Microaggressions and Acculturative Stress Experienced by Muslim American High School Students

by

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Thesis

Submitted to the Faculty of

Peabody College of Vanderbilt University

For the Degree of

MASTER OF EDUCATION

in

Community Development and Action

May 2023

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Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge and give thanks to my advisor Hasina A. Mohyuddin whose guidance helped make this thesis possible. Thank you so much for responding to my countless questions regardless of time or day of the week. I would also like to thank Ashmeet K. Oberoi who graciously allowed me to use her qualitative data to further her research. Without her research and advice this paper would not have come to fruition. Lastly, thank you to Douglas D. Perkins, his class inspired me to develop this thesis topic and his support has meant the world.

I would also like to give special thanks to my fiancé, C.J. Laws, for supporting me throughout this entire process, reading countless drafts, and always being understanding of my dedication to academics. You're truly a blessing and your continued faith in me has pushed me beyond what I deemed possible.

Sincere thanks to my family- my dad, Richard, and four brothers- Alex, David, Eric, and Chris. Finally and most importantly, I would like to thank my momma, Eileen, without you absolutely none of this would be possible. Thank you for checking in every step of this process and being a continued inspiration to me in life.

Abstract

Previous research has illustrated the importance of examining both microaggressions and acculturative stress. However, there is a large gap in existing research examining the impact of microaggressions on acculturative stress in religious minority groups in the United States. This study is a qualitative analysis examining microaggressions and acculturative stress experienced by Muslim American high-school students in the Chicago area. This analysis was completed using existing focus group data collected for Dr. Ashmeet K. Oberoi's prior study completed in a Mid-western city in 2013. Two focus groups, one composed of five male students and one comprised of six female students, all between the ages of 18-22, who attended public schools in the Chicago area, were coded and analyzed with several key themes emerging. Experiences described by the students supported Nadal et al. (2012)'s existing domains for microaggressions. Further, this study applied aspects of Bashir et al. (2021) acculturative stress domains while adjusting and adding themes for acculturative stress as they were explained by the students. This study supported several past findings from Dr. Oberoi's research including gendered differences, stress related to needing to represent Islam in a positive light, and mixed relationships of support and conflict stemming from both teachers and Muslim peers. This research hopes to illustrate the need to reevaluate curricula in United States public schools and incorporate counseling as a key resource for Muslim immigrant students.

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Introduction

In 2020, the American Muslim Poll found religious discrimination remains high for Muslims, with 60 percent of Muslim adults reporting religious discrimination as well as Muslims being more inclined to face discrimination in institutional settings than members of other religious groups (Mogahed & Ikramullah, 2020). It is apparent in the media that stereotypes and discriminatory beliefs towards Muslims not only persist throughout the United States, but also negatively impact Muslims' identification as an American (Saleem et al., 2019). Western civilizations have long held Christian-based values, and while the United States claims to separate church and state, Christian values still infiltrate American institutions. Rakodi (2012) conceptualizes development as being inseparable from religion as even when one claims to be secular in thought, they have been influenced by the dominant faith tradition in their country of origin. Therefore, even institutions like public schools that strive for diversity are still inherently influenced by Christianity in America. Religion has existed in U.S. government and politics in official ways such as Eisenhower passing "In God We Trust " as the official U.S. motto, and even American currency and pledge being marked by religion (Gunn & Slighoua, 2011). Interestingly, over the last half-century, religion has re-entered the U.S. public sphere in political discourse at all levels. Even recent events, such as the overturning of Roe v. Wade have brought into question how separate the church and state truly are. While the U.S. may claim to be open to all religions, it is apparent Christianity comes first, so how does that impact the development of Muslim youth in the United States? For Muslim American youth, many of whom are first or second generation immigrants, the influence of Christianity in public spaces like schools may be especially difficult to navigate. Microaggressions experienced by Muslim students and

Acculturative stress resulting from experiences are two possible ways Muslim American students' experiences may differ from non-Muslim American students.

Literature Review

According to Pew Research Center (2017), only about a quarter of U.S. Muslims have been in the U.S. for three generations or longer meaning, a majority of Muslims are still first and second generation immigrants. Muslim immigrants face entering a country that holds differing values and unfortunately, has a history of discrimination and oppression. There has long been an implicit idea of what an "American" is and along with that an assumption, due to discriminatory beliefs, that Muslims cannot fit the American mold; that there is something to which Muslims must explicitly assimilate. Amonyeze (2017) points out discrimination is not a past event in America but a current subject which requires new perspectives and social attitudes. Given the impact both explicit and implicit discrimination can have on youth, it is crucial to address bias and inequities in schools. When considering the relationship between immigration and acculturation it is important to consider both the historical and attitudinal situation in the society to which one immigrated; societies can either provide social support to immigrants or seek to minimize differences (Berry, 1997). Berry (1997) outlines how even countries that are considered more accepting and pluralist in nature can have boundaries determined by relative acceptance of cultural, racial, and religious groups. The role of schools in ensuring belongingness is important as immigrant students who are involved in an acculturation process often face interference in their sense of belonging while adjusting to the dominant culture (Kayama & Yamakawa, 2020).

