the US when he was four, where they have lived ever since. Despite growing up in the US, harmonizing his American and

Muslim identities has been an unresolved challenge for Yahya, who often finds himself being pulled in different directions.

For me, my religion is a very internal thing. I don't go out of my way to distinguish myself from other Muslims, but at the same time I don't make an effort to advertise that I am one... It's not something I do to wear sheep's clothing, but if I'm at a mosque or an event and there are a lot of older generation Muslims, grandparents and what not, and you have Muslim friends there who you know to be very religious, I kind of turn that on a little more, and turn down regular me in real life.

Yahya is careful not to seem too religious around his non-Muslim colleagues, yet must also appear religious enough around the Muslim community, a balancing act he would rather do without. Having grown up in the US he is accustomed to American life and attitudes, yet as he explained, he is subjected to anti-acculturation pressure from Muslims who have grown up elsewhere, "They try really hard to portray themselves as Muslim on the outside... it's out of fear of letting go and losing their identity." Yahya's assertion that non-American Muslims living in the US are afraid of "losing their identity" upon moving here is not an uncommon one, as many immigrants rely on social networks and religion to act as a buffer against integration (Akresh 2013).

For Sheila (27 SA), the management of her American and Muslim identities is likewise complex. With a sort of effortless, 'coffee shop' cool demeanor about her, Sheila is refreshingly down to earth. Yet despite her easy-going, approachable personality, she often feels she is walking on egg shells when it comes to her status as a Muslim. "A lot of the people I know, like at work, don't know anyone else who's Muslim... Whenever I approach the fact that I'm Muslim, I do it very gently. It just seems like such a sensitive subject." She continued:

I've always struggled with saying that I'm an American or not... I feel like I have two very different sides, I'm one person with my friends, and then there is my family at home... For the most part I'm American, but I'm also Muslim, and I'm not really entirely certain what that means.

Mustafa (27 SA), a barista who was born and raised in the US, described his feeling of a "sense of duty" to self-identify as Muslim, to say "I am Pakistani, and I was raised in a Muslim

household and I'm here." I spoke with Mustafa at a coffee shop where he had until recently been employed. He had an easy, nonchalant air about him and a favorable rapport with staff and regulars alike. Instantly likable, Mustafa had no trouble opening up during the interview, although he was not always so candid: "In high school I was not forthcoming about identifying myself as Pakistani... there was a period where I would have preferred people not to know." Mustafa attributes this to the insecurity that all young people experience, and it is an insecurity that he seems devoid of as an adult, "I realized that if you are just secure in yourself, somehow people pick up on that." Today, he seems to relish his status as a second generation immigrant:

I would consider myself a very typical American in the sense that I'm an immigrant and I have all the opportunities the United States afforded me, and in a lot of ways that is the new face of the typical American, multi-cultural, multi-faceted.

For Lina (39 SA), the differing ways she presents herself have little to do with exhibiting or hiding her Muslim identity, and more to do with practical matters and interests. She states:

If I'm with my American friends I wouldn't remind them all the time that I'm a Muslim, and when I'm with my Muslim friends I talk differently because I have different topics to talk on. I correlate myself with the group of people I'm with at that time, but I definitely do not try to camouflage myself.

Raised in India, Lina came to the US as an adult upon getting married. She is friendly and outgoing, and like many immigrants has a very pro-American attitude. At the time of our interview Lina was wearing a distinctly Indian dress, but that style is not typical for her outside the house, especially post-9/11. "We were even told (by religious leaders) to wear Western clothes. I stopped wearing any kind of ethnic clothes even to go to the mosque." Conscious of the connotations associated with a Muslim identity, Lina and other members of the Ismaili sect of Islam to which she belongs were careful to alter their appearance.

Abbas (20 SA), a college student born and raised in the US, spoke at length of his struggles with fitting in as a younger person:

I guess when I was younger, especially after 9/11 and everything; I was only in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade when it happened. My parents specifically told me ‘try to keep it low right now’. There weren’t many Muslim people at my school. So at that time I was trying to fit in. The few people I hung around with knew I was Muslim. But I wouldn’t tell anyone else. [But now] it’s just natural, I don’t try to hide it.

It is perhaps important here to note that the challenges Abbas faced are not entirely different from those of other teenagers, Muslim or not. In fact, other respondents echoed many of these same ideas; the teenage years were especially difficult, but much of that is resolved by the time they have entered college. This seems to be due in part to their development as a person and also the presence of other Muslims as a support group. The university at which Abbas studies has a relatively high number of Muslim students, disburdening an openly Muslim presentation of self.

Some of the aforementioned respondents make a conscious decision not to appear Muslim, either because they are not particularly religious or because they dislike the negative connotations that accompany that status. Others are less interested in concealing their religion, but simply do not find it to be the most salient part of their identity.

### *Higher Visibility*

Eleven respondents (48%) are categorized as higher visibility. Their presentation of self often made their identity as Muslims obvious at first glance. This was most often accomplished through their manner of dress (ex. hijab for women). As noted, an individual’s presentation of self has important implications for their master status and overall identity, thus influencing their social lives and experiences.

Ahmed (23 SA), a student born in Pakistan who relocated to the US with his family as a small child, exhibits a comfortable blend of American and Muslim characteristics. “I try to maintain balance between both” he says, “I try to just stay the same throughout.” Ahmed has a

respectful demeanor and a very open, candid manner of speaking about himself and his faith. For the interview he was dressed in a t-shirt which clearly identified him as a Muslim, with “I (heart) Muhammad” in big bold letters. When I first met Ahmed he was wearing a shirt with “Islam” prominently written upon the back. When asked about displaying his religion so prominently he responded, “My intention is not to differentiate myself from others, but to inspire people to learn more about Islam.”

Talia (20 Arab) has had a considerably more difficult time managing the impressions she gives regarding herself. A student at the time of writing, Talia was born and raised in the US, and has a very American sense of humor and personal disposition. She is full of life and loves to laugh, yet as a young woman wearing hijab feels she has to work hard to “make people feel comfortable, instead of being scared.” As a child attending an Islamic school, Talia’s status as a member of a minority group was not readily apparent to her. “It wasn’t until after 9/11 that I started to be more aware...I started becoming more aware and I wanted to be white.” Talia noted that were it not for her head-covering, she could “probably pass as a white girl”, a claim with which I would readily agree. Her fair skin and American accent would serve her well as someone who does not want “people to associate me with something different.” Yet for Talia, as for many of the others, it is not that simple. Talia dresses in a way that easily identifies her as a Muslim, in part due to personal choice and in part due to community expectations. She stated that she feels it is important for her to dress modestly, yet also acknowledged that family members comment if her clothing does not meet their expectations of suitable Muslim dress.

As soft-spoken and friendly as she is, Khadija (34 Turk) is concerned with not appearing ‘scary’. A nurse turned school teacher, Khadija described the challenges she faces in presenting

herself in a way that meets her understanding of Islamic dress code, yet also feels appropriate to the students and teachers she works with every day.

Like most people you want to blend in and look like part of the majority. I have to dress professional, but at the same time stay covered up. Of course, I stand out, being covered up. Covering the hair and wearing long sleeves. Personally, I prefer pants over skirts because it helps me blend in more, or appear less scary, more professional...It's a challenge to present yourself...It's hard to be an American and a Muslim at the same time.

Fatma (36 SA) finds that Muslims like herself have a responsibility to present a wholesome image of Islam, "Meeting with other people and showing that we're just like everyone else, that's really important." She continued:

We're new, people don't know anything about us, it behooves us to make sure we are people of social justice, people who always support the right things, people who act good, who do good, who are good with our neighbors. And it's gonna get better, I really believe that.

A mother of three who was born and raised in Canada before getting married and moving to the US, Fatma is keenly aware of her social performances, as is her friend Maryam (36 SA), though they experience these performances in different contexts. Fatma explained that while in law school she found that she often had to "tone down" her Muslim side around her non-Muslim classmates, while Maryam reported having to "downplay" her religiosity around non-religious Muslims. Both spoke of the way wearing hijab influences the way others perceive them. Fatma stated:

I wear a headscarf, so when I went to get a job after law school I was a little nervous, 9/11 happened when I was in my last year of law school and I was really nervous about wearing a scarf and just kind of being a target.

Maryam, who only recently began wearing hijab, expanded on this subject:

If you are wearing a hijab, you are putting yourself out there, and there are so many negative views of the religion... When I first started wearing the scarf it was a conflict in itself. I didn't know what I was doing, I had no idea, how do you wrap this thing? I was so conscious of leaving the house with it, like, how do I look?

The respondents presented here are all much more overt in their presentation of themselves as Muslims. A fact demonstrated especially by their clothing but also their speech

and responses to interview questions. Some find this to be a genuine expression of who they are as a person, while others mentioned the role of familial and community expectations. Also significant is the consideration they put into finding an appropriate middle ground from which they can express their religiosity while not also delineating themselves too much from non-Muslim Americans, or as Khadija put it, not to appear ‘scary’.

Only 13 (57%) of the study’s 23 respondents were mentioned in this section. The reason being that they offered very little of significance on the questions related specifically to self-presentation. This may be due to the uncomfortable nature of the questions for some, which is itself somewhat suggestive that they are keen on carefully managing the way they are perceived. The ten (43%) not represented above did in fact provide meaningful contributions to the study and are given their due time in subsequent chapters.

These ten are listed here in order of their visibility, once again from low to high, albeit more subjectively from the author’s point of view: Aisha, Emma, Ron, and Ali are the least visible, sometimes mistaken for Hispanics or even Indian Hindus. Muhammad, Soroush and Omar are more visible, in that they wear short beards with trimmed mustaches (popular amongst Muslim men). Finally, Natasha, Nora and Nuriya all observe the hijab, making them highly visible as Muslims.

### *Discussion*

Some of the less visible respondents have the option of hiding their identity as Muslims, and several either chose to do so or expressed a similar desire, especially post 9/11. People have a tendency to de-emphasize certain aspects of their identity depending on their environment (LeBoeuf *et al.* 2010; Moore 2011). Several respondents noted having more problems with

presenting as Muslim in their youth, problems which had mostly resolved as they entered adulthood. Studies on American Muslim youth have found that they are particularly vulnerable to such concerns (Ajrouch 2004; Sirin and Fine 2007).

Others noted how community and family expectations influenced their presentation of self, especially regarding their manner of dress. Lina's admission of amending her self-presentation is contrasted by her initial remarks on the topic in which she insisted that she had never changed the way she looked or behaved, did not know anyone who did so, and further, could not fathom why anyone would. Her later acknowledgment of consciously self-presenting as 'less Muslim' was in some ways mitigated by the fact that it was enjoined on her and the greater Ismaili community by religious leaders. This example and others presented above are evidence of how identities are often changed and adapted to meet the situation (Ajrouch 2004; LeBoeuf *et al* 2010).

Women in particular experienced pressure to cover their bodies, which is common amongst American Muslim communities (Read and Bartkowski 2000). Of the women interviewed for this study, seven cover their hair, and three of them mentioned their concern about appearing 'scary' to non-Muslims, a finding which invokes both Goffman's (1973) *impression management* and Cooley's *looking-glass self* (Jacobs 2006). All seven of the women covering their hair expressed their keen awareness of how their self-presentation is viewed by others. Indeed, the head scarf worn by these women is a well-known visible identifier of Muslim status (Selod 2011).

In part by the particulars of their ethnic and racial background, in part due to the community and familial expectations confronting them, and in part due to their own choice to

adopt a lower or higher visibility as Muslims, respondents established 'Islam' as a salient part of their identity to varying degrees (Moore 2011).

Perhaps the most relevant of findings for this section is the lack of data provided by respondents. Though three interview questions were used to inquire specifically about this theme, many respondents were reticent and at times defensive, yielding fewer useful responses than in other sections. This in itself may be revealing, though I would caution against reading too much into this finding, as it may simply be a consequence of the confessional nature of the questions coupled with the interviewer's novice technique. Future studies of this nature would do well to take care in the asking of questions related to self-presentation so as not to put respondents in a defensive frame of mind. In particular, questions of this nature should come later in the interview after a more pronounced rapport has been established.

### **In Search of an American Muslim Identity**

When asked about their experiences of assimilation and identity formation, those that immigrated later in life often felt their identity was tied to their homeland. Emma and Maryam admitted that though they were technically American citizens, they did not feel particularly so. The opposite held true when they spoke of their children, who they insist must be raised thinking of themselves as American. Others expressed a feeling of being in-between two worlds; American, but not quite. Nora and her sister Nuriya have a complicated ethnic identity; their parents are from India and Pakistan, though they spent much of their lives in Dubai. Both have lived in the US at least ten years, yet they still hesitate to identify as specifically American. Their experience is not uncommon. Even for those born or at least raised in the US, their sense of national, ethnic, and religious identity was often complex and conjoined to that of their parents'.

For this discussion of assimilation and identity, respondents have been placed into one of three categories: *latecomers*, those who immigrated to the US as adults or young adults, at a point where their sense of identity was likely to be permanently and primarily tied to their sending country; *in-betweens*, those who described themselves as being American but not wholly committed to that identity; finally, there are the *well-integrated*, these individuals were typically born in the US, or at least lived here during their most formative years. Though age of first entry to the US is generally a good indicator of which category a respondent will fall into, there are exceptions. Below I offer their thoughts on what it means to be an American and a Muslim at the same time, with special emphasis on the degree to which Muslims should attempt to assimilate into American culture and the implications this has for their religious and ethnic identities.

### *Latecomers*

Latecomers are primarily 1<sup>st</sup> generation immigrants, most having come to the US as adults. Three respondents (13%) clearly fit into this category, as their sense of identity remained closely linked to their sending country.

Having come to the US at 27, Emma (42 SA) is firmly rooted in the cultural and national identity of her sending country, though she is well aware that her two children do not fully share her cultural heritage:

I'm a Pakistani Muslim, my identity is the same, it is what it is. Our kids are growing up here, it is their country now, my kids were born here, you have to go according to the socializing. They have their own identity, you have to manage both (identities).

Lina (39 SA) was 26 when she first moved to the US. Having decided years earlier that she wanted to settle in the West, when an Indian suitor with US citizenship came to propose, marriage and immigration was an easy decision. Lina has a very pro-American attitude, and is keen on making sure her two children are comfortably assimilated, yet with a strong sense of

their Indian roots. “We need to adapt to the structure of living of the country we are in at that time” she explained. A member of the Ismaili sect of Islam, Lina is able to retain her ethnic and religious identity whilst accommodating to life in suburban America.

Born in Pakistan and raised in London, Maryam (36 SA) came to the US at the age of twenty-one. Though she holds American citizenship, Maryam most readily identifies herself as British. “When my friend first mentioned about the study I was like ‘American Muslim? Really? That’s what I am?’” Her surprise at being considered an American Muslim is well-explained by her comments on what it means to hold such an identity:

You’re part of a country, you’re part of something greater, and the only way you can benefit from it is to be who you are but integrate well with others. I would like to teach my kids that, I don’t want them to grow up in a bubble so they don’t know how to interact with the non-Muslim kids, they need to be able to, and the same with grownups. I guess we’re structuring this identity so that they can have a smoother path into it.