Discrimination, in any form, is the antithesis of belonging and thus, should be addressed due to the potential effects on youth. Microaggressions are "a form of discrimination (often

unintentional and unconscious) that send negative and denigrating messages to members of marginalized racial groups" (Nadal et al., 2012, p. 16). Microaggressions are crucial to examine because the perpetrator can often be unaware of their derogatory slights and insults when in communication with minority groups (Sue et al., 2007). "Because microaggressions are discriminatory, the effects of perceived discrimination stay with the student—whether the microaggression occurred in the classroom, on the playground, during lunch, or even outside of school" (Lin et al., 2016 as cited in Steketee et al., 2021, p. 1085). Furthermore, Zine (2001) studied Muslim youth in Canada and found students in public schools struggled to resist conformity in social settings, which continued the dichotomy of "insiders" and "outsiders." She also mentioned resisting conformity, in this case, was manifested through the maintenance of relationships with Muslims outside of schools (Zine, 2001). In the United States public school system, both microaggressions and dimensions of acculturative stress are likely to have lasting impacts on Muslim students.

Microaggressions

Research has indicated microaggressions, consisting of microassaults, microinsults, and microinvalidations, can affect nearly every aspect of a marginalized individual's life (Sue et al., 2007, 274-275). Post the September 11th terrorist attacks on the United States, attitudes toward Muslim and Middle Eastern people have become increasingly negative (Abu-Ras & Abu-Bader, 2008). In one study after 9/11, approximately forty percent of Americans admitted to being prejudiced towards Arabs, Muslims, or both (Abu-Ras WM et al., 2009, as cited in Abboud, 2019). Likely, this event along with stereotypes related to extremism have contributed to a rise in religious microaggressions towards those in the Muslim community. Hate crimes against Muslims had a 17 percent increase in 2017 with reports of verbal abuse, discrimination, bullying,

and microaggressions (Agrawal et al., 2019). Pervasive negative attitudes towards Muslims were also impacted by former President Donald Trump as an increase in anti-Muslim hate groups coincided with his campaign and presidency (Lajevardi, 2021). Muslim women who wear traditional dress may be the target of discrimination and Islamophobia at increased rates (Sediqe, 2022). Pop culture magazine *The Scene* published a video in which they interviewed Muslim women about what they are tired of hearing; responses varied from comments about the hijab to questions that are actually cultural and not religious like arranged marriage or women's agency (Iris, 2017).

"Passing" is also an important concept when studying microaggressions against Muslims (Johnson & Nadal, 2010, as cited in Nadal et al., 2012). Those who do not wear traditional clothing or who may appear to fit in more with the dominant group may hold privileges over others within their own community. Often, microaggressions have been studied under a racial lens with very few researchers focusing on the racialization of religion. Even the beginning of American history was rooted in race relations between Native Americans and Puritans where, "Christianity served to unite early Americans under a single attribute, but also to identify others as outsiders" (Husain & Howard, 2017, P.144). This racialization of religion continues today with microaggressions also being directed at non-Muslim Middle Eastern individuals due to assumptions of religious affiliation based on appearance and lack of understanding of religious diversity of those of Middle Eastern heritage. The conflation of Arab with Muslim in America can be traced to the Naturalization Era (1790-1952) when, "whiteness was a prerequisite for American citizenship" (Beydon, 2013, P.1). However, this conflation existed prior in an Orientalist framework where Arab and Muslim conflation was linked to the broader East and West dichotomy (Beydon, 2013). Aziz (2022) explains how colorism exists at the root of

American racism thus, the phenotype of skin color restricts many Muslims from American privileges despite secularization or assimilation.

Microaggressions both subtle and overt can be draining psychologically and physically, often leading to higher levels of stress and diminished mental health (Nadal et al., 2012). While age and multicultural training can diminish levels of explicit bias, implicit bias has remained almost unchanged (Baron & Banaji, 2006; Boysen & Vogel, 2008, as cited in Berk, 2017). Microaggressions are a result of implicit bias and are often automatic, unintentional, and can occur on a daily basis (NEA Center for Social Justice, 2021). In schools the results of implicit biases are especially concerning as teacher bias can impact students' overall success. It is important to note that educators' teachings extends beyond academic focus; they teach by example, this may include tone and language used towards others as well as non-verbal actions such as allowing ignorant comments to go unchecked which in-turn gives tacit approval of similar comments (Willoughby, 2012). Microaggressions against students can occur in various ways including, "student→student, instructor→student, advisor→student, and staff→student" (Berk, 2017, P. 96) . Cherng (2017) found not only a link between teacher underestimation of academic ability and lower student expectations, but that the relationship between the two is stronger for students of color. In this study, I intend to use Nadal et. al (2012)'s categorization of microaggressions towards Muslims consisting of "1) Endorsing Religious Stereotypes of Muslims as Terrorists, 2) Pathology of the Muslim Religion, 3) Assumption of Religious Homogeneity, 4) Exoticization, 5) Islamophobic and Mocking Language, and 6) Alien in Own Land" (P.22).

Acculturation and Acculturative Stress

Acculturation refers to assimilation to a different culture, normally the dominant one, and results in the rejection of the individual's culture of origin (Schwartz et al., 2010). While biculturalism, the co-existence of two-distinct cultures, would be idyllic, it is often difficult to maintain two cultures when one culture is not accustomed to the majority of an individual's peers. In the United States, even census data chooses to classify Arab Americans as "white" overtly failing to acknowledge the many factors that influence Arab Americans including acculturative stress regarding identities which are particularly important to consider for Arab American adolescents (Goforth et. al, 2016). Previous literature by Ahmed et al. (2011) found high acculturative stress was correlated with increased psychological distress of Arab American adolescents, with 85% of the study sample being Muslim. These participants resided in one of the larger Arab communities in the United States and are predominantly of Lebanese ethnic origin but also had Iraqi and Yemeni high school students included (Ahmed et al., 2011). Interestingly, a study by Awad (2010) found Muslims reported higher levels of discrimination than Christian Middle Eastern individuals; however, it was moderated by levels of acculturation. As a result, Middle Eastern Christians reported less discrimination with dominant society immersion than Middle Eastern Muslims. This may be due to the Christian values America holds aligning more with the values of Middle Eastern Christians than Middle Eastern Muslims.

Acculturative stress is largely impactful on the development of youth across many immigrant groups (Goforth et al., 2014). In fact, acculturative stress is often more pronounced during adolescence when youth are developing their ethnic identities and discovering their role within a cultural group or society (Goforth et al., 2016). Sirin et. al (2013) found during high school years, increased acculturative stress predicted an increase in internalizing mental health symptoms as well. The three mental health symptoms explored were withdrawn/depressed,

anxious/depressed and somatic symptoms with data indicating something was occurring in the 12th grade increasing stress in immigrant origin youth (Sirin et al., 2013).

The domains of acculturation and acculturative stress seem to be debated amongst researchers, with different dimensions and methods being used. Sam and Berry (2010) elaborates on Berry's initial acculturation model, which included assimilation, integration, marginalization, and separation as key variations of acculturation, now acknowledging two variations in adaptation being psychological well-being and sociocultural competence. While previous studies have evaluated how acculturative stress, including discrimination, plays a role in Muslim youth development, none have independently evaluated microaggressions as contributing to acculturative stress and leading to poor psychological and educational outcomes. For this study I intend on focusing in on acculturative stress specifically, focusing on some of the dimensions presented by Bashir et al. (2021) who studied the experiences of Pakistani students in Dutch society these dimensions included, perceived cultural distance and challenges, perception of social and cultural differences, academic differences, familial/friend support, teacher/academic support, coping strategies, and perceived discrimination. Although, Bashir et al. (2021) had a sample of Pakistani scholars in the Netherlands, their experiences with being practicing Muslims and the psychosocial adjustment to a non-Muslim majority society made their study's domain research seem applicable to my current study. Given the findings in the literature, my research questions focus on the impact of microaggressions on Muslim youth as well as the possible relationship between microaggressions and acculturative stress.

Research Question(s)

What is the relationship between microaggressions towards Muslim adolescents and reported acculturative stress? Furthermore, how do microaggressions in public school settings impact *Muslim youths' development?*

Identifying Patterns

As the sample size (n=11) is too small to apply statistical analysis for hypotheses, rather, I intend to look at the following to identify potential patterns in analysis:

1. Muslim students reporting more scenarios that can be identified as microaggressions will likely discuss aspects of acculturative stress more.

2. Muslim women who wore the hijab during high-school years will have experienced stereotypes and exoticization more frequently than those who do not wear traditional clothing.

3. Negative stereotypes surrounding Islam will likely be related to subthemes of terrorism, radical ideology, and untrustworthiness.

4. Teachers will likely serve as support systems for Muslim students in American public schools potentially helping buffer stressors.

5. Media will play some identifiable role in perceptions of Muslim students.

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Methods

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Methodologically, I worked alongside Dr. Ashmeet Oberoi using her focus group data from her dissertation in 2014. Unlike previous studies, this paper sought to narrow down how acts that can be categorized as microaggressions, assessed through Nadal et al. (2012)'s categorization, contribute to acculturative stress impacting Muslim adolescents in high school. Oberoi (2014) collected this qualitative data with the goals of touching upon these four domains:

a) exploring the role religion played in school experiences of Muslim adolescents

b) identifying the domains of school lives that are relevant to lived experiences of Muslim adolescents, e.g., social relations at school
c) identifying sources of joy and stress or conflict related to being a Muslim in an American public school
d) identifying their adaptation and coping strategies including sources of social support to handle any challenges at school that were due to being a Muslim (Oberoi, 2014, P. 92).