Though she is reluctant to apply the label to herself, “It’s gonna take another twelve years living in this country”, Maryam clearly recognizes that her children are American Muslims, and that it is important for her as a parent to guide them to “harmonize the two ends... so [they] don’t feel so alienated.” This is particularly important to her, as she finds it problematic when Muslims fail to achieve such a balance in their personal and social lives:

You have a group that is very into the religion and another group that is a complete polar opposite, they’re Muslims but they will do everything to not fall into that category, they want to be more westernized, wear more Western clothes.

One of the more interesting aspects of latecomers is that since they feel only a very weak connection to American life and culture there is consequently no issue of conflict with their religious self. Latecomers are in America but not of it, and their loose affiliation with American identity presents them with no obstacle and holds scant implications for their overall identity.

### *In-betweens*

The second category presented here are the in-betweens, which constituted eight (35%) of the 23 respondents. In-betweens have typically been in the US for a considerable amount of their lives, though there is much diversity between them. The overriding characteristic of this group is that they all consider themselves to be Americans, but also are not wholly integrated into that role.

Soroush (27 Persian) was born in the US, where he lived until the age of four. His parents took him to their home country of Iran where he remained until the age of seventeen. Since returning to the place of his birth ten years ago, Soroush has been very selective in his approach to assimilation:

How much should a Muslim adapt to American things? As much as he thinks is valuable and makes him a better person... I have more things I've adopted from this culture than I've carried over from Iran. In that sense I think I'm more American... I feel when I'm going to Iran I'm a tourist, when I come back to Houston, I feel like I'm back home.

Soroush, a rather astute student of Law and a “generally very confused guy”, consistently challenged both the interview questions and the concepts behind them. He disagreed with the notion of American Muslim as a shared religious or cultural identity:

Somehow, the way you're phrasing it, I'm not too comfortable. I don't like the labeling... It's not just like that you have become American Muslim, whatever that is, that you have entered a club that everybody can relate to each other and everybody welcomes each other... I really don't see it that way.

The way she discusses the assimilation process as natural and inevitable, one would think Khadija (34 Turk) sees little consequence to her Turkish identity in becoming an American. However, other than an American born husband and a noticeable southern twang to her speech, there is nothing distinctly American about Khadija. Despite her resistance to assimilation, she recognizes that it is a foregone conclusion for her son, who speaks no Turkish and shies away when it is spoken to him.

Khadija first came to the US to pursue an education, but quit school and started working after her father passed away. During the interview, she spoke less of the desirability of assimilation and more of its inevitability:

If you go outside and volunteer, work, whatever, go to school, then you are gonna see people, you're gonna hear people and you're gonna adapt more quickly. America is an immigration country, everybody that immigrates brings something here and everything mixes up. It doesn't mean that they are going to lose their identity, it stays there. They don't lose their identity, they live it.

What makes her comments so interesting is that, on first sight, Khadija is virtually indistinguishable from the more conservative Muslims of her native Turkey. In fact, she is more traditional in her dress and attitudes now than she was 14 years ago when she first immigrated. Donning the headscarf and accompanying body length jacket she wore for our interview is a relatively new habit for her, giving the impression that she is making a concerted effort to distinguish herself from others.

Nuriya (21 SA) grew up in Dubai before moving to the US in the seventh grade. The challenges of acculturation were buffered by the fact that though her parents are from Pakistan, she herself never lived there. Like her older sister Nora, Nuriya has never felt particularly tied to the culture of Pakistan, Dubai, or the US. For them, religion has always taken precedence, "When someone moves they can't be exactly who they were before. I do want to be Muslim and known as a Muslim, not anything else, and I think living in America allows me to do that."

For Nuriya, the American Muslim identity is a composite of various influences, both cultural and religious, formed through a deliberate attempt at achieving some semblance of balance. This unique identity exists in-between these cultural, national and religious influences:

I think that's what makes it shared, the fact that it's so different, the fact that everybody's kind of going through the same thing, where they can't pick between an identity, they can't pick their parent's culture and they can't pick American culture completely, so they're kind of stuck in between, and they try to do both things, and I think that's what makes an American Muslim.

Aisha (22 SA) came to the US at the age of 12. Ten years on she has found it easy to assimilate into American life, despite the doubts harbored by her parents:

I love America, I love every single thing about it, but there are a few things like how people look at Muslims that I don't like. You can adapt to America completely but you have to have some limits to it. A Muslim can be an American. I'm proud to be an American because it gives you more freedom... Sometimes my parents are like, "If we hadn't come here then you would be wearing hijab"... I'm going to stay here in America. I can't stay in Pakistan more than two months.

Though Aisha finds a great deal to like about America, it is clear from speaking with her that she has certain reservations about fully assimilating, reservations that become clear when asked about the "limits" a Muslim should have when adapting. In her response, Aisha drew on images of the decadent, lascivious behavior that she and other in-betweens sometimes associate with American lifestyles. These criticisms of 'typical American lifestyles' are dealt with in the following chapter.

Muhammad (26 SA) is an exception to the age at time of entry model of assimilation described above. Born and raised in the US to parents of Indian descent, Muhammad is very conservative. His views on assimilation and identity seemed to suggest a hesitancy to identify too strongly with the country he calls home:

In regards to an American work ethic, that's something a Muslim should aspire to. In regards to living a very hedonistic lifestyle... a Muslim has to refer back to the Quran and the traditions of the Prophet and base it on those rather than what your own desires want.

Like Aisha before him, Muhammad calls upon notions of the decadent American, heedlessly following their own desires. In addition, Muhammad exhibited a general frustration with the current state of the American Muslim community. A frustration tempered with hope for the future:

One of the biggest debates in America among Muslims is: are you an American Muslim or are you a Muslim American, which is kind of asinine. I mean, do you call an Egyptian Muslim a Muslim Egyptian or an Egyptian Muslim? It's always American Muslim, right? People are coming from all over the world and settling here, they don't know where their loyalties lie, where their identities lie. I think with my generation

(2<sup>nd</sup>) and the following generations that are strictly American, you'll see a much more American Muslim identity.

Muhammad spoke disparagingly of the insistence of some Muslims in the US that they refer to themselves as “Muslim Americans” rather than “American Muslims”, a distinction that, as Muhammad points out, is not applied to Egyptian or any other Muslims. In brief, the argument he is referring to is that some in the Muslim community prefer to say “Muslim American”, ostensibly to ensure that other Muslims know they are Muslim first and foremost; American second. In this manner the issue is constructed as a matter of one's loyalties and allegiances (Galloway 2011).

Though he claimed to have found the interview questions hard, Yahya (31 SA) articulated his thoughts on each subject quite well, and it was clear he had given these topics careful consideration. Yahya spent much of his youth moving from place to place, making it difficult for him to settle in. Now a graduate student in a challenging field, Yahya offered his nuanced understanding of Muslims' efforts to assimilate, or not, as the case may be:

I think a lot of Muslims my age, first and second generation, spend a lot of time trying to answer that question. Being an American is not just one thing, a lot of elements make up ‘American’. So there's a lot of disconnect, because they're trying to fit into this mold that they think exists, but they're not actually filling it ever.

When questioned more directly about his identity as an American Muslim:

I think Muslim Americans are a brand new demographic. It's kind of like our spotlight now. We're coming out into American society as an actual minority group. It's all kind of coalescing into what might eventually be considered ‘American Muslim’, but right now it's a gigantic mess of super fanatical people and, totally on the opposite spectrum, very liberal people. It's a little confusing now.

Speaking with Jasmine (20 Arab), it was often difficult to discern whether she found American life to be incompatible with Islam, or with Arab culture. She spoke often of the difference between Arab culture and “real Islam”, yet just as often she conflated the two. This may have been befitting, as she often gave very contradictory statements during the interview:

In the West, you have a choice to live however you want, so I don't think Muslims should overly try to integrate themselves into a culture. We have to always remember who we are, and we have to pull back and stick to our roots... Sometimes if a person is so affected by what their parents have tried to teach them, and they feel stuck, sometimes they do want to have a completely American persona in which they reject being Muslim. You lose a lot of yourself if you don't go back to your roots, your religion.

The notion that Muslims in America have a greater degree of freedom and choice as to how they would like to live their lives came up with many of the respondents. These freedoms were often acknowledged as a means by which a person can live a better life, yet just as often they were regarded as potentially threatening in that they open the door to bad habits and influences they would have been protected from had they been living elsewhere. Jasmine's above response seems to indicate both. Furthermore, her statements regarding the degree to which Muslims like herself should attempt to assimilate or "stick to our roots" are illustrative of the conflict she experiences in trying to be both an American and Muslim at the same time, while not feeling wholly bound to one or the other.

Jasmine's father was an American citizen of Scottish and German descent, and a convert to Islam; her mother was Algerian. She spent half her life living in Algeria before immigrating to the US with her mom. Now, ten years on she feels neither truly American nor Algerian, and finds it difficult to relate with others in her predicament. In her previous statement Jasmine talked about holding on to one's roots, here she speaks disparagingly of those who hold on too tightly:

There are others who went through this before us and are now married and they are parents and they were so tightly bound they are exactly like their parents, even though they are Americans. They have the same 'back home mindset' ... It's a constant battle to find an in-between [the American and Islamic halves] but some people just choose either/or. It's an everyday struggle, an every second struggle.

Nevertheless, Jasmine does envisage a kind of shared American Muslim identity, "Muslims are so tightly bound, we're all about being united... I think American Muslims are stronger than most Muslims out in the world."

Fadi (43 Arab) is hard to categorize. Having come to the US at the age of 18, he would most readily be a latecomer, yet meeting and talking with him one is struck by how very Americanized he is. It is tempting to include him in the well-integrated category but for his own words which demonstrate that though he has made every effort to assimilate, it is an impossible task, “This is the life of an immigrant, you never leave the culture you came from 100% and you never assimilate 100%. You’re on your own plane somewhere.”

Though his cultural identity is somewhat ambiguous, his national and religious identities are much less so: Fadi is an American, “I’ve made the decision, I’m living in this country and I’m gonna die in this country”, and he is decidedly non-religious, “religion to me has become a very, very non-important thing.” For him, being Muslim is simply a byproduct of being Middle Eastern; a religious heritage that he is not ashamed of yet prefers to distance himself from:

I don’t necessarily downplay my Muslim side, for me it’s never been a problem because it’s never been a very significant part of my personality... I do downplay it, because it’s not what defines me, I’m not a big religious person, it’s more culture, not religion.

Throughout the interview his criticism of religion and religious people became more and more pronounced, yet he also acknowledged his connection to Islam and the important role he envisions for it as a means of conveying his cultural heritage to his children. This becomes clear from Fadi’s discussion of his wife’s conversion to Islam:

When we first started dating I said ‘You don’t have to convert, I don’t really care, but you do have to learn about it, because the children will be connected to that, and if they have a question or something I don’t want you to be completely clueless and not engage with them to the point where I feel like I’m a stranger in the family’... [after her conversion] She started being more Muslim than I cared to be. And after a while she adjusted, so we’re ‘Muslim lite’... [My kids] have never been to a mosque, I hardly ever take them cause I don’t go. It’s more of a cultural thing than a religious thing, because I don’t want them to be a stranger to my culture that one day I feel like these kids have nothing from me.

As the above quote makes clear, religion is only useful to Fadi to the extent that it preserves and transmits culture. Regarding assimilation into the American way of life, Fadi could not be more in favor. He referred repeatedly to the importance of assimilation into American culture,

and especially of language skills. He insists that Muslims can and should become a part of American life, and in fact, as he sees it, they already have:

We have organic, homegrown, 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> generation Muslims in the US, people that literally cannot identify with anything other than the culture they live in, they just happen to have that religion...

It must be remembered that for Fadi, the religious aspects of a Muslim identity are incidental. He believes religion should play a much smaller role in modern, everyday life. Therefore, his willingness to embrace American life whole-heartedly, as he seems to, is not necessarily evidence of a meaningful harmony between American culture and Islam, but rather American culture and the few remnants of secular Syrian society that he chooses to hold onto.

In-betweens provide an example of Portes and Rumbaudt's (2001) selective acculturation, carefully negotiating themselves into those aspects of American culture that they find advantageous and leaving behind the rest. Even still, the reasons for this segmented assimilation vary within this group; some prefer to hold on to important parts of their sending country's cultural heritage, such as manners of dress and ways of thinking. Others make a more conscious decision to reject certain aspects of American life that they find decadent or offensive. And still others seemed unsure of exactly who they were in terms of their identity, unable (or perhaps unwilling) to lay a firm claim to being an American or a Muslim.

### *Well- integrated*

Clearly the largest category, 11 respondents (48%) are categorized as well-integrated. There exists a great deal of variety amongst respondents in this category, but they hold several things in common. In general, they identify first and foremost as American, have made America their permanent home with no intention of relocating elsewhere, and have excellent English language skills. Furthermore, and more subjectively from the author's point of view, they exhibit

‘American’ traits and characteristics that the other respondents do not, such as sense of humor and personal affect.

Self-effacing and shy, yet straightforward in his replies, Ahmed (23 SA) was one of the first respondents interviewed for this study. Like many Muslims in the West, he is acutely aware of not only his minority status, but more so the fact that he is a representative of Islam in a country where it is largely misunderstood and maligned. This is not to say that his answers were contrived or disingenuous, but rather careful and measured. When asked about growing up Muslim in America, Ahmed had this to say:

I’ve grown up here, and in that sense I don’t find myself as an outsider because I’m in tune with the culture here. Maybe if I went back to Pakistan I might feel that I’m a bit out of the culture.

Hopeful for the future, Ahmed sees a time when the second and third generational descendants of today’s Muslim immigrants will find their place in the tapestry of American culture. And rather than weakening or diminishing in faith, American Muslims will find a revitalized Islam, free of the “cultural baggage” of the old world and infused with the best of American culture:

We have this new identity forming of people learning how to adapt to America. Their children are speaking English, and it isn’t that everyone has dropped their faith; people are realizing that Islam is something universal and we are dropping some of the cultural baggage... As a Muslim we would align ourselves with whoever is promoting those good aspects of American culture.

One of the more encouraging ideas related by Ahmed and others is the way they contextualize the struggles and conflicts that Muslims in America face as part of the larger narrative of American history. These will be dealt with in more detail in the following chapter, yet Ahmed’s comments on the subject go a long way toward demonstrating his outlook on life as an American Muslim:

I guess it is just a part of being initiated into America, there are some struggles that American Muslims will have to go through. Catholics, Jewish people, Japanese, everybody has faced this prejudice and now American Muslims are up next.

Ali (41 SA) is an exception to the integration framework used to categorize respondents. Indian by birth, Ali did not immigrate until he was 18, and even then he claims he had little interest in settling in the US. Though technically a latecomer, Ali really belongs in the well-integrated category. “America is my country” he insisted, “I would pick up arms in defense of America. When I pledged allegiance to America I took that oath very seriously.” A financial advisor at a reputable bank, Ali comes across as accomplished yet humble. He is smartly dressed and has a warm, friendly charisma about him. His accent is very American and he knows it, “I sound very American on the phone, unless you see me you can’t tell.”