Author Positionality Statement

I am a 23-year-old white woman raised in Ewa Beach, Hawai'i. I was raised Catholic but now consider myself influenced by various religious traditions. I hold a Bachelor of Arts in Psychology from Rhodes College where I minored in Islamic & Middle Eastern studies and Russian language. I am currently a master's student in Community Development and Action at Vanderbilt University's Peabody College. I have lived in both Memphis and now Nashville but, aside from visiting my fiancés family in Chicago I have limited experience in the area the participants in this study lived. I bring to this study my knowledge from past research projects, course work, and experiences. However, I recognize my position is privileged in my access to resources and I am aware of the biases I may bring due to my positionality as a white woman in the United States. I also recognize there are limitations due to me not being of the same religious background and having limited familiarity in the Chicago area. I strive to not make assumptions based on my own experiences and opinions and constantly be cognizant of how biases may shape my research.

Positionality of Researcher

Dr. Ashmeet K. Oberoi is a community psychologist, a first-generation immigrant, and is Sikh. Although Sikh by religion, she has experienced the demands to justify her religion as many made assumptions of her being Muslim (Haarlammert et al., 2017). Her multiple positionalities allowed for her to relate to the participants in some ways but not religiously she made sure to be

mindful of both her multiple positions as well as the social, cultural, and temporal space her participants occupied.

Participants

Working with Dr. Oberoi's existing focus group data comprised of Muslim young adults ages 18-22, five males and six females, who attended public school in the Chicago area, I seek to further Dr. Oberoi's research by examining how microaggressions may be a large factor in stress and conflict for Muslim youth in American public schools. Happening in two sessions separated by gender, the focus groups, although smaller in sample size, were diverse in terms of ethnicity. As Dr. Oberoi reported, "3 participants were Asian Indian (1 M, 2 F), 2 were Pakistani (1 M & 1 F), 4 Arab (3 female – Egyptian, Syrian, and Palestinian & 1 M), and 1 Yemeni male" (Oberoi, 2014, P. 94). As traditional garb can distinguish a woman as being Muslim, it is important to note that 4 of the female participants wore the hijab during their high school years. Muslims were the minority religion at each high school, and all had attended public high schools in Chicago suburbs except for one male who attended a Chicago city public school.

Sampling

Dr. Oberoi's data collection procedures included separating focus group questions into the four domains outlined above. Participants were selected through a convenience sampling method through the Muslim Student Association (MSA) at University of Illinois Chicago (UIC) and through snowballing. The initial recruitment was through email. The recruitment email was sent by MSA after meeting with the principal investigator (Dr. Oberoi). The recruitment email asked participants to get in contact with the PI either by email or phone. One on one meetings were then scheduled with interested MSA members who were interested in participating and they were given more information on the study and informed consent forms. Once forms were signed,

they were asked to fill out the "Demographic Questionnaire" (See Appendix A3 for Dr. Oberoi's "Demographic Questionnaire").

Measures

Important questions asked in Dr. Oberoi's focus groups related to this current study include demographic questions as well as focus group questions including the ones featured below:

The role their religion played in the school experiences:

- Was your religion a big deal in your school? What was the school like for a Muslim student like yourself attending it?

- How respectful was your school to your religious customs? (e.g., Place to pray, dietary restriction, religious holidays, religious /cultural clothing)

- Did you face cultural misconceptions of any kind?

Social relations- your teachers, classmates, and friends at school:

- Did any of them act in a manner or said something that was discriminatory or stereotypical? For example, something discriminatory may be if the teacher denies or treats you differently from other students because of your religion. Stereotypical, would be if they make stereotypical comments or questions about your culture (e.g. Do you speak English, are you allowed to go outside of your home?).

- Were there other Muslim students in your high school? How did the presence of other Muslim students affect your behavior? Did you feel any pressure to conform to Islamic and cultural norms because of other Muslim students at school? For instance, did you feel any pressure to conform to Islamic and cultural norms because of other Muslim

students at school? For instance, as a Latina student my friend was told she was "acting white" because she took advanced placement courses.

Sources of Joy and Stress or Conflict:

- Could you describe to me aspects of your school or school experience that you found stressful because you are a Muslim? Could you give me an example?

Sources of social support:

- When you had a school-related problem or issue specifically related to being Muslim in that school, or were just irritated at something related to school, what did you do? Is there anyone you turned to for support and guidance at school? Could you give me an example or two?

- …imagine someone you know who is also a Muslim and is about to start as a freshman in your high school, what advice would you give to that person?

These questions were asked in the focus groups as part of Oberoi (2014) dissertation study (P. 96-98). View Appendix A1 for the full focus group protocol and full question list.

Dr. Oberoi analyzed her data within the 2014 study using guidelines from Strauss and Corbin (1998) Grounded Theory approach wherein, two data analytical stages were used beginning with separating data into specific codes and then organizing them into meta-codes otherwise known as categories (Oberoi, 2014, p. 95). In my study, I used the Structural Coding process presented by Saldaña (2016) in which all the data was categorized into segments by similarities, differences, and relationships compared to my research questions. Following this approach, I looked specifically at how microaggressions contributed to acculturative stress in

reported high school scenarios. The process of open coding where words and phrases are taken from the data were crucial in understanding how microaggressions fit in everyday school experiences for the Muslim youth participants.

The focus groups were not conducted like a structured interview, so the participants were able to bring in relevant topics to the discussion. The principal investigator (Dr. Oberoi) made sure the students stayed within the topics of the focus groups and each focus group session was recorded. The transcript of the focus groups was viewed in designated research spaces to ensure privacy while coding. The names of participants were also de-identified with randomized abbreviations assigned in place of names. Video recordings were not viewed for this study. I analyzed and coded all conversations in the focus group one time without any existing domains or categories in mind and then evaluated those codes by the six domains presented in Nadal et. al (2012)'s including microaggressions towards Muslims consisting of:

(1) *Endorsing Religious Stereotypes of Muslims as Terrorists*: "…occurs when non-Muslim people assume that all Muslim people are affiliated with terrorism in some way" (Nadal et al., 2012, P.22). This can allude to all Muslims being violent, evil, and untrustworthy.

(2) *Pathology of the Muslim Religion*: "refers to the conscious (and sometimes unconscious) belief that there is something wrong or abnormal with someone of a different religion…" (Nadal et al., 2012, P.24). Examples include comments made about Arabic names and Muslim traditional clothing.

(3) *Assumption of Religious Homogeneity*: "When others assume all Muslim individuals share the same experiences, religious practices, or behaviors, they make a judgment that there are no differences between members of a certain group, that an entire religious group is completely homogenous" (Nadal et al., 2012, P.24-25).

(4) *Exoticization*: "…may occur when someone asks an individual an excessive amount of questions regarding any or all aspects of their religion…can also occur when people view particular religions as exotic or trendy" (Nadal et al., 2012, P. 25). An example includes fashion designers using Islamic garments in their designs.

(5) *Islamophobic and Mocking Language*: "…involves instances where people make fun of the religion, use hurtful language, and tease the people who subscribe to it" (Nadal et al., 2012, P. 26).

(6) *Alien in Own Land*: "may experience situations in which others make them feel as if they do not belong in the US even though they were born in the US or consider the US to be their home" (Nadal et al., 2012, P.27).

Preliminary predicted themes of microaggressions include exoticization, stereotypes surrounding terrorism or criminality, pathologizing cultural or religious values, and being treated as though they are not citizens. The responses will also be coded with reference to acculturative stress, specifically focusing on some of the characterizations of acculturative stress presented by Bashir et al. (2021):

(1) Perceived cultural distance and challenges: Basir et al. (2021) classified this theme as an umbrella term embodying challenges in adjustment- this includes sub-themes such as perception of differences in society and culture, language barriers, and perceived academic differences.

(2) Perception of social and cultural differences: Basir et al. (2021) classified this as a sub-theme of *perceived cultural distance and challenges*. I choose to evaluate this separately as being more directly linked to experiences of being the only Muslim or only one to see certain perspectives in comparison to non-Muslim peers.

(3) Familial/ friend support: Under the umbrella of coping strategies in Bashir et al. (2021), this refers to family and friends acting as help for students experiencing hard situations in a new environment.

(4) Teacher/academic support: Under the umbrella of coping strategies in Bashir et al. (2021), this refers to teachers acting as help for students experiencing difficulty in a new educational environment.

After coding and analyzing data, the findings were reported back to Dr. Oberoi for feedback on accuracy. This ensured, since the data is from her prior study, that she had time to view the findings and make recommendations. This study's findings will hopefully provide new insight on the impacts of microaggressions on acculturative stress in Islamic high school students within the United States.

Analysis

Upon reviewing the transcripts from both the female and male focus groups, several themes were identified. While some aspects of the dialogue fit well within the six domains of microaggressions presented by Nadal et. Al (2012) and the characterizations of acculturative stress presented by Bashir et al. (2021), several unexpected categories emerged as well. These categories include relationships between Muslims serving as a form of support as well as a form of conflict, and gender differences. Furthermore, microaggressions as well as added stress were identified from figures of authority such as teachers, security guards, and coaches. A new aspect of acculturative stress was also identified as an *added sense of responsibility* referring to any incident discussed that led the student to take on more responsibility than their non-Muslim peers would likely have to. No identifiable information is available throughout the following data as identities were obscured prior to data analysis.