Ali gave differing answers to the question of an American Muslim identity, first challenging the idea and later affirming it. Where Soroush drew a distinction between a national and religious identity, Ali discussed a difference between cultures, “This notion of a single, unanimous Muslim world acting and working like one and having a unique, singular identity is a huge fallacy, all of us are culturally very different.” For Ali, there is no ‘Muslim’ identity; nevertheless, he did speak in favor of the existence of an American Muslim one. For him, American Muslim refers to a blend of values, an “amalgam of American conservatism and Muslim conservatism.” This blend is clearly evident in Ali himself, and in his sister-in-law Lina, which may explain why they have had so little trouble managing their American and Muslim identities:

My family is very adaptable. We fit into wherever we go... We should always do that, we should adapt to whatever are the best customs of the new world, but never give up on our original identity. Over time it becomes a mish-mash. It’s all a matter of taking what’s best in the culture.

Mustafa (26 SA) finds the possibility of culture loss through assimilation to be a “non-issue”. A barista by trade, the personable Mustafa is used to rubbing elbows with typical,

everyday Americans. He asserts that immigrants do not have to sacrifice anything of themselves to assimilate, though he did not always feel this way:

I felt like I didn't identify with a lot of young Pakistanis my age. I thought maybe it was uncool to be Pakistani, and I think post 9/11 I started to feel like I should identify myself as a Pakistani Muslim American kid... [now] I feel like I have the best of both worlds. I got to be this young American kid, but I was also really bound to my (Pakistani) culture.

However, Mustafa is less optimistic about the possibility of an emerging American Muslim identity. Though many respondents answered in the affirmative, Mustafa was cautious about accepting the notion:

Maybe 20-30 years' time there might be a more defined American Muslim identity. It's developing, but I don't see it ever being one unified identity of American Muslims.

One possible explanation of Mustafa's reluctance may be his general disinterest in religion. Most of the more religious respondents affirmed that there was indeed a burgeoning sense of identity that they shared with other Muslims in the US. Whereas the less religious, like Mustafa, doubted the day would come when American Muslims really felt like one distinct community.

When discussing the possibility of a future spouse, Mustafa, like Fadi, argues that religion is not so important to him:

She could be from Pakistan or the States, but someone who at least understands the culture and is willing to stress the importance of it in the household. To me, I think it's more important that my kids have the culture than the religion.

Mustafa's comments must be understood within the context of his conceptualization of Pakistani culture, which he argues is inseparable from Islam. Thus, although Mustafa claims religion is currently of little importance in his life, it is clear that Islam has played an important role in his upbringing and in the upbringing he envisions for his children.

Having lived in America since she was a young child, and Canada before that, Latifah (36 Arab) has little connection to her Egyptian ancestry. She recalls her parent's attempts to accustom her and her siblings to the life they themselves and been raised in:

We joined the Egyptian American Society and then later a more conservative Islamic group. The Egyptian group was too superficial and the Islamic group was too rigid. I didn't feel comfortable in either group.

Her view of American culture is hardly more favorable, "It's all about being like everybody else," she says, "keeping up with the Jones', and looking right, but then hiding family secrets like alcoholism and abuse." This is not to say that Latifah thinks Muslims should shrink away from American life, rather, "A Muslim should be part of the collaborative group, blend in with society, but with a sort of measuring stick or ceiling of some sort." This attitude is not unlike that expressed by many other respondents, a view that Muslims can take that which is good in American culture, but leave behind that which may conflict with Islamic principles.

What is different about Latifah is that her comments demonstrate her awareness that Egyptian society in particular and so-called Muslim societies in general often fall short of these very same principles. Immigrants often have the tendency to romanticize the country they left behind, but as a second generation immigrant to the West, Latifah is firmly rooted in her American identity. This fact is evidenced by her view of the American Muslim identity, which she conceptualizes as almost a form of rebellion:

There are so many freedoms here than most Muslim countries that I think there is a huge split, something happens between the immigrants who come and the children who are raised here. So I think the American Muslim identity has to do with breaking from family lineage restraints, from country of origin, and creating a new society.

Though she has only lived in the US for eight years, Natasha (22 SA) affirms that she is "really happy to be an American. I feel like I *do* have an American identity." Born in Saudi Arabia to parents from Pakistan, Natasha has actually had American citizenship since birth. Her father worked as an engineer for a prominent oil company in Saudi, resulting in her being raised

in a housing encampment for the company's employees, who come from a variety of countries.

“Even though I was born in Saudi Arabia and lived there for 14 years I really don't identify myself as Saudi at all” she says, “I identify myself more as American.”

A student of psychology, Natasha took particular interest in the study, and provided a thorough explanation of her thoughts on the existence of an American Muslim identity:

It is there, just as much as an American Christian or American Jewish identity. I feel like you can define yourself as both, you can separate them too. I have no problem calling myself American without adding Muslim as well. I don't think it's conflicting in any nature. There are a lot of Muslim Americans who have a problem with identity. I don't see that (my identity) as a problem, but some others, because they were born here especially, they've had that problem growing up.

In Natasha's view, conflicts between one's American and Muslim identities would be particularly acute for the second and third generations. This may be explained by considering first the difficulties that many people experience in adolescence, compounded by the stigma of belonging to American's most hated religion.

Sheila (27 SA) has a friendly, charismatic personality that alternates between being youthful and exuberant one moment and mature and reserved the next. Currently employed in retail, Sheila hopes to begin a career as an English teacher in the near future. She spoke first of her own youth and experiences in school:

When I was in middle school, maybe 12, I kind of wanted to feel a little more American. I went to a private Catholic school and I was one of the only Pakistanis... When I was in college, my first two years I wanted to experience it and I wanted to have a sense of belonging, and it seemed like drinking was a big part of the culture and I wanted to do that... Sometimes you just feel like you wanna belong to the dominant culture.

Having lived in the US since the age of one, Sheila is essentially second generation. Our interview revealed her mother's concern about how Sheila and her siblings would turn out, far removed from Pakistani culture, and the disconnect she experienced between the cultural upbringing that her parents wished for her and what she was exposed to growing up in America.

For Sheila, assimilation is inevitable, “you can try to fight it but if you watch TV, if you communicate or socialize with anyone it’s just gonna attach itself to you.”

Though categorized here as well-integrated, Sheila exhibits some characteristics of an in-between. These are evident from her remarks, in which she draws a line between second generation American Muslims and both Muslims in general and other Americans:

I think there is a certain understanding that we have of each other that other people don’t have. Certain things that we have gone through just growing up, and especially after what happened on September 11<sup>th</sup>, certain things just changed a lot. There’s a certain sense of solidarity among us. There is a certain sense of an American Muslim identity... That’s kind of how Mustafa and I are connected. We understand that we come from certain backgrounds, and religion, and so we understand each other more than someone who is Muslim but in a different country, or someone who is just completely American.

Canadian born and raised, Fatma (36 SA) feels closer to Western culture than that of her parent’s native Pakistan. She moved to the US at 21, and has had little trouble blending in, “I think it helps when you don’t have an accent” she said, echoing the opinion of many respondents, “When you have an American accent it seems to put people at ease. Once I start speaking I feel like a lot of those misconceptions go away.” Fatma spoke at length about her children’s assimilation and her own efforts to actively foster their development of a healthy American Muslim identity:

We have this big debate, me and my husband, about should we send them to an Islamic school or should we send them to a regular public school to make sure they’re integrated into regular society because they eventually will have to go into regular society. We try to mitigate the isolation they get, cause they’re only surrounded by Muslims. [What] we’ve done is we’ve tried to put them in extra-curricular activities that would take them outside of their group.

Fatma recognizes the challenges that she and others like her face, and is keenly aware of the prejudicial attitudes and ideas bandied about regarding members of her faith. However, not only is she hopeful that things will improve as time goes by, she is actively working to make it so:

I’m really gung-ho about us forming a Muslim American identity, I’m actually on the board of my kids’ school, and that’s part of our mission statement. How do we have these kids grow up to be strong American

Muslims?.. I think we are going through growing pains and that it kind of sucks right now, but we're having to deal with this cause there is this idea of the 'otherness' with us and a lot of people are afraid of us and we have to make more of an effort to be part of everyday American life. So, I think it's something that we're all struggling with and trying to figure out.

Though he did not come to the US until a legal adult, Omar (41 SA) has since begun to think of himself as American:

I am who I am and I'm proud to be a Muslim American. I've lived in this country for so many years, this is my home, and hence, I'm an American. This country has offered me a citizenship and a safe place to live; I think we have something to offer back.

Omar held a favorable view of assimilation, yet viewed the American Muslim identity in a manner very different than most. Rather than something which organically develops on its own, he found it artificial and contrived. For Omar and his wife Maryam, an American Muslim identity is a manufactured one, dreamed up by Muslim immigrants who fear losing their children to America's potentially 'corrupting' influence:

That's why this identity issue is coming up, because they see their kids going into this area... They're losing their children; either they're going out on dates, getting married to other religions, or people going outside the boundaries of Islam. And now they're like, 'we need to have an American Muslim identity'.

Omar's disdain for the concept of an American Muslim identity should not be misunderstood as a rejection of American culture and life, but rather an affirmation that Muslims in the US do not *have to* change themselves to integrate successfully. The way he sees it, American Muslim is a concept people have developed only recently, and in direct response to their fears of assimilation. Whereas many respondents conceptualize the identity as an authentic, homegrown and natural consequence of the acculturation process, Omar finds it pedantic and forced. Envisioning American Muslim as a sort of alternative identity that people use to shrink away from the challenges presented by integrating into American society, Omar offered this thought:

You need to be balanced, you need to look at the religion, you need to look at the history, you need to learn from that... I need my kids to have that confidence, they were born here, this is their home, they need to

face challenges and address issues... [For example:] If someone prevents me from praying I'll leave that job and go somewhere else, not that they won't get a lawsuit from me, they'll definitely see a lawsuit. (laughter) I will sue their ass!

Though still a young man, Abbas (20 SA) exudes a maturity beyond his years. Born and raised in the US, he feels himself “culturally balanced” between the American lifestyle around him and that of his parent’s native Pakistan, “It’s kind of like a buffet, you have to pick and choose.” He mentioned the freedoms that America provides, in particular those for women, which is interesting because though many respondents had brought up freedom as an important and favorable quality of American culture, none had mentioned greater freedoms for women specifically. When asked to what extent his fellow Muslims should integrate into American culture, Abbas had this to say:

People say, like Islamic speakers, I’ve heard them say ‘Do not integrate yourselves into America’, but I’ve also read that wherever you go as a Muslim you should bring positive impacts, you shouldn’t be just another person in the crowd. I know a lot of Muslims just try to stay back and not do anything, but we have to integrate into society.

In contrast to the fear of American exposure that Omar found irritatingly common amongst Muslim immigrants, Abbas finds this to be ultimately beneficial, “Growing up here you see a lot of things, like especially when you’re young” he said, in reference to advertising and television programs promoting lifestyles and behaviors unwelcome amongst conservative Muslims, “you’re exposed to more things, which you could say gives you a chance to have more control over yourself.” Though he finds some of the behaviors promoted in such media to be contrary to Islamic principles, he also feels the challenge of turning them down to be a chance for personal and spiritual growth.

Ron (42 SA) is perhaps the most well-integrated of all the respondents. Having lived in the US since he was a young child, Ron sees assimilation as necessary and beneficial, and seems to have little trouble negotiating both his American and Muslim identities, “I’ve done it my

whole life, so there's never been a choice to make. It's very natural for me to do the things I do."

Yet even he must sometimes wrestle with labels, "I consider myself an American Muslim; some days a Muslim American, and some days an American Muslim." At times measured in his responses, Ron provided a thorough description of how assimilated a Muslim should strive to be:

They should make every other effort to be like Americans, or like the people they are living with... Just the natural things anybody would do to become part of society. Whatever that takes, dress that way, talk that way, raise your kids that way. When you are out and around wear Western clothes, not Eastern... Just become like the people around you.

Though Ron's comments may at first seem unqualified, "whatever that takes", they should not be misunderstood. Placed within the context of his discussion it is clear that Ron does see limits as to how a Muslim should behave. He provided a lengthy explanation of how he avoids drinking while on business trips, and frequently mentioned a Muslim's obligation to the 'pillars of Islam', most notably the five times daily prayer. What is different about Ron is that he does not associate drinking alcohol and other un-Islamic behaviors with American life. This is significant because although none of the interview questions mentioned alcohol, many, many respondents brought it up and associated its use with the 'typical American'. In some cases they also acknowledged its presence and use in their sending country, yet somehow found it both more ubiquitous and accepted in America.

Despite being comfortable in his skin as an American, when it came time to start a family, Ron found a young woman from outside the US. Nora (33 SA), his wife of thirteen years, is not particularly American. In fact, she insists that she is so out of tune with American culture that she found many of the interview questions difficult to answer. "That's a tough one... I feel like I don't have the background to know", she claimed, when asked for her thoughts on assimilation, "I admire Americans who have no culture, they go with what they feel is right." The assertion that Americans 'have no culture' is one she shares with her sister Nuriya, and in

fact was a common impression shared by several respondents; one that will be dealt with in another chapter.

A dentist by profession and homemaker by choice, Nora's comments demonstrate that she clearly does not belong in the well-integrated category, but she does not fit in the other categories either. Nora does not readily identify herself as American, and does not feel especially bound to the country or culture. Her English is impeccable, and she does share certain 'American' attitudes with her husband, but admitted in the interview that she does not think of herself as an American, but rather a Muslim living in America. In fact, a separate category could be created for Nora, and to a lesser extent Nuriya and Natasha as well, as all three felt that not only was Islam confounded by the cultures in which it resided, but that there was a sort of "Islamic culture" all its own. In the interview, Nora spoke frequently of Islam and its relationship to a receiving country's culture:

Islam is such a fluid notion... if something is right in a society, Islam doesn't want to remove it, but if something is wrong... I wish Muslims would really understand Islam and kind of break the cultural rules that have been set up.

As can be seen from the diversity of opinions and attitudes expressed by respondents, there is a lot of variety in the well-integrated category. On the whole, they call America their permanent home and have little to no ties to their sending country or to that of their parents. Also, with perhaps one exception, all of them are fluent in English. In fact, the importance of speaking 'like an American' was mentioned by several of the well-integrated respondents (and a few in-betweens) as a necessity for integrating into society. In addition, from the author's admittedly subjective point of view, these respondents displayed the most 'American' personality traits and mannerisms.

## *Discussion*

Understanding the way Muslims in America view American culture is important to understand the ways and degrees to which they assimilate. On this point, respondents across groups mentioned the greater degree of freedom that American culture provided them. Most felt that these freedoms were beneficial to them, yet also frequently criticized that America is *too* free. They feel the permissiveness of America provides an avenue to immoral behavior. The examples they provide, such as drinking alcohol, were also sometimes acknowledged as somewhat popular in their sending country. Be that as it may, many respondents associated alcohol with American life and culture, and the drinking of alcohol was considered part of ‘being American’, provoking many respondents to distance themselves from other Americans in that respect (Ajrouch 2004).

Aisha, Muhammad and Latifah all spoke of the ‘typical American’ as a materialistic, hedonistic pleasure seeker. This was unexpected considering that Muhammad and Latifah have spent their entire lives in the West. Even latecomers like Lina and Maryam spoke less critically, though as first generation immigrants they must be keenly aware of America’s cultural shortcomings, and actively work to buffer their own acculturation (Johnson 1997). Only Abbas constructed American freedoms as a means of bettering oneself spiritually. For him, the greater degree of freedom translated into an ongoing opportunity for spiritual growth, as he was able to exercise his choice between what he considers right and wrong from a religious standpoint.

Many respondents expressed a strong insistence on assimilating their children into American culture. Lina, Emma and Maryam, who all fall in the latecomers’ category, likewise spoke of ensuring that their children will be well-integrated Americans. This is not wholly surprising, as research suggests that the children of immigrants may act as “bridge builders”

between their parents and the host country (Kaya 2007). The fact that the most integrated, especially those who were born in America, rarely mentioned this concern may suggest that they perceive it as foregone, something they really do not need to strive for because it will happen anyway, or perhaps their young age and status as unmarried and childless means they have yet to give the matter much thought. Fatma is something of an exception, as she was born and raised in Canada yet is also actively working to ensure that her children grow up thinking of themselves as “strong Muslim Americans.”

The notion of paying one’s dues as an immigrant was a recurring theme among respondents, many of whom think that American Muslims are going through normal acculturation pains. A number of respondents referred to previous immigrant groups, especially Italians and Irish, pointing out both their initial struggles and the fact that they eventually overcame them. This line of thinking seemed to be most common among those who were most thoroughly integrated into American culture, such as Ahmed, Mustafa, Talia and Abbas, who constructed the challenges of integrating as a sort of rite of passage in becoming American. Omar and Ali spoke as if they owed America something for the citizenship it had extended to them. Even the less integrated, like Khadija, expressed a similar attitude, noting that previous immigrants had gone through the same or worse. This is especially interesting in that it takes to task the previously discussed attempts at distancing oneself from Americans (Ajrouch 2004). Rather than drawing a line between themselves and other Americans, these respondents actively sought to connect themselves to other Americans, more specifically, to previous immigrant groups. Painting themselves into the wider portrait of American history, these individuals envision the difficulties they face in becoming American as necessary, inevitable, and most importantly, transient. Altogether, seven respondents (30%) expressed similar attitudes.

Opinions on the existence of a definable, recognizable American Muslim identity generally came in three forms: flat rejections (22%), agreement with caveats (35%), and rather enthusiastic affirmations (43%); with the majority of respondents falling in the third category. The differences of opinion are perhaps partly explained by the different ways that ‘American Muslim’ was conceptualized by respondents. Ron reported that the term most readily called to mind ‘white American converts’, whereas Muhammad referred to the ‘American Muslim’ vs. ‘Muslim American’ debate. Still others claimed they had never given the idea much thought.

Aisha and Soroush flatly rejected the idea, challenging the very notion and suggested that Muslims are too different from one another to be categorized in such a way. Soroush in particular found the term unnecessary and misleading, as did Khadija, who seemed disturbed by the use of such a label, feeling that Muslims were Muslims regardless of where they lived. Omar and Maryam found the American Muslim identity to be generic and reactionary, developed as a sort of oppositional identity. They associated the deliberate formulation of this identity with attempts by fundamentalist Muslims to differentiate themselves from Americans in general. Viewed in this way, religion and religious identity not only become more salient (Read and Bartkowski 2000) they are also used to balance the incongruence between the ethnic and American identities of Muslim immigrants and their children (Peek 2005a).

About a third of respondents saw the emergence of an American Muslim identity as a possibility, but one that has not yet come to fruition. Emma and Lina see it as a reality for their children, but one in which they do not share. Mustafa, Yahya and Muhammad see it on the horizon, but insist that it has yet to happen.

Among the ten respondents who answered affirmatively, six had been born or at least raised in the US, and two had been here since the age of ten. Ahmed, Ron, Sheila and Abbas all

spent their formative years in the US, and all find that their identities as American Muslims feel quite natural to them. In addition, some reported that they enjoyed the camaraderie they felt with other American Muslims. Natasha and Nuriya also gave affirmative answers, even though they came to the US as pre-teens. As mentioned earlier, Ali gave contradictory responses, but eventually agreed that American Muslim is a relevant and meaningful term. Not surprisingly, eight of the ten were also categorized as well-integrated. There appears to be no correlation between a respondent's subjective measure of personal religiosity and/or visibility as a Muslim and their attitude toward assimilation.

Others, like Talia and Jasmine, agreed that 'American Muslim' was indeed a real identity, and one that they possessed, but felt it was the result not of a shared system of values but of prejudice and discrimination. Their connection to other American Muslims is based on feeling like second class citizens. Latifah seemed to echo this sentiment, feeling that Muslims in America were united only in the sense that they were 'otherized'.

Though there is little in common in the outcomes reached, it is clear that each of these individuals has constructed and negotiated their identity through a complex process of interaction with the society around them (Cahill 1986; Nagel 1994). Identity formation is an ongoing process for American Muslims (Mir no date), and one in which religion may play a more important role than national (Waters 2000) or cultural/ethnic identity (Johnson 1997); a process in which many strive to drop the "cultural baggage" and take that which is best from the "buffet" of American culture (Rauf 2004).

### **Interpersonal Interactions and Experiences of Prejudice**

Though most respondents (65%) felt that Muslims in America do experience prejudice, many of the accounts they provided were of an indirect and sometimes hyperbolic nature. Some

respondents struggled to provide an example of themselves having received prejudicial treatment, and those that did often provided examples which could easily have been simple misunderstandings. Some asserted that they were simply unaware of its existence or that it was perhaps uncommon in their multi-cultural neighborhood. Others, however, gave extensive and detailed accounts of the prejudice and even violence with which they have been targeted due to their status as Muslims in America. It must be said at the outset, whether they experienced this prejudice directly or not, many felt the weight of bigotry in their everyday lives.

A few respondents provided examples of prejudice they had faced, yet simultaneously claimed that they had not really faced prejudice, which begs the question: how do they define prejudice? If respondents are working with different definitions of what constitutes ‘prejudice’, as they most certainly are, that may help explain the wide variety of responses. Attempting to define respondent perceptions of ‘prejudice’ is not the focus of this chapter, rather, the intent is to examine examples of the prejudice they have faced in hopes of better understanding their lives and experiences as Muslims living in America.

Considered first are the relationships and interactions that respondents reported with other Americans, other Muslims in America, and finally the people of their sending country. Following that, I will discuss multiple instances of both direct and indirect experiences of prejudice/discrimination. Data for this section came primarily from two questions: Do you ever feel like you have to choose between being an American and being a Muslim? And do you think American Muslims are faced with prejudice?

#### *Relations with other Americans*

Respondents offered examples of both positive and negative experiences with other Americans. Some described using these interactions as a way of building bridges of

understanding between themselves and non-Muslims, others discussed the way their fluency in English facilitated positive encounters with other Americans.

Ahmed felt that in some ways he could relate more with other Americans than with his own parents who “don’t know what’s going on in American culture.” Fatma explained that she enjoys spending time with non-Muslim Americans, “[I] go to their houses, exchange gifts, go to parties.” Natasha even feels that being a Muslim has at times gotten her more respect, “I worked at Capitol Hill as an intern, and being a Muslim girl with a hijab they seemed to take me more seriously than some of the other girls.”

Omar described a work environment in which most of his colleagues have been understanding and supportive of his praying at work in his office, even though it sometimes conflicts with scheduled meetings. Completing his five daily prayers on time is a focal point for Omar, who claims that missing even one is “unacceptable”. He related one of his many stories about praying in public:

Once I was driving back from Dallas and I stopped to pray, it was some guy’s private property. He stopped and said ‘What are you doing?’ I said ‘I’m praying’, he said ‘Okay, pray for me too’.

The times when he does find himself the target of prejudice, Omar turns it into an opportunity to talk to non-Muslims about Islam. Perhaps not with the explicit intention of gaining converts to the faith, but rather toward building bridges of understanding. Ron, who also openly practices his faith by praying at work, does much the same. “I try to look for similarities”, he said “so I think about how I can relate to a person at first. I would like to establish a dialogue first, before establishing differences.”

Khadija is somewhat more covert in her practice of Islam at work, though her status as a Muslim is evident by her headscarf. “I don’t talk about Islam, at all, whenever I used to work in hospitals or in the schools I don’t say anything...I keep it very professional.” She went on to

explain that she is keen on bridge building and enjoys sharing her faith, but is often reluctant to take the first step:

I wanted them to know me better as a person. See beyond the scarf and know me as a person and then when they ask something, or say something about Christianity I can say right away, 'Well, in Islam it's almost the same thing.' There are a lot of similarities. I've had people ask if they can come to the mosque with me and they came a couple of times. I don't take the step to explain Islam until they come forward. I don't want to be pushy or scare away, because it's in the hands of God...

Jasmine and Soroush described having strained relations with the Americans around them. Jasmine claims that she is sometimes worries about people rejecting her for being a Muslim, "You don't know if you are the enemy or the friend." This is despite the fact that she looks very 'white American' and does not self-present as a Muslim. Even her real name sounds very typical American. Soroush has no such luck, "My accent is obvious and I wasn't raised here, so [when] I say I'm from Iran there is always a setback and people are more reserved." This is especially unfortunate, because as he explained, Soroush feels more "secure" in America than Iran, "Here is where I entered society... I don't see us ever going back to Iran."

Many respondents commented on how an accent, or the lack thereof, shaped their interactions with other Americans. Ali claimed that when speaking on the phone, the other party cannot tell that he spent the first 18 years of his life in India. When meeting people face to face, "The prejudice exists until I open my mouth and start talking. When they hear somebody that sounds like them the prejudice goes away." Fadi said much the same, "When I start talking it's like 'Hey, take that preconceived idea out of your head and let's talk about what's going on, forget what you think'." Talia described using voice inflection to put the other person at ease, "When I talk to people I sometimes use a more southern accent, more twangy, so that I sound more quote unquote 'American', so I can be more non-threatening." However, Sheila pointed out that altering one's behavior to satisfy others was often a losing prospect, "I wear slightly more

revealing clothing. Some Muslims might view me as non-Muslim in my clothing, but other people (Americans) don't quite think I'm dressing revealing enough."

When asked about their interactions and experiences with non-Muslim Americans generally, responses tended to be positive, though there were some exceptions. The importance of English language skills, and the barrier produced by their absence, was discussed by some as well. On the whole it is worth noting that these responses were generally positive, especially when compared with those of the next section.

### *Relations with other Muslims*

Though respondents reported many positive relationships and encounters with non-Muslim Americans, they had much less favorable things to say regarding other Muslims. As the following respondent comments demonstrate, Muslim on Muslim relations in the US can often be strained.

Omar provided one of the few bright spots. As mentioned above, Omar is reluctant to let his daily prayers pass by unmet, though his busy family life and frequent travel for work often complicate the matter. He described these and other instances in which he was forced to pray in unusual places:

Once I found a spot by a shop and prayed, and after that the shop keeper (a Muslim) came out and said 'I have a prayer rug if you want it' (laughter). One time in a parking lot an African-American was driving by, he was playing loud music, some rap, and he was like 'You're a Muslim! I should have prayed with you.'

All other accounts were much less encouraging. Mustafa spoke of the discomfort he experienced as a child, "As a young kid, I used to feel insecure about going to the mosque and I felt that I was going to be judged by my peers at the mosque." Mustafa's fear ostensibly stemmed from his concern that the other children would find his religiosity lacking. Such

concerns were common. Maryam, Nuriya and Abbas have all been accused by other Muslims of being too religious. Maryam elaborated, “Their immediate perception of someone who wears a scarf or follows the religion is like they’re from a village back home.” Nuriya reported having been made to feel “not normal” for being an observant Muslim, and Abbas noted that his Muslim friends in the US and his extended family in Pakistan all complain that he is “too religious”. Ron on the other hand has been told that he is “too American”. Incidentally, Mustafa, Maryam, Nuriya and Abbas all share a Pakistani ethnic background. As does Ron, who noted, “Most of the bad behavior we have experienced has been with other Muslims, typically Pakistanis. Pakistanis are not very nice to each other.”

Nora focused on the static that occurs between Muslims who have different ideas about practicing Islam, “With Muslims, sometimes little issues come up, they’ll nit-pick and make things so difficult that I feel like becoming less of a Muslim.” Latifah faced much the same while in college. She explained that although she held an active, leadership role within the Muslim Students Association, she felt that she never quite fit in:

The leaders and organizers of this group, 90% of them were Indo-Pakistani, so they had their own perspective on religion that didn’t fit in with mine. I had my own group of friends that were more on the liberal end but still had roots in the religion and their home country.

Khadija has experienced considerably strained relations with both her husband (a convert) and her family since deciding to wear the hijab four years ago:

I thought it was important that I cover my hair... It was a turning point. My mom is still having a hard time accepting that. It was a big thing for me. I told my husband that I was going to start covering my hair whether you like it or not, and if you don’t like it we can divorce... I always wanted to cover my hair, but in my family no one does, and I knew they would give me a hard time.

Khadija’s troubles are dealt with more extensively in the following chapter, for now let her story be illustrative of the pressures that Muslims sometimes face due to community/familial expectations. Talia is no stranger to the harsh criticism of the American Muslim community.

While working as a waitress at an Italian restaurant she was chided by other Muslims for accepting tip money for serving alcohol. Such criticism puts one in a difficult situation, feeling as though they cannot win regardless of how they choose.

Yahya bemoaned having to make such choices. “I don’t think I have to choose at all” he argued, referring to the “huge barrage” of conflicting voices and demands coming from other Muslims, insisting that he prove his loyalty to America or Islam. A task which is even harder for Soroush, who, as a member of the minority Shia sect has to “really try to prove yourself that you’re not some kind of a beast or different kind of animal”, referring to the animosity he often is met with by the majority Sunnis.

The responses above demonstrate the tension and unease that many respondents experience when dealing with other Muslims. Some were in the precarious position of being accused of being alternately too religious or too American. Others found that they simply held different ideas about Islam from other Muslims and this presented an obstacle.

#### *Relations with people from the sending country*

Respondents provided a more varied set of responses when asked about their relationships and encounters with Muslims in their or their parent’s sending country. Some of these took place within the sending country itself, for example while visiting. Others deal with recent immigrants to America and the attitudes and prejudices they bring with them.

Jasmine finds returning to Algeria enjoyable enough if she goes as a tourist, but finds the conservative nature of the country too stifling. She recounted an experience in which she left home one day wearing shorts, an act which inspired no small amount of gossip. She even faces discrimination in everyday interactions, “If I go to a store they will charge me more because I

have an American accent.” Fadi emigrated from Syria at the age of 18, and has since adopted a very Americanized persona. When asked if his countrymen find him ‘too American’, he blithely responded, “They don’t say ‘you’re American’, they say ‘you’re affected, you have different views’, which is true.”

Soroush left Iran for the US 10 years ago, and although he visits when he can, has lost touch with the people. “At least here I feel like I can connect to people” he disclosed, “I can talk to them, you can predict what they’re gonna do and say. But in Iran they are more turning into this black box that I can’t predict.” Omar criticized recent immigrants from his native Pakistan, who he finds tend to draw lines demarcating ‘us and them’, “some people that have migrated have a cookie cutter approach, either you are with us or without us type of approach, which I think is a bunch of gibberish.” His wife Maryam provided more detail regarding this recurring irritant:

There is more criticism coming from your own, especially people who don’t know what they’re talking about...you get much more of a friction wearing hijab in Pakistan than you do in America, people are much more accepting, whereas over there they have a perception that you’re going down the extreme end.