Gender Differences

Prior to moving into the analysis of specific themes identified, it is important, given the dialogue, to highlight the influence of gender as a potential factor in both microaggressions and acculturative stress. Within the male focus group, many shared stories or statements regarding women in Islam. In fact, every single male student mentioned how they believe it to be more difficult for Muslim women than Muslim men in American society. This was predominantly due to women's hijabs and traditional dress being an outright symbol of the religion whereas, men can more easily conceal their faith beliefs. Below are two comments regarding the noticeable gender difference:

> "I think it's harder to be a Muslim girl. We all don't look Muslim. But to wear an outward symbol is different. It takes a lot of dedication and courage. I feel like it's easier to be a Muslim guy."

> "Right, when they [girls] walk into a room, they're being judged. In the airport, they're judged. Even though it's not them."

As discussed in past literature the notion of passing allows for Muslim men to have privilege in American society in comparison to hijabi women (Johnson & Nadal, 2010, as cited in Nadal et al., 2012). Although being Arab or of Middle Eastern appearance can also result in racial microaggressions and discrimination, the racialization of Islam appears to be gendered as both focus groups emphasize heightened microaggressions and discrimination for those wearing traditional garb. Many students discussed direct incidents that stemmed from the choice to wear a hijab. This notion of the impact of traditional garb on the microaggressions and stress women face will follow throughout several themes discussed below.

Table 1

Major Themes for Microaggressions Identified

Themes	Sub- Themes
Endorsing Religious Stereotypes of Muslims	Radical Islam Negative connotations Untrustworthy
Assumption of Religious Homogeneity	Calling on Islamic Perspective Lack of recognition of differences in faith and culture
Exoticization* (identified, not explored)	Excessive Questions
Islamophobic and Mocking Language	Expectation of being foreign Offensive language Racism
Alien in Own Land	Schools dictating holidays off and access to prayer rooms Being Othered

Table 2

Major Themes for Acculturative Stress Identified

Themes	Sub-Themes
Perceived cultural distance and challenges	Difficulty connecting with peers
Perception of social and cultural differences	Being the only Muslim Being the only one on the side of certain issues
Added sense of responsibility	Being asked to represent the entire religion Needing to self-monitor/censor

	Having to educate the entire student body, teachers, and/or administration
Family/Friend* (identified, not explored)	Serving as both sources of ● Support ● Conflict
Muslim to Muslim Relationship	Serving as both sources of ● Support ● Conflict
Teachers and School Administration	Serving as both sources of ● Support ● Conflict

Endorsing Religious Stereotypes of Muslims

A frequently identified theme throughout the focus group data was the notion of Endorsing Religious Stereotypes of Muslims. This is defined under Nadal et al. (2012) study as primarily framing the stereotypes of Muslims as terrorists but can more broadly be alluding to violence or untrustworthiness. Female students reported various stereotypes that arose including connotations of Muslims being violent, for example, being connected to radical Islamists. However, they also discussed specific events such as when a female participant describes how teachers would not be kind to her and threaten her with detention for no reason. The female student would then try and inform administration but,

"they wouldn't believe me."

She perceives the lack of untrustworthiness stemming from her wearing a hijab. Although the girls acknowledged the stereotypical statements often frustrated them, they alluded to it often being from a place of ignorance. For example, another female participant states:

> "I guess at my high school people were just so, like, ignorant about so many things… they weren't trying to, you know, spread the word in a bad way, but they just honestly didn't know."

The perpetrators of these microaggressions are noteworthy as well. While one may expect ample stereotypes to come from the peers, a majority of the discussion actually surrounded their teachers and administration. One female explains a class where a commonly respected teacher began to talk about Islam as radical,

> "...he said, something-something radical Islamists, something like that and the way he said it was with like a negative kind of connotation and I raised my hand and said what is a radical Islamist what does that mean?"

She goes on to discuss how this class frustrated her but that she took the time to speak with the teacher after the class and be patient with him. It should be noted that only one female participant mentioned their school putting forth efforts, beyond school clubs, to educate students on Islam and that she and her sister were in charge of such efforts.

The theme of endorsing stereotypes stretched beyond just the female participants and was also identified in the male focus group. In comparison to the female group who was often met with stereotypes from their teachers, the male focus group discussed stereotypes often stemming from their peers. A male student mentions that after 9/11 he wasn't attacked much, however his "close friends" would often make comments such as:

> "My friend would say 'oh hey terrorist!' and they would ask about suicide bombers in my religion."

Overtly Islamophobic statements like this, even if framed in a joking manner, can often be seen as normative as they are coming from friends. However, these statements can increase anxiety for students (Douglass et al., 2016).

Another male participant discussed needing to defend his religion to his friend because:

"he was so brainwashed with propaganda I was constantly defending it [my religion]."

The discussion of stereotypes stemming from the male's peers did not seem to create the same level of frustration the females felt from teachers. Rather, the male group spoke more about trying to understand where their peers were getting their information. Several male participants pointed out propaganda surrounding Islam affecting perceptions with one stating,

"It's the media, really."

Almost every participant mentioned a form of microaggression that was impacted by stereotypes.