Though respondents did not speak at length about the tension they experience with people from their or their parent’s sending country, the comments they did make are revealing. These experiences demonstrate how some American Muslims can at times feel stuck between their life in America and the life and culture of their sending country.

### *Indirect Prejudice*

Turning now to the topic of prejudice more specifically, the following comments demonstrate the kinds of prejudice beleaguering American Muslims. For many respondents not only was the prejudice they perceived indirectly applicable to them, it was also often very generalized. Many of the examples cited had been reported in popular news accounts; others

reflected arguably unfair portrayals of Muslims in television and film. Altogether, 11 respondents (48%) provided examples of indirect prejudice.

Nora stated “I hear that there is a lot of prejudice, and I see a lot in the news. I personally have not faced anything.” Ali noted that prejudice is not applied evenly, “Prejudice is there, but it’s selective” he said, arguing that Muslims who more openly present themselves as religious feel the brunt of it. “There is an overarching prejudice against Muslims, but how does it come down to the individual, you have to exhibit those behaviors (wearing hijab, etc.).”

Talia spoke at length about the subject, providing a variety of topical examples but none which she herself directly experienced. She mentioned a man in Texas whose farm was situated next to a newly constructed Islamic center and who purportedly started hosting ‘pig races’ just to be offensive to his new neighbors. She also spoke of the Westboro Church’s ‘Burn a Quran Day’, and the ‘Innocence of Muslims’ film trailer that was released on the internet.

Natasha provided more specific examples of prejudice, though none she experienced herself. She described a friend in New York who was the target of verbal slurs and intimidation on her daily walk to the school bus stop. Her friend eventually quit wearing her hijab to avoid the negative attention. Natasha also reported that her cousins in Ohio were the victims of physical abuse, “people would throw rocks at them from cars when they would be going to school.” It should be noted that in both cases the recipients of abuse were students, a detail that is in keeping with two things: many of the reports of prejudice came from respondents who had grown up in America and attended public schools, and many of the respondents who came to the US as adults reported not having been a victim of prejudice.

Muhammad cited examples of prejudice at the institutional level, “There have been a lot of cases where it has happened. FBI informants in mosques... that’s religious profiling.” Fadi

continued in this line of thinking, implying that anti-Muslim sentiment is evidence of a double standard:

It's acceptable to pick on Islam. You wouldn't imagine talking about a Jewish person the same way you talk about a Muslim person; can you possibly sit there and criticize Judaism? You'll be labeled anti-Semite and you'll lose your job, but for Muslims it's fashionable to pick on them, even by leaders in this country, by senators.

Aisha implicated the media, saying they “exaggerate stuff on Muslims and take it in a negative way.” She finds that this negative media exposure has real world effects on the way Muslims are perceived, “Sometimes people think if you're a Muslim you are involved in a terrorist group or something like that.” Fatma and Maryam both commented on this topic extensively. Fatma decried the “onslaught of negative images about Muslims in the media” and asked the question: “If it's affecting me, why would it not affect anyone else?” She continued:

I watch *Homeland* (TV show), it's really good but it's really Islamophobic. Remember that scene where the wife finds out her husband is a Muslim, and she's just shocked? ‘How could you be Muslim?!’ Are we like, the dirty word? I felt so weird watching that, do people see us like that? Do people actually think that if you're a Muslim you're just crazy? Is that how horribly people see us?

The popular television series Fatma referred to is characterized by high intrigue and enjoys high ratings, and for many viewers may be one of their few windows into the lives of Muslims in America. A point brought up by Maryam “most people who do not have face to face interaction with Muslims would follow what they see in the media.” She went on to provide examples from popular movies:

I've noticed in the past 5-10 years, even in movies the perception has changed. Now the bad guy is always a Muslim. I'm like, why can't they be someone else? Like in the movie *Taken*, they do all the illicit things, they drink, they traffic women, they run a prostitution ring, and it's a Muslim guy! Have it be somebody else! I guess that's the way they see us, which is really sad, because were not all bad crazy people who do these things. I think there is a prejudice, I think it's growing. If you see *Iron Man*, the people who kidnapped him, even though they don't specify it they have a very strong visual stereotype that they want all their negative characters to fall into, and unfortunately that's us.

Other respondents, like Ahmed and Abbas, seemed better able to deflect the prejudice they both acknowledged was there. “I think there is a lot of racism in this country and

particularly against American Muslims” Ahmed noted, yet tempered the statement by adding, “African Americans went through a lot worse.” Abbas in particular felt the presence of prejudice was overblown:

It’s not that extreme. It’s not as bad as like African Americans in the 1960s. When I do feel like I’m being stereotyped I just compare myself to Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr., if I’m not going through what they went through, then I have nothing to complain about. So to me it’s not that big of a deal. My brother and I talk about this all the time, I tell him ‘Yeah, people are saying that we’re this and that, but at the same time we’re not being beaten, we’re not being completely banned from a place because we’re Muslims.’

Brave talk aside, his remark “my brother and I talk about this all the time” is either an exaggeration of speech or a tacit admission that it does in fact weigh heavily on his young mind.

Yahya cautioned that we should not think the indirect nature of this prejudice precludes its having an effect:

I don’t know if there is any prejudice around me specifically, I haven’t experienced it, but that doesn’t keep me from thinking that there might be. Quite a few of us, we still have that fear that there is prejudice, somewhere, and we have to sort of unconsciously watch what we say sometimes, or how we act, because we just want to make sure everything is okay.

Though these examples of prejudice are indirect in nature, it should not be assumed that they have no effect on the Muslims who reported them. These incidents are generalized and often occurred far away from the respondents locale. Indeed, some of the never ‘happened’ at all, as they were fictional representations in popular entertainment. Yet, the fact that these respondents so readily called them forth as examples of prejudice against Muslims in the US demonstrates their salience.

### *Direct Experiences of Prejudice*

Some respondents struggled to find an example of prejudice from their own life; others spoke as though they had had this conversation numerous times before. Altogether, about half the respondents (48%) shared stories of their personal experiences of prejudice. Some seemed to

report incidents yet also deny their relevance, others reported what could very well have been a simple misunderstanding, yet others had real and disheartening experiences of prejudice and even violence.

Nuriya spoke briefly of feeling uncomfortable wearing a hijab at school, yet also denied having experienced prejudice, which she attributes to the diversity of the city in which she lives. Omar at first reported having not experienced prejudice, but also conceded that “one or two people that I still talk to (work colleagues), they tell you to your face, ‘Yeah, we don’t like Muslims... Muslims are bombing us, and we should just go and bomb them and kill all the Muslims’.” Despite this undeniably bigoted statement Omar refuses to be discouraged, “Let it be” he said “we still have to live with people... tolerance is the key and we need to educate people.”

Some described experiences that were somewhat superficial. Ron struggled to think of a situation in which he has been on the receiving end of prejudicial treatment, “Other than being screened at the airport a lot more than in the past... I don’t feel like I have been discriminated against, in any way, at any time.” Maryam also noted with a laugh that she always gets “randomly selected” at the airport, a reference to the fact that her hijab makes her more visible and therefore an easy target. “It’s right there, it’s on your head. It’s in people’s face. You are at the forefront a lot more.”

Fatma also struggled to provide a specific example of prejudice in her own life, which, like Nuriya she attributed to the diversity of her city and neighborhood. She did recount a recent experience where she feels her hijab made her the subject of suspicion:

So I’m at the swim meet and this little kid came up to me and I just started talking to him, he was probably four or five, and his mom kept giving me these really strange looks and she kept staring at me the entire time . She called her son over and gave me really dirty looks, that’s the only way I can describe it, and I thought, ‘You know what, the only reason she doesn’t like me is cause of my headscarf, there’s no other reason’.

Previously, Natasha had shared stories of the prejudice her friends experienced in other states, and here she related a confrontation she witnessed with her mother:

She wears an *abaya* and *niqab* (full body black robe and face veil), and while at a hospital a young woman came up to her and said ‘Why are you wearing that? You don’t need to be wearing that! This is America!’ in a really harsh, condescending tone.

Her friend Talia also had stories of family member’s experiences of prejudice. “My brother and his wife were eating at a restaurant and a woman came up and harassed them, ‘May the blood of the pig rain over you...’.” Nevertheless, Talia feels that facing such prejudice has ultimately made her, and American Muslims in general, stronger as individuals and as a community. She provided a lengthy explanation of how this occurs:

Muslims, even though they come from all different backgrounds and cultures, but because they are a minority in terms of belief, they kind of bond together in that way. I do believe there is an American Muslim identity, because when I was growing up people would come up to me and tell me some shit, or having people treating us like second class citizens, and because of that we’ve all bonded together and formed that identity. That’s more through oppression; if there hadn’t been that aggression toward us then I don’t think we would have that strong identity.

Soroush feels that prejudice is a part of his everyday life, and that he experiences it not just from his classmates but professors as well. “That’s the ones that I encounter every day, and that’s what probably hurts the most.” He continued, “I don’t blame anyone for this prejudice and I don’t judge it necessarily, but it’s there.” He then provided examples from the lives of his sister and wife:

Once when I was with my sister, who wears the hijab, we walked into a store and a customer cursed at us and walked out and I was confused as to why he did that and then I realized it was because of my sister wearing hijab. When my wife came here, she had to put some gas in her car at a gas station, and a homeless woman started throwing trash at her saying ‘You Muslim, go back to your country where you came from’.

Jasmine experienced prejudice more directly. Though she no longer wears a head scarf, it was her custom during high school. “People always asked me stupid questions” she recalled, “Do you have cancer? Do you have ears? Do you have hair? My answer to all of these is yes!”

The difficulties Khadija faces are numerous: she must deal with the stress of living in a country not her own, raising a child in a bi-cultural marriage, and navigating a job market for which she is well qualified yet faces routine discrimination because of her choice to cover her hair. As she describes it, before deciding to observe the hijab four years ago, Khadija had no trouble obtaining work as a nurse, a position for which she is well qualified. And now she must daily handle classrooms full of young children who are mostly unaccustomed to the sight of a woman in hijab:

Whenever I went to hospitals, I applied and sent my resume. I got a phone call and at the interview, I could tell from the way they looked at me, there was prejudice. I had questions like, ‘Well, are you going to get rid of that scarf?’ I used to not cover my hair, life was easier back then. You go to interviews and you get the job, they don’t ask you to change your clothes or wear something else.

To make matters worse, Khadija is also criticized by those closest to her, “My husband is American and he always says ‘You don’t look normal’.” The couple first met years ago when she treated him on the job as a nurse. He converted to Islam before marrying her, but at the time she was not wearing a scarf. Now that she does it puts a strain on their relationship. In addition, her family has expressed their displeasure with her choice to cover her hair; something she has come to see as a religious obligation since the death of a close friend.

The lack of familial support is something with which Sheila can relate. Though not especially religious herself, Sheila is surrounded by non-Muslims and often subjected to their teasing. Her husband is a convert to Islam, though largely non-practicing, and his family is devoutly Catholic, leaving Sheila with little support when it comes to living up to Islamic guidelines of food and drink. “Around my in-laws I don’t like to bring that side out. I feel like I have to be more American. They just think it’s hilarious that I don’t eat pork.” She continued:

My brother-in-law went to Afghanistan for a little while (in the military), and I feel like around him I can’t quite talk about Islam... when he came back he just had these horrible things to say about Islam.

Likewise, her co-workers are simultaneously unfamiliar with and unimpressed by Sheila's status as a Muslim. "Just the other day at work one of my managers was like 'Sheila, where are the box cutters?' People were laughing and I was like 'What? Why would I know?' Sheila spoke of her high school days in which students occasionally made remarks such as: "Go back to Iraq" (her family is from Pakistan), or "Oh, do you know Osama?" causing her no small amount of grief:

It's kind of infuriating. Why would you bring up such a terrible day and think it's funny? I think that if I were in high school right now I would probably be really depressed.

The most harrowing tale of prejudice came from Mustafa. Far beyond the bullying of a few bigoted teenagers, Mustafa was victimized in a violent attack carried out by his school's baseball team:

I was assaulted on 9/11, I was beat up pretty badly. I'm a complete pacifist, completely non-violent, never been in a fight in my whole life... They surrounded me, and they roughed me up pretty bad. Punching me and kicking me on the ground. That was the only time I felt a level of vitriol that was kind of scary.

When asked how the school responded to the attack:

They brought me in, and they were extremely sympathetic. They wanted to find out who did it, but I felt like it wasn't really their place to change the hearts and minds of ignorant kids.

Mustafa also mentioned that he has run into many of his attackers around town since that day, "and they've apologized, really heart-felt apologies..." He does not seem bitter, nor does he speak of a grudge. Rather, his attitude is one of looking to a brighter future, yet also not ignoring the reality of prejudice in his life:

There are a lot of people that joke around about it (*anti-Muslim sentiment*), and you can tell they are trying to come to terms with it by joking around, but they still hold that prejudice, but at least they are trying to go to the path of understanding... I feel like we are conditioned to overlook the amount of media prejudice, which we often overlook because it's so normal. I feel like there is prejudice in the air.

Although some reports had an air of exaggeration and there were a few curious denials, overall the findings of the preceding section demonstrate the reality and prevalence of prejudice

in the lives of American Muslims. Many of the incidents discussed were directed at respondents with more visibly Muslim identities. In other words, those that exhibit visible markers of their Muslim identity (i.e. hijab) were more likely to be targets of prejudice. Though it should also be noted that in some instances they were the only Muslim with which their antagonizers interacted.

### *Discussion*

Respondents described both positive and some negative interactions with Americans. Interactions with other Muslims were primarily negative, a finding which no doubt reflects selectivity in reporting. Interactions with people from sending countries were likewise reported as strained. Some respondents recounted receiving criticism for being too religious, and others for being too American. Khadija provided an example of the former and Talia the latter. In America it is commonly thought that Muslim women cover their hair as a result of cultural/familial pressure (Hasan 2000); however, in some cases, as in Khadija's, the opposite holds true (Read and Bartkowski 2000). Khadija observes what she believes is a religious injunction enjoined on her and does so in spite of pressure from her family. Talia was chastised by other Muslims for accepting tips as part of her waitressing job in which she served alcoholic drinks, reflecting the community pressure that some American Muslims feel to reject American culture (Ajrouch 2004).

As lamented by several respondents, popular media sometimes feature deplorable depictions of Muslims. These negative portrayals both draw from and reify preexisting stereotypes (Jackson 2010). Fatma and Maryam expressed concern with how exposure to such material might influence viewers who have little to no contact with Muslims in their everyday lives. Research suggests that they are right to be concerned, as the average American is ill-

equipped to see through such distortions (Tindongan 2011), and the more television news people watch, the greater support they hold for institutional discrimination against Muslims (Nisbet and Shanahan 2004).

Originally conceptualized, this chapter dealing with prejudice was not intended to be quite so long. Only one of the twelve interview questions asked about prejudice, yet many of the respondents had a considerable amount to say on the topic. It must be remembered that while 15 of 23 respondents (65%) said they believe Muslims in the US face prejudice, slightly less than half (48%) provided examples of *direct* prejudice in their own lives, and, as demonstrated, some of them were much less severe than others. Many of the same respondents also shared examples of *indirect* prejudice, which was found in popular media or passed on in stories from friends and family. Several respondents flatly denied that they were subject to any kind of prejudice; a finding that was unexpected but possibly explained by a desire to manage their presentation of self. This could be due in part to the differing ways that respondents understood the term ‘prejudice’. It is therefore impossible to know if the true amount of prejudice they experience is actually higher or lower than that reported here.

The finding that most instances of prejudice reported in this study occurred during the respondent’s youth, especially in American public schools, is significant. Previous research has suggested that American Muslims suffer anxiety and stress due to their status as Muslims (Ajrouch 2004; Sirin and Fine 2007). These studies must be interpreted within their proper context, as much of this research has been carried out on Muslim youth. The identities young American Muslims are developing and the behaviors they exhibit do not match “normal” American constructions, which may cause them distress (Mir 2007). The findings of the current study suggest that this anxiety and stress are transient and that sufferers ‘age out’.

A possible explanation of why the findings of previous studies are not reflected here could be the sample. Besides having a small sample (n=23), it is also unrepresentative of American Muslims as a whole. The vast majority of respondents were of South Asian descent, making them greatly overrepresented in the study. Recent studies of Muslims and discrimination have often focused especially on Arabs (Amer and Hovey 2011). In addition, most respondents lived in a large, multi-cultural American city home to many Muslims. Furthermore, some respondents lived in upper-middle class suburban areas, where South Asian Muslims were quite common. Each of these can be said to confound the results of this study. However, though the sample is small and largely unrepresentative of American Muslims in general, the interviews were lengthy and the data rich. Respondents often spoke candidly and at length about their experiences and attitudes.

Prejudice makes for good story telling. The most interesting accounts presented above were also the most awful. It is important to approach this subject delicately, as there is a tendency to get carried away when constructing such problems. The medicalization of a problem lends to its pressing immediacy and also to the pathologizing of its sufferers (Figert 1996). Indeed, the year 2006 saw the first volume of a publication entitled *The Journal of Muslim Mental Health* (Elias 2006).

This is not to suggest that there is no problem, or that some Muslims are not suffering from mental health problems and excess stress and anxiety as a direct result of being visibly Muslim in America. American Muslims are sometimes said to carry a “double burden”, as they experience the same anxiety and fear regarding terrorism as other Americans, yet at the same time, they are often blamed for it (Elias 2006). Yet, the incidents are often isolated, few, and seem to occur most often in adolescence.

## A Clash of Values?

Data for this section come primarily from the final interview question: *Some people have argued that the values of Islam and America do not fit together. How do you feel about this idea?* Many of the comments below were also lifted from earlier portions of the transcripts. This should be no surprise, as the overarching intent of the interview questions was to approach this very topic, though none so directly as the question above. Responses to this question, and additional commentary gleaned from the transcripts, ranged from enthusiastic denials to bitter capitulations, and no small amount of digression. Responses are here divided into four related themes: *oppositional attitudes* toward America, followed by arguments that *conflict exists* between American and Islamic values; next are *pro-American attitudes*, and the many assertions of *no conflict*.

### *Oppositional Attitudes*

Oppositional attitudes are rejections of American life and culture, and were expressed by nearly half (43%) of respondents. These sometimes took the form of attitudes expressed by other Muslims, especially the less integrated, warning American Muslims to be wary of assimilating. Other times these came from the respondents themselves, even the more integrated.

Jasmine spoke of the challenges faced by American Muslim youth, especially while in high school. These young people “wanted so badly to fit in, and their families pushed them toward their home countries’ culture.” She described this situation as a “huge crisis” that was “sad, ‘cause I know a lot of people are trying to get away from this (community expectations).” Talia also noted the pressure that families place on their children, “Growing up there is so much tension and you don’t know what to believe and it kind of leads you to feel so much guilt and

shame.” She also described oppositional pressure from anti-immigrant forces that she feels work to confound immigrant success in America:

The only clash is a manufactured one by those who want to push Muslims in a corner just like was done with the Japanese and with Blacks, the Italians, the Irish, constantly throughout American history, any person that was ‘other’ was automatically labeled and oppressed, thrown into the ghettos or put in concentration camps.

More referred to the opposition to America coming from within the Muslim community. A phenomenon which Yahya felt was specific to fundamentalist voices. “The super fanatics, they don’t often preach a good message of values” he recalled, listing this as a primary reason for why he prefers not to attend prayer services at certain mosques. Still, Yahya viewed these more radical voices as a temporary dilemma, “Eventually they are going to be drowned out because no one will care to listen to them anymore, they’ll be kind of dwindling as the years go by.” The discussion for this section contains a more thorough examination of Yahya’s conception of “super fanatics”.

Aisha and others also spoke of opposition to American culture, though they made no reference to specifically fundamentalist voices. The opposition they spoke of is like that experienced by many immigrant groups who fear losing themselves in the assimilation process. In Aisha’s case it is a simple act of denial “I don’t dress like a typical American”, a remark amusingly made while dressed in blue jeans and a grey shirt. Still, the importance of the statement should not be lost. Aisha wishes to distinguish herself from Americans, as demonstrated by her tepid opposition to American norms of dress.

Fadi tied the oppositional attitudes of some American Muslims to increased religiosity and found them both to be a consequence of their status as recent immigrants:

They become more religious here because it’s their way... trying to become more Muslim because it’s a defense mechanism against what you see. In the US there’s more personal freedom so there’s a lot more alcohol, a lot more illicit drugs, a lot more freedom to do something and stray, and we feel it’s a defense

mechanism cause we get scared... The first exposure is, it's too loose, there's so much going on that a person can easily get lost.

Natasha also commented on pressure from other Muslims to reject America. "I get annoyed when they talk about how much they hate America, but I haven't really met a lot of Muslims that do that." When asked if the Muslims she spoke of were American born and raised or recent immigrants, Natasha provided more detail:

They may have been born here, but they had really strong ties to back home, like extremely strong ties. Actually a lot of them have been Palestinian, just cause they have that fight in them. Really I've only met like two.

When spoken of in general terms, Natasha at first appears to be routinely irritated by repeated incidents of anti-American sentiment from her fellow Muslims. When prodded for an explanation it becomes clear that this is hardly a widespread phenomenon but rather a few isolated though likely recurring incidents. She attributed the animosity to their holding Palestinian backgrounds, which is easily understood considering the geo-political and religious strife in which they hold America to be a proxy antagonist.

Ahmed feels that there are plenty of things in American culture that a Muslim should be opposed to, "If we look at mainstream media, mainstream culture, things like hip-hop, obviously there's a lot of vulgarity, lots of indecency." Yet he tempered this statement by conceding, "I don't even necessarily think this is accepted by all Americans. There are groups of people who don't agree with these indecencies as well." Ahmed also recognized that opposition could come from Americans as well, "(They think) Islam is something alien to America", a sentiment shared with Soroush, who felt that American opposition to Muslims was in some ways "justified". He continued:

I imagine it this way, people are living their lives and they hear all this animosity that exists between their government and a whole bunch of other countries that are all Muslim, and they hear about 9/11 and everything else that happens, and you [Americans] don't know anything else about these people, that's all

you've heard about them, and then this Soroush guy walks into class with a beard, calling himself Muslim, and you just connect the dots.

This conciliatory statement could be considered along with Soroush's earlier comment about prejudice in which he said, "I don't blame anyone for this prejudice and I don't judge it necessarily, but it's there." He perceives anti-Muslim sentiment and is bothered by it, yet also recognizes that it does not come out of thin air. Fatma likewise expressed an understanding of how Americans could reject Islam, especially considering popular media portrayals. "Sometimes I can get really down on whatever's happening in the world" she said, referring to the plethora of news stories proffering a negative depiction of Muslims, "Muslims just do crazy things everywhere, and I see why people hate us." Fatma also discussed her very oppositional attitude toward her parent's sending country of Pakistan:

I've seen how women are treated there, so I am as appalled as any other regular American. I get very angry, cause they are using my religion to justify these horrible actions... this real extremist religious strain of Islam is taking hold... that society is just breaking down.

The above quote is a condensed version of a rather extensive tirade regarding what Fatma views as the consequence of both fundamentalist and secular forces on her family's sending country, forces that are causing Pakistan to "break down". This discussion of how American Muslims perceive the battle between fundamentalism and secularism in their or their parent's sending country warrants further study.

Omar spoke at length on the topic, expressing a variety of ideas. It was not always easy to discern exactly what point he wanted to make, as he expressed what are clearly very oppositional attitudes toward American society and lifestyles, yet also strongly insisted that American and Islamic values are not in conflict. It may be useful to recall that in earlier chapters of this study Omar is categorized as well-integrated into American society and enjoys good relations with his non-Muslim coworkers:

I think there's a whole clash going on internally, amongst Muslims... I think Americans themselves are suffering, it's a disease. Morally and ethically I think the entire country is going down, from a social value perspective. So there is a disease that we need to recognize, and I think what happens is when everybody gets a cough or a cold, you tend to catch it, and that's what it is. So, being Muslims, and your kids are growing up, you see that they're going to be looking at TV... I think, as American Muslims, we feel threatened a lot more... what happens is you have these two extremes, there's not a balanced approach... Short answer to my longwinded explanation, there are a lot of things occurring in this society which kind of threaten the social moral values of a family. So, for a lot of Muslims, including myself, I mean, my kids, yes, they need to be aware of certain behaviors, but I need to educate them that these behaviors are inappropriate. Whether you're a Muslim, whether you're a Christian, whether you're a Jew, because these rules are the same, they were revealed by God.

The oppositional attitudes expressed are not unique as it is common for immigrants to attempt to mitigate and buffer their own assimilation into a host culture. Attempts to foster this view amongst fellow American Muslims are likely best understood as efforts to preserve the identity and traditions of that group. Therefore, the above comments must be understood not as evidence of a blanket rejection of American culture, but rather as reflecting selective acculturation.

### *Conflict Exists*

Responses for this section reflect the attitude that America and Islam hold conflicting or contradictory value systems. Six respondents (26%) provided comments delineating the ways they differed. Some wrote the whole thing off as a simple misunderstanding, while still others perceived a clear and significant clash of values.

Not seeing the two in conflict herself, Latifah still provided her notion as to why some may. "That's a fear based process, a lack of compassion and understanding." She was referring to both some Muslims' rejection of America and also some Americans' rejection of Islam. When asked about the apparent incompatibility of US Law and Islamic *Sharia* she seemed to concede, "If you approach it from a black and white perspective, it absolutely can be that." However, she

went on to explain that in her understanding, the *Sharia* is rarely applied in such a “black and white” way.

Natasha finds the conflict to be based on misunderstanding. She argued that rather than a conflict between American and Islamic values, the problem should be understood as a conflict between American values and the cultural values of the sending countries, such as Iran or Afghanistan:

When it comes to values, as a Muslim, I don't see a conflict... but a lot of the time Islam is portrayed as another country's culture... I feel that that's more in conflict than Islam itself.

In addition, Natasha finds that another problem is the way Muslims represent their religion. “The Muslim is in conflict with his own religion” she claimed, elaborating that Muslims do a poor job of portraying Islam accurately. Mustafa also feels that much of the conflict is primarily a result of “a lot of misunderstanding on both sides” and that given time, “that clash of values is going to start going away.” Mustafa has often found himself carrying out the role of polemicist between the cultural values of his parent's Pakistan, which he insists were instilled in him as a child, and those of American society:

I find myself in Pakistan sometimes being an apologist for American culture... [and in the US] Sometimes I find myself apologizing for Pakistani culture and saying ‘The whole community makeup is based around the mother being there for the kids all the time, and being a full time mother’, but I don't necessarily agree with women staying at home all day.

Mustafa's statement demonstrates that Pakistani culture has a way of conceptualizing motherhood, and the role of women more generally, that Americans fail to appreciate or even understand. He therefore finds himself in the uncomfortable situation of explaining and even defending Pakistani gender roles, even though he himself disagrees with them. Perhaps being on the boundary between the two cultures has provided him with a unique perspective, as he offered this insight on the supposed clash of value systems: “Even though they might appear to be

opposing sets of values, it really comes back to a mentality and a system of looking at the world.”

It is unclear whether Jasmine simply misunderstood the question or truly conceptualizes it so differently than the other respondents. “There are major similarities between the fundamentals of Islam and America” she began, “[but there is] always going to be some kind of conflict, because we are so different here.” When asked for more detail as to what she meant by “different”, Jasmine delivered a vague and unsatisfying monologue on how American life is “hectic” and Islam means “peace”, therefore the two are in conflict. She made frequent references to Islam being a “gray area” religion, but the meaning of this statement was not ascertained.

Yahya expressed one of the two genuinely affirmative responses to the question of whether conflict exists between American and Islamic values. He emphatically rejected any prospect of a harmonious relationship between the two, yet also maintained that the two cannot be meaningfully compared:

When people talk about it they are actually trying to compare apples to oranges. America is not a religion, it is a political identity with strong cultural roots. Islam is a religion and it's not tied down to any culture, or politics or country. They're never gonna get together.

When asked to consider ‘Islamic’ and ‘American’ as ways of life to better facilitate their contrasting, Yahya responded:

No, it will not mesh at all. If someone tries to live Islamically in the US, there are just a lot of guidelines that you have to adhere to, beyond how you eat or dress, to how you should think... If you're a moderate, it works, if you're a liberal it works.

Soroush also cogently demarcated a line between America and Islam, though a careful reading leaves one wondering if it is Islam in general of which he spoke, or the Shia Islam he learned in Iran. On an individual level, Soroush argued, Muslims like himself can cope, but on the institutional and cultural levels the differences are irreconcilable:

Do I think they cannot work together? For sure I think they can work together. Do I think they're different? Yes, they are different. They're really different. I mean, secular culture that exists in the West is totally different than Islamic culture, the bases are different, reflections and manifestations are different, the practices are different. But then again, I'm speaking in a cultural level, I'm speaking in... like, Islamic system, Islamic mentality vs. secular Western mentality. I'm not talking about at the individual level... But as a philosophical viewpoint, I think they are a lot different. There's definitely differences between Islamic thoughts and Western secular, as a dominant culture in this country.

Though several respondents spoke of a clash between Islamic and American values, a careful reading reveals that more often these perceptions came from outside sources, and the respondents themselves often disagreed with these sentiments. Some played Devil's advocate by means of example, arguing points of view they themselves did not hold but had simply heard before. Only two respondents gave meaningful and significant examples of value clash.

### *Pro-American Attitudes*

The comments offered here are notable for both their sincerity and their spontaneity. They are useful in the sense that not only do they provide contrast to the aforementioned oppositional attitudes; they also afford greater insight to the conviction with which many respondents call America home. Further, they furnish an appropriate segue into the following section.

Ali admitted that he was at first unsure about moving to the US, but now states "this is a great place to live... this is home. This city is a wonderful place to be. I feel more at home here than anywhere else." Fadi spoke affably of life in America and the reception immigrants receive:

After you're here for a while you realize it's a wonderful place, many opportunities, you can be what you want, and despite what happens today, the stereotyping, the prejudice, it's still a better society than any other at accepting newcomers... The US is amazing in that.

Natasha invoked the civic pride she shares with other American Muslims, "I know a lot of Muslims, and they're actually really happy to be here, they talk about how blessed they are to be in a country [like this] as opposed to what you hear about countries like France."