Assumption of Religious Homogeneity

Throughout both the female and male focus group transcripts, there were references to peers and teachers assuming that every Muslim is the same or conflating Middle Eastern individuals with Muslims. This theme was not as frequently identified as other microaggressions. However, it is still worth highlighting as the conflation of Middle Eastern with Muslim undermines the uniqueness of both (Abboud et al., 2019) and complicates the concept of identity in the United States. In the female focus group, multiple girls mentioned frequently being asked to speak on behalf of all Muslims. For example, a female participant states:

"teachers would call on me to say 'what is the Islamic perspective on this' I was like, you know what I'm not a scholar, I'm like seventeen trying to get through high school the only thing on my mind is the test next week so."

Similar examples were echoed with the reaction to this expectation of speaking on behalf of all Muslims being: "kind of annoying."

       In the male focus group, assumptions of religious homogeneity were also connected to race and ethnic background. A male participant stated that after 9/11 his friend:

       "asked me if I was Arab. I said no and he said ok that's good."

This "friend" is conflating the Arab cultural identity with Muslim faith. Furthermore, in the male group another student references his Russian friend whose only knowledge of Islam was from the media telling him:

       "you're nothing like what I see on TV"

and even asked why Muslim people didn't speak out on the fact of them being different from the media depiction. The depiction of Muslims in the media appears to have an impact on perceptions of Muslims and Islam in general.

Islamophobic and Mocking Language

       Islamophobic and mocking language appeared in the female focus group but was more prevalent in the male focus group. Islamophobic and mocking language manifested in both non-verbal and verbal ways for the female group. A non-verbal form of islamophobia involved a hijabi female describing having her hijab physically torn off. Females who wore the hijab mentioned Islamophobia being directed at them due to their identifiability. One hijabi female, mentioned that they believe men have an easier time because they don't often wear an outright symbol of Islam,

"The thing with guys, you can't really tell unless they have a beard, or they wear a kufi on their head."

This was echoed throughout the male focus group as well. The males who had female siblings recognized passing to be a privilege in American society. One male references a time he and his sisters overheard a male say something vulgar to their female friend. He discusses his sisters' anger at him not intervening:

"My sisters and I argue about it all day and night. They say in this society, it's hard. You can say society changed, it's easier now. Your rights are protected. You know, you can't take a few blows for God? But on the other side, I know it's hard. I don't have to go through it; I look like a white boy. I can't even begin to know where they're coming from and how they feel."

This description of events illustrates the gender differences that are prevalent in microaggressions. Females who wear traditional garb are unable to separate themselves from their religion as easily as the males which can lead to them being the target of increased microaggressions. However, this is not to say the male participants did not describe several events where they also were subtly and overtly the targets of Islamophobia.

A Muslim male described the reaction from a security guard who noticed his shirt had the Palestinian flag and Arabic writing on it.

"I just thought it was a cool shirt. The security guard said something so ignorant. He said something like 'oh does it say hate America?'"

Comments like these especially from figures of authority both solidifies and enables the negative stereotypes to be perpetuated without fear of consequence. If an educator or administrator, in this

case security guard, an administrator, or a teacher, gives voice to prejudice or bias it signifies

that it is okay for students to replicate those overt or subtle behaviors (Willoughby, 2012).

Alien in Own Land

The microaggressions related to alien in own land surrounded experiences that resulted in

the othering of Muslim students either overtly by making comments about them not belonging in

the U.S. or subtly having actions that make them feel as though they don't belong. An example

of an overt comment came from the Male focus group where a male at a high school basketball

game made a comment to his sister who wore a hijab.

"Some guy told her 'what are you doing here? This isn't for your people!'"

The implied statement of her not belonging also alludes to there being a certain type of person

meant to be there. Continued commentary like this contributes to the implicit belief that there is

an ideal American and for some reason being Muslim is incompatible with that idea.

More subtle microaggressions were present as well in the form of school policies. A

female participant discusses how her school received Christian and Jewish holidays off but did

not include Muslim holidays.

"We got all the Jewish holidays off, every single Jewish holiday like ones you've never
heard of we got off and no Muslim holidays."

While not receiving all holidays off may seem like a harmless administrative choice by the

school, it connects to the notion of being American conflicting with the identity of being

Muslim. By only offering Christian and Jewish holidays, the public school brings with it a

hierarchical structure that places Christian and Jewish traditions above those of Muslims. In

order to truly be accepting in nature, Muslim students should be offered the same privileges as

Christian or Jewish students that includes having their holidays be worthy of recognition in American society.

Moving from identified themes of microaggressions, I now analyze identified themes of acculturative stress found within the focus groups.

Perceived cultural distance and challenges

Acculturative stress appeared in the responses of every participant in some form. Perceived cultural distance and challenges as proposed by Bashir et al. (2021) was identified in both the female and male focus groups. Often, this theme was identified in combination with themes of microaggressions discussed above. For example, a female participant described how many first encounters happened for her:

> "Everyone expects me to have like an accent, like a foreign accent, or you know, something funky in my life but once they realize that I'm like, just like them except I believe in like, like I have different values, like we still like the same things."