Khadija commented on how she came to serve in the US military. “There were some jobs open in the health care field, I applied and the doors were open. I served five years in the Air Force. It was a very good experience.” Like Natasha, Khadija also noted the love that many American Muslims have for their country:

I haven’t seen any Muslim American say ‘Oh, I hate it here’. They love it! That’s why they stay here, they send their kids to school every morning, they go to work every day, they have dreams, buy a house eventually, help raise their grandkids...

Though only four respondents (17%) offered such ringing endorsements of America, the fact remains that they were unsolicited and seemed genuinely sincere. Further, they highlight the fact that for most immigrants to the US, Muslim or not, they are here because they want to be here.

### *No Conflict*

The majority of respondents reported that they perceived no conflict whatsoever between American and Islamic values and several expressed surprise at the question itself. Most were quick to deny the allegation, though they often did so for a plethora of different reasons. Overall, it should be noted that not only do they deny any conflict between the values they hold as Muslims and as Americans, their responses often demonstrated the perplexing nature of the question. It was clearly something many of them had never considered.

Aisha simply stated “I don’t believe that. That’s not right.” Others were likewise brief, “The values of Islam and America fit together” Ahmed insisted, “It isn’t Islam against America.” Like several other respondents, Ahmed drew upon the values that Islam shares with Christianity as exemplary of why the two should be regarded as concordant. Ron said the “values fit

together”, yet also noted that Muslims should do a better job of stressing Islam’s emphasis on family.

Lina was quick to reject any discord, “I don’t agree with that... I don’t see any difference between what American values teach you and what Islam teaches you.” Abbas was more willing to acknowledge that some differences do exist. “There’s not much that really conflicts with each other” he assured, “except for the separation of church and state”. Other respondents also mentioned America’s separation of church and state as something they found disagreeable. This finding was not pursued or as it would have detracted from the focus of the interview. This may be an avenue for future research on Muslims and American politics.

Ali provided a more detailed answer. His response touches on several themes: the commonalities that many felt were evident, the lackluster efforts of Muslims in America to properly demonstrate that commonality, and the role of the media in perpetuating negative stereotypes:

There is a lot more in common. Yes there are differences, but there are so many commonalities. What surprises me is that America is so conservative, but people don’t see the commonalities with Islam. And that’s because Muslims have done a bad job of representing Islam. As we go forward, if two things happen: very slowly change the American media mindset, and the American mindset through that, and also educate Muslims about their strengths and how to interpret that through the context of American culture.

As mentioned above, several respondents defined American values as Christian values.

Talia noted that Islam and Christianity share certain values, particularly those associated with the Protestant Ethic:

If you’re hardworking good things will happen to you, living a good life, being a good person, being a righteous individual, good things will happen to you. I feel like that resonates well with Islam... There isn’t really a clash between them, they fit well together.

Emma seconded this notion, comparing Christianity to Islam, “I think they can go together. A lot of values are similar.” Conversely, Nuriya was not so supportive, “I don’t think that American values are based off Christian values”, she declared, and then continued by

denying that America had any values whatsoever, “There seems to be no values to me, sometimes. I don’t see a clear value, to be honest.” Nuriya’s comments, put in their proper context, are less incendiary than they seem here. She felt that America allowed her to be the person she wanted to be, and also exhibited the same practiced aloofness and distance when asked about her parent’s Pakistani culture.

Muhammad made reference to America’s political origins in formulating his answer, “If you were to look at the values of the founding fathers, the Bill of Rights, those aren’t in conflict with Islam.” Latifah did much the same:

Go read the Declaration of Independence. The values of Islam are a great parallel to the Declaration of Independence, the pursuit of life, liberty and happiness, because that’s exactly what Islam intended.

Latifah furthered her point by discussing the *Sharia* (Islamic Law), a topic of great consternation for those most fearful of America’s legal system becoming Islamized. Carrying on with the same themes, Omar spoke exhaustively on the subject:

There is not a whole lot of contradiction between being a Muslim and what you call the American values, or the family values... Everything is focused around humanity, being a nice citizen, law abiding citizens, following the rules, and that’s part of Islam and being a Muslim, abiding by the laws of the country. The Constitution, when you look at it, it’s identical to what Islamic values are... Islamic *Sharia* is synonymous with the rules and laws of this country. There is hardly any contradiction. When it comes to what *Sharia* is... I think American law per se incorporates all of it... I think 90% of US law, when you look at it, is similar to *Sharia*.

One cannot help but wonder if there is not a fair amount of wishful thinking at work here. Nonetheless, the point to be made is that these respondents view America and Islam as being amicable partners on a variety of levels. Natasha took a different tack, pointing to American converts to Islam:

There are a lot of American converts to Islam, and they don’t stop defining themselves as Americans. If it were in conflict it would have died out (in the US) by now, but it hasn’t, it’s one of the fastest growing religions.

Nora, who confessed that her mother has a PhD in Sociology, said Islam works with some social classes but not others. Like many respondents, she was initially surprised by the question, asserting “The values of America and Islam do fit together... I do not see why they wouldn’t.” When asked to provide more detail, Nora advanced her hypothesis:

The upper-middle class, professionals, they all have the same values, they are healthy, want their kids to be healthy... The lower socioeconomic status people, who survive on McDonalds and TV dinners and instant gratification, that’s a completely different mentality, Islam would never fit in with their values... I think it’s more of a class distinction, people who are educated know delayed gratification, they have long foresight.

Her comments seem to construe Islamic values as being exclusively compatible with the upper-middle class American values she and her husband share, a notion that curiously ignores the masses of poor, uneducated Muslims around the world. However, this interpretation runs counter to the impressions she gave during the interview. Rather, her statements should be read as indicating that Islamic values are congruent with what she feels are the best of American values.

Sheila began by referencing America’s ‘melting pot’ character, “[America] is a land for everyone, and that should include Islam.” She offered herself and her family as “living proof” of Islam and America’s compatibility. However, Sheila became increasingly uncertain the more she thought about it:

I’d like to think they can, but sometimes I don’t know. There’s a lot of head butting between the two. I think they can, but at the same time I don’t know if they can. This is gonna make me think about it for a long time.

As she related in an earlier chapter, Fatma has been working with her children’s school board to ensure sure that hers and other American Muslim children grow up well acclimated to American life, which she feels is congruous with her religion:

The American values are the same as the Muslim values, like family, being loyal... family, friends, pursuit of happiness, all those things... there’s nothing there that goes against Islam. So I actually really strongly believe that for sure Muslims can be Americans and also be Muslims and retain their identity. That’s what I’m trying to do with my kids.

While some Muslims shrink away from the public sphere for fear of discrimination and rejection, Fatma argues that they should be more engaged, an attitude shared with Ron and Ali, among others. Fatma believes that there is no contradiction between being an American and being a Muslim and that, furthermore, Muslims have a lot to offer American society:

There is nothing in Islam that goes against American values. What are Islamic values? Be good to your kin, be good to others, work for society, forbid evil and enjoin good. I think there is nothing in that that is intrinsically un-American. What are American values? I think of the constitution, the pursuit of happiness, being loyal to America. There is nothing in that that goes against being a Muslim. If anything, if we are here, then we can be really good at being good Americans. We can really work hard to make this society better, 'cause that's what our religion teaches us, and I think that if a lot of people saw that they would really appreciate Muslims as well. I always thought Islam is about social justice.

It might be recalled that Fadi is very nonreligious and therefore his insistence on no conflict between American and Islamic values should be taken with a grain of salt. His previous comments demonstrate that he finds fault in religion and is indeed at odds with it in his own life. Nevertheless, Fadi provided Islam in America with a ringing endorsement:

I think they're extremely the same. What are the values of Islam? Religion. Religion is very important in the US. In the US we have one God, Islam believes in one God. I don't understand the difference.

He continued by discussing what he feels is a key issue in the misunderstanding between Islam and America: the *niqab*, or face veil. Uncommon in his native Syria, and closely associated with fundamentalist forms of Islam, the *niqab* is also a point of contention for Fadi, as his remarks demonstrate:

The biggest, easiest thing for Western society to criticize is the appearance of a woman when she wears *hijab*. There are some Muslim societies where women cover the face, nothing to do with Islam, it's not mentioned in the Book (Quran), it's not in the *Sunna* (example of Muhammad); that is not. It's a cultural thing.

Fadi observed repeatedly that when he first came to the US twenty-five years ago, Islam was not such a controversial or pressing issue. He believes American society is becoming more and more religious, a trend that he finds particularly irksome:

I don't feel them at odds, and they weren't many years ago, there was no mention.... I think in the future you're gonna have an upsurge of Islam in the West. They're not at odds, it's all superficial. So many people pay attention to the skin of the matter rather than the core of it. There is no conflict.

Maryam gave a very complex and contradictory response, at first suggesting that the two cannot be compared, "They're like apples and oranges, cause one's a religion and one's a cultural identity." She then also insisted that she "can't think of anything that the two conflict about, they kind of go together." Maryam then referred to the problems that she perceives young American Muslims are facing, "It's a clash, two ways of life. That's when the child ends up getting confused." On the whole, her replies were more positive than negative, and she finished her discussion with this thought:

I don't think there's a contradiction between Islamic identity and being an American, I think it's just how you want to take it forward and make it how you want it to be. You can be a Muslim living in America and be as Americanized as you want to be.

The most important findings for this key section of the study are that a strong majority (78%) of respondents unequivocally reject the existence of a value conflict between their faith and country, and many of those seemed almost bewildered by the very notion. This finding is especially telling in that many respondents struggled to think of how anyone might view them as conflicting.

### *Discussion*

Many respondents were astounded by the question, asking for further clarification and struggling to imagine a scenario in which their values as a Muslim and as an American meaningfully conflicted. At least four respondents (17%) began by simply asking "What are American values?" A question which was promptly directed back at them in hopes of avoiding researcher influence and also to ensure a more complete understanding of how these individuals

conceptualized American culture. As noted in previous chapters, some respondents attempted to argue “America has no culture”, an opinion for which they were not refuted but rather asked to elaborate upon.

Oppositional attitudes could be from the individual, from the society from which they come, or from other Muslims in America. The oppositional attitudes of which respondents spoke should not be attributed directly to them, as they often bring them up as examples of thinking and opinions with which they disagree and find fault. The opposition often came in the form of criticism directed toward respondents, attempting to discourage them from adopting American values and behaviors (Ajrouch 2004). Further, some experienced opposition from other Americans who feel that Muslim values exist in opposition to American values (Rauf 2004).

Occasionally, very pro-American feelings were expressed, with respondents speaking of their love and admiration for their host country. Again several respondents made explicit reference to previous generations of immigrants and the struggles they faced, which may be viewed as an attempt to weave themselves and their story into the greater narrative of American history. Some respondents regarded Christian values as a link between Islamic and American values. They conceptualize Islamic and Christian values as holding much in common, and American values as being essentially Christian. Others focused on American family values, which they saw as a close parallel to Islamic family values (Hasan 2000). Still others envision a meaningful congruence between the best aspects of American and Islamic value systems (Rauf 2004).

For those who felt that conflict does exist between the value systems of America and Islam, their reasons for thinking so were often quite different. However, rather than evidence that there are many reasons why the two cannot coincide, these denials are perhaps better understood

on a case by case basis in which their particulars are examined. At times respondents resented the comparison of a national or political entity with a religion and stated that such analogies are poorly evinced.

Five respondents (22%) feel conflict exists, yet a careful examination of their responses reveals that the conflict they spoke of is held by others, not by themselves specifically. Some noted that if a conflict does exist, it is better thought of as one between differing cultures; a misunderstanding that is essentially temporary. All said and done only two (9%) of the 23 respondents unequivocally answered in the affirmative, Yahya and Soroush.

Yahya's afterthought, "if you're a moderate it works, if you're liberal it works", is telling. Drawing upon his comments presented above, as well as others he made during the interview, it is clear that Yahya perceives religiousness as synonymous with fundamentalism. A forgivable error, but also a very suggestive one, as the strict, uncompromising nature of fundamentalist strains of Islam is indeed incompatible with a modern, pluralistic society, as America is increasingly becoming. The point being that Yahya's comments delineate the incompatibility of America with radical Islam, an assertion that few would challenge. Fundamentalist Islam is significantly different than its more traditional, moderate manifestations (El Fadl 2005). However, Bagby's (2011) survey of American mosques found that only 1% of American mosques endorsed *Salafism*, a popular strain of fundamentalist Islam. Further, Yahya's remarks leave room for moderate and liberal Muslims, which constitute the great majority of Islam's adherents in America (El Fadl 2005).

Soroush's rejection of a possible harmonious relationship is rooted in his conceptualization of America as a series of secular institutions in which religion can find no purchase. The only respondent from Iran, where he spent fourteen years of his life, including

adolescence, Soroush was raised within a theocratic system in which religion and politics were joined at the hip. Therefore, it is understandable that he finds America especially secular, as his measuring stick for such things is different than that of most respondents.

Fatma also made reference to fundamentalist, militant Islam in Pakistan and other parts of the world, expressing her disgust and revulsion with the way her religion is used. Few other respondents made mention of this topic. As a side note, none of the interview questions focused specifically on ascertaining the Islamic discourse to which a respondent adhered. Considered here subjectively by the author, most exhibited either a tendency toward traditional Islam or secularism. Some exhibited touches of progressivism or conservatism, but none overwhelmingly so. Further, none expressed an inclination toward Salafi, or fundamentalist Islam (El Fadl 2005), though some, such as Fatma, mentioned their disapproval of Islamic fundamentalism.

Khadija's revelation of time served in the US military was an unexpected finding. It raises the question of how American Muslims serving in the US military negotiate what may ostensibly be conflicting notions of identity and loyalty (Mubarak 2004). The current study may one day serve as a precursor to research on this small yet compelling population.

Separation of church and state came up with several respondents as something they would like to see changed in America. This is interesting for it can be interpreted in two divergent ways: either American Muslims hold a system of thought and values inconsistent with the American insistence on pluralism and secularism, or, conversely, it may be suggested that their decrying of the separation of church and state, coupled with their impression that American values and political leaders are primarily Christian ones, is itself evidence that they feel a strong predilection toward American values. Regardless, the differing ways they approached the question and the thoughtful answers they provided are evidence that the respondents of this study

are aware of the interplay between the value systems of their religion and culture, both of the sending country and of America. This awareness lends itself to critical self-examination of who they are and what they believe, and plays an important role in their definition and development of an American Muslim identity (Peek 2005a).

# Chapter four: Conclusion

## Major Findings

Some of the major issues to emerge during interviews shed light on more than just the initial research questions. A short summary of key findings is presented here before diving into the research questions more directly.

Though some respondents admitted to downplaying their Muslim status from time to time, this is only the most superficial of evidence of a conflicted identity. Such behavior is common practice amongst the general population, as identities are often changed and adapted depending on the situation.

The problems that some respondents experienced with their identity as American Muslims, especially in regard to their presentation of self and direct experiences of prejudice, were primarily relegated to their adolescence. These problems were often acute during the pre-teen and teenage years and typically resolved by young adulthood.

Many respondents spoke favorably of the freedoms America provides, yet some also tended to associate greater freedom with greater license to follow immoral desires. Case in point, almost every respondent mentioned alcohol and some disapprovingly associated its use with ‘typical Americans’. In fact, several used this as an important demarcation between themselves and other Americans. However, many more sought to connect themselves to America, arguing that the challenges and prejudices they face are unremarkable compared to what other immigrants have faced before them. This attempt to weave American Muslims into the greater tapestry of immigrants to America who have ‘made good’ is one of the more compelling findings of this study.

Also of interest were the ways that respondents viewed the assimilation of their children. The most integrated respondents often failed to mention the issue at all, perhaps in part because they tended to be younger and unmarried. Conversely, the least integrated respondents spoke unprompted of their desire to ensure their children would grow up feeling American. This may be suggestive of them trying to save their children from the conflict they experience in holding both American and Muslim identities, but could also be evidence that they feel there is no conflict, and therefore do not hesitate to encourage their children in becoming more deeply integrated. Considering these respondents were typically latecomers, and selected into immigration as adults, it is perhaps safe to assume the latter.

A third of respondents felt that there was no clear sense of an American Muslim identity to speak of, but that they could foresee such a development for future generations. Nearly half claimed that there was indeed an American Muslims identity already, and that their lives and experiences were living proof. These respondents tended to be the most integrated. However, three of these affirmers argued that this unique identity was a result of a sense of shared prejudicial treatment and an experience of being otherized.

Though only one interview question dealt with prejudice, respondents supplied a wealth of data. Altogether, nearly half reported having experienced direct anti-Muslim prejudice. Whether experienced directly or not, most felt the weight of prejudice in their own lives and some felt that the most significant source was popular entertainment such as television and film.

It should be noted once again that much of the direct prejudice experienced occurred in the respondent's adolescence, especially at school, where differences are exploited and bullying is common. This is one of the most important findings of this study, as much of the research characterizing American Muslims as victims of conflicted identities has focused on adolescents.

Most occurrences of prejudice reported by my respondents took place during their teenage years. This prejudice rarely continues into adulthood, as most respondents reported no longer having such problems as adults. Considering this finding, it is plausible that much of the previous research on the 'identity crisis' suffered by American Muslims is characterized by selective sampling, and cannot be reliably applied to the general American Muslim population.

Furthermore, the extensive focus on the problems facing American Muslim youth serves the dual and conflicting purposes of raising awareness of the struggles these young people face during their adolescence, yet also pathologizes them in the process. The challenges that accompany their coming of age are no doubt aggravated by their experience of being members of a mistrusted minority; yet extensive scholarly focus on this transient part of their lives constructs American Muslims as fundamentally conflicted, thus inviting more research in a similar vein and further stigmatization. Further, this focus on victimization ignores their own agency and often extensive community and familial support networks.

When speaking of a possible clash between the values of Islam and America, only two perceived a genuine conflict. One conceptualized a clash between American values and those of fundamentalist, puritanical Islam; no argument there. The other conceived America as an inherently secular society, divorced of any religion. This respondent came from Iran, a theocracy where religion permeates nearly every aspect of social life. It is therefore no small wonder that he found the two incongruous. One of the key findings of this study is that American Muslims envision a great deal of similarity and compatibility between the values of their faith and country.

Turning attention to the initial research questions more directly: *Do American Muslims find the values of Islam and America to be incongruent?* For the most part the answer is no;

though there were exceptions. Soroush, Yahya and Jasmine all stressed that Islam and America held incongruent value systems. Though as noted, upon careful inspection these claims are contestable. Yahya equated the values of Islam with fundamentalist forms of the religion, and was right to argue their being in conflict. Most respondents were much more moderate in their interpretation of Islamic values, and found there to be no conflict whatsoever.

Jasmine equated Islam with the conservative Arabian culture of her mother's Algeria, and found it to be incongruent with America's 'hectic' lifestyle. Though she was right in assessing these two cultures as dissonant, few other respondents conflated Islam and Arabian culture as thoroughly as Jasmine. Indeed, many spoke of their ability to discern between Islam and the culture of their sending country; a skill that Jasmine professed but did little to exhibit.

Finally, Soroush was quite right when he argued that American values and Islamic values were eminently incompatible, so long as one remembers that Soroush's concept of Islamic values and culture is primarily based upon the Islamic Republic of Iran in which he spent his formative years. The values of America and of the Iranian regime are in conflict; an assertion that will not be challenged. Though as the only respondent raised in a genuine theocracy, Soroush's ideas do not match those of the rest of the sample.

By and large, most respondents felt that Islamic and American values complimented each other. However, that is not to say that holding both identities was not without complications. Several respondents noted the difficulty of being a Muslim in America; conversely, many discussed their freedom to practice their faith more fully in the American context.

The most significant finding was that there was little to reconcile. With the exception of high school and the conflicting demands it presents on teens in their formative years, respondents largely felt they were free to be Americans and Muslims simultaneously without sacrificing one

for the other. This is reminiscent of the selective acculturation of Portes and Rumbaut (2001) and the notion of adhesive identities described by Yang (1999). Houston provides these individuals with a multi-cultural atmosphere in which pluralism is the norm. This enables them to adopt the aspects of American culture they find favorable and complimentary to their ethnic/cultural background and to absorb them at a leisurely pace.

Most respondents either felt that there was an authentic American Muslim identity or that they could envision one emerging for future generations. Immigrant respondents often spoke of their appreciation for the US and the citizenship it had extended to them. Some expressed a sense of duty to be model citizens and make the most of their adopted country's opportunities. Several mentioned that American Muslims are in the slow and painful process of paying their dues as newcomers to American society, but even this assertion implies continuous movement toward further integration.

Others, especially 2<sup>nd</sup> and 1.5 generation respondents, were careful to distance themselves from more 'typical' Americans who were conceptualized as materialistic and pleasure seeking. This is arguably evidence of their segmented assimilation. However, though it involves a rejection of 'typical' Americans, this should not be mistaken for downward assimilation. These young people are not identifying with lower SES populations or adopting oppositional attitudes, but rather turning away from behaviors they find morally objectionable.

*Do the experiences of these American Muslims fit into the fundamentally conflicted identity framework?* Some, such as Yahya and Jasmine do seem legitimately dismayed by their situation. I do not contend that no American Muslim is faced with difficulties, but rather that the fundamentally conflicted identities with which American Muslims in general are characterized is at once hyperbolic and largely unrepresentative.

The framework is not representative of the majority of American Muslims who took part in this study. Given that so few respondents could scarcely be described as ‘fundamentally conflicted’, and that, as these interviews have hopefully made evident, the vast majority seemed anything but conflicted, how relevant is the conflicted framework? Based on the findings of the current study, I argue that the ‘identity crisis’ which is said to devastate the everyday lives of American Muslims is much less prevalent than research suggests, and more significantly, it is mostly relegated to adolescence.

The framing of the American Muslim experience should not be of the poor, powerless Americans who just happen to be Muslim, caught in a culture that hates and fears them; victims from birth. Not only does this paint all American Muslims with the same brush, but the portrait is an awful one, not to mention largely uncharacteristic of the population and misleading. Rather, let us turn our attention to the agency young American Muslims in particular are demonstrating in their efforts to define themselves and their religion. This is an exciting time, as we are witnessing the emergence of a generation proud to be both American and Muslim.

### **Limitations of this study and directions for future research**

Aside from the rather small size, the sample itself was somewhat unrepresentative of American Muslims in terms of their racial/ethnic backgrounds. Seventeen of the 23 respondents (74%) were of South Asian descent; be it Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi, compared with an estimated 33% nationally (Bagby 2011). Further, this study was conducted in Houston, Texas and the neighboring city of Sugarland, Texas. Both cities have relatively high Muslim populations, which likely provided respondents with a social network of friends and family, mitigating prejudice and buffering integration. Sugarland in particular is home to higher SES

families and a great number of immigrants in general. Seven respondents (30%), all of South Asian descent, were residents of Sugarland. It is worth noting that these seven differed greatly from one another in their visibility as Muslims and their levels of integration, representing the spectrum rather than a niche.

This thesis is in some respects a pilot toward further studies of the American Muslim community. The theoretical framework and methods employed here are amenable to inquiries into the lives and experiences of American Muslims with LGBT sexual orientations, those serving or having served in the US military, those who subscribe to the fundamentalist Salafi creed, and to a lesser extent American converts to Islam who may have met with familial or community resistance to their change of faith.

More specifically, future studies may wish to examine the role of religiosity in mediating a conflicted identity. This study included a question on religiosity, but the data obtained for this question were at times inconsistent with other statements made by the respondents when considered wholly, and deemed unreliable for meaningful analysis. It would be useful to understand how American Muslims employ religion as a means of both buffering and facilitating their integration into American society.

Sorting religious identity from cultural background is a daunting task. Further, one may ask how much of the experience of American Muslim immigrants and their children can be tied directly to their identities as Muslims or as immigrants. In order to approach this issue, future research may wish to conduct comparative studies between the experiences of immigrant Muslims and their children and Black and white converts to Islam. Such comparative studies may enable scholars to tease out the issues common to all American Muslims, immigrant or not.

Interestingly, several respondents commented that they would like to see less of a separation of church and state in America. This finding was surprising, especially since American Muslims could not reasonably expect Islam to be represented in a de-secularized American government. Future studies should inquire as to how American Muslims understand this separation, and what implications they foresee for a greater representation of religious thought and values in American legal systems. If I were to hazard a guess and I would expect this sentiment to be uncommon amongst more thoroughly integrated American Muslims, and perhaps not extensively thought through by those who advocate for a lessening of the separation of church and state.

Finally, and most importantly, future studies of the American Muslim population should be wary of the bias inherent in the commonly utilized fundamentally conflicted framework. Though convenient and commonsensical, there can be little doubt that it must taint researcher expectations, instruments and findings. I encourage future work into the processes of American Muslim identity formation and negotiation to avoid such stigmatizing assumptions and to seek out more 'value-free' avenues which will no doubt result in more authentic representations.

## Appendix

### American Muslim Identities – Interview Questions

1. Have you ever wanted to ‘pass’ as a member of a different group? For example: would you let people think you were from a different ethnic group if it meant favorable treatment? Do you know anyone who does this?
2. Do you ever feel like presenting yourself differently to different people? For example: do you ever want to act more like a Muslim or more like a non-Muslim American depending on who is around you? Do you know anyone who does this? What types of things do they do?
3. If I asked you for a list of five words describing yourself, what would they be? Why do you think you have chosen these words? Are there times when some of these words describe you better than others?
4. How much should Muslims try to become like ‘typical’ Americans, or should they at all? In becoming American, does a person gain or lose something of what it means to be a Muslim?
5. Do you ever feel like you have to choose between being an American and being a Muslim? Does anyone ever expect you to choose one over the other? How do you feel about this?
6. Do you think there is such a thing as an American Muslim identity? Why or why not?
7. Which would you prefer: marrying an American who became Muslim or someone from your parent’s country that was non-Muslim? What do you think your parents would prefer for you?
8. Do you think that American Muslims are faced with prejudice? If so, do you think this is based on skin color or religion? Have you ever experienced any prejudice in your own life? What about someone you know?
9. People immigrate for a lot of different reasons, such as seeking better opportunities or escaping violence. What made your parents want to immigrate? Would they prefer to stay in the US or do they plan on moving back?

10. Are there any specific things you do, such as the clothes you wear or the way you speak, which are intended to show that you are different from non-Muslim Americans?
11. Some say a practicing Muslim is one who prays five times a day and fasts during Ramadan. On a scale of 1-5, with 5 being highly practicing, how would you rate yourself? Why is that?
12. Some people have argued that the values of Islam and America do not fit together. How do you feel about this idea? Do you ever find examples of this in your own life?
13. What important questions have I not asked?

**Table 1: Respondent Quick Reference Guide**

Name	POB	Age	T-US	T-out	R/E	Islam	Occup	Religy	Visy	MS	INT	AMI
Aisha	Pakistan	22	10	12	SA	Sunni	Student	3.5	Low	S	InB	No
Ahmed	Pakistan	23	22	1	SA	Sunni	Student	5	High	S	Well	Yes
Jasmine	Algeria	20	10	10	Arab	Sunni	Student	3	Low	S	InB	Yes
Lina	India	39	13	26	SA	Ismaili	Home	5	Low	M/2	Late	Maybe
Ali	India	41	23	18	SA	Ismaili	Financial	5	Low	M/2	Well	Yes
Emma	Pakistan	42	15	27	SA	Sunni	SmBizOwn	2.5	Low	M/2	Late	Maybe
Talia	US	20	20	0	Arab	Sunni	Student	2	High	S	Well	Yes
Mustafa	US	27	27	0	SA	Sunni	Barista	2.5	Low	S	Well	Maybe
Latifah	Canada	36	30	6	Arab	Sunni	Teacher	3	Low	D/1	Well	Yes
Khadija	Turkey	34	14	20	Turk	Sunni	Nurse	3	High	M/1	InB	No
Natasha	Saudi	22	8	14	SA	Sunni	Student	5	High	S	Well	Yes
Yahya	Algeria	31	27	4	SA	Sunni	GStudent	2	Low	M	InB	Maybe
Ron	Pakistan	42	38	4	SA	Sunni	Engineer	4	Low	M/2	Well	Yes
Nora	Pakistan	33	13	20	SA	Sunni	Dentist	3.5	High	M/2	Late	Maybe
Mhmd	US	26	26	0	SA	Sunni	Consultant	5	High	S	InB	Maybe
Sheila	Pakistan	27	24	3	SA	Sunni	Retail	3	Low	M/1	Well	Yes
Fatma	Canada	36	15	21	SA	Sunni	Home	4	High	M/3	Well	Maybe
Fadi	Syria	43	25	18	Arab	Sunni	SmBizOwn	1	Low	M/2	InB	Maybe
Soroush	US	27	14	13	Persian	Shia	GStudent	5	High	M	InB	No
Nuriya	UAE	21	10	11	SA	Sunni	Student	4	High	S	InB	Yes
Maryam	Pakistan	36	15	21	SA	Sunni	Home	4	High	M/3	Late	No
Omar	Pakistan	41	20	21	SA	Sunni	Consultant	5	High	M/3	Well	No
Abbas	US	20	20	0	SA	Sunni	Student	4	Low	S	Well	Yes

Place of birth (POB) details which respondents are native born American citizens; amount of time living in the US (T-US); time living outside the US (T-out); racial and ethnic (R/E) background; South Asian (SA), denoting India, Pakistan and Bangladesh; Arabs (Arab), with familial ties to Algeria, Syria and Egypt; Turkey (Turk) and Iran (Persian); respondents' branch of Islam (Islam); respondents' occupation (Occup); religiosity (Religy), five representing the most practicing; visibility (Visy) of Muslim status; marital status (MS); integration (Int) into American culture; recognize an authentic American Muslim Identity (AMI).

**Table 2: Percentage Breakdown by Interview Theme**

<b><u>Self-Presentation and Assimilation</u></b>		<b><u>American Muslim Identity?</u></b>	
Low Visibility	52%	Flat Rejections	22%
Higher Visibility	48%	Agreement (with caveats)	35%
Latecomers	13%	Affirmations	43%
In-betweens	35%		
Well-integrated	52%		
<b><u>Experience of Prejudice</u></b>		<b><u>A Clash of Values?</u></b>	
Indirect Prejudice	48%	Conflict Exists	22%
Direct Prejudice	48%	No Conflict	78%
No Answer	4%		

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