This statement is reflective of a microaggression as her peers usually make assumptions about her that she is different from them both linguistically and culturally due to her faith. Choosing to wear the hijab, she has that outward symbol of the faith described as a gender difference earlier. Furthermore, there exists a perceived cultural difference between her and her peers even though they may have similarities in other aspects beyond religious beliefs.

A commonly reflected perception of cultural difference also existed in terms of the ignorance of their non-Muslim peers. Ignorance not just in regard to lack of awareness surrounding different faiths but also overall political awareness. A male student stated,

> "Kids in high school were so ignorant to what goes on in the world…As far as political issues, people were just so ignorant to know what to say."

This theme of ignorance identified seems to be a challenge the Muslim students dealt with on several occasions.

Perception of social and cultural differences

Social and cultural differences were also identified as a theme present. The male participants spoke more to the feeling of being excluded if they did not give into peer pressure. A male participant stated a big cultural difference was in relation to the partying scene,

> "I think that for me just following some fundamentals of Islam like not dating, not drinking, not doing drugs. Stuff like that. You know I've been to parties, but it was very limited."

It is important to note that he did not necessarily view this as being negative; rather, it provided an opportunity to stay true to his faith. He stated,

> "I feel like it helped me keep my identity as a Muslim."

This male, by choosing to stay true to his religious beliefs, had to resist going to parties which in American society can strengthen one's connection to their peers. However, by maintaining his identity he is able to stay true to himself; likely feeling more connected to the values surrounding his religion than the American culture.

The female students also did not complain about the social and cultural differences. However, they did point out the difficulty in connecting with their non-Muslim peers. When talking about "preppy people", a female participant, said:

> "it's hard to like connect with them and like understand them and have conversations with them cause they're like," another student interjects: "in a different like world basically" to which the original participant affirms: "yea, they see things differently."

This back and forth and affirmation regarding the differences between "preppy people" and the Muslim students illustrates that this sort of interaction was not exclusive to one school but was prevalent in different schools in Chicago. The term preppy people is in reference to a subculture that exists in America consisting of typically upper-class students who are preoccupied with beliefs and values that only the privileged can attain (Telingator, n.d.). While there may exist difficulty for any high school student who is not part of this subgroup to relate to them, Muslim students may be under increased difficulty connecting with these peers due to their religious beliefs and values being conflicting with those in that subgroup.

Added Sense of Responsibility

The notion of having an added sense of responsibility was touched upon frequently by the female participants. Many actions including needing to seek out prayer rooms, send emails to educate the broader school community, and censor oneself to better represent Islam were woven throughout the discussion. A female student mentioned:

> "…I would, whenever any debates and stuff would go on, I would try not to get frustrated and like take out my anger like in front of everyone you know, because then I would get a bad image and I would give a bad image of Islam so you had to like always make sure you don't, you watch what you say and how you say it."

Comments like this illustrate an added sense of responsibility to act more mature than high schoolers are normally expected to in order to improve perceptions of Muslims. These actions are a unique form of acculturative stress, as they are added responsibilities that are outside the typical realm of what high schoolers are expected to do. Expectations set upon them to educate non-Muslims or act on behalf of their entire community seemed to appear alongside terms such as "frustration", "annoyance", and "hardest part." However, there is a lack of complaining

throughout, rather, many of the females expressed a sense of strength arising from the hardships

they faced such as a female who said:

> "But in the end, I feel like it made me, um, a stronger person, because I feel like I learned
> a lot and I know how to deal with people who are very ignorant at times, so, I think, I
> probably wouldn't change it—I liked the way it happened."

In addition, the notion of added sense of responsibility was also prevalent in the dialogue

with male participants especially in relation needing to defend their religion. When discussing

defending his religion to his friend, a male participant mentioned,

> "I would always tell him there are different terrorist attacks worldwide done by Jews and
> Christians but you never hear their religion brought in. There's extremists in every
> religion."

This added responsibility of educating their peers is an additional stressor that could potentially

impact student's emotions. Similar to needing to speak on behalf of an entire community,

needing to constantly explain and defend your faith may also be draining.

Another common sub-theme in both female and male groups was the added need to seek

out places to pray. A male student described that his school took away the Muslim prayer room,

> "Sophomore year they said no for a prayer room. Then we got one a year later. Then a
> year later it stopped. There was racism but it wasn't as bad. Every group has their time
> when there is hate towards them."

This back and forth can indicate how easily administration can change their mind about the

resources they give their students. It is even more interesting given in 1969 the Supreme Court

ruled that students do not "shed their constitutional rights to freedom of speech or expression at

the schoolhouse gate" (ACLU, n.d.). Thus, under the first amendment, every student should have

the right to practice their religion, which includes access to prayer rooms.

Although mental health impacts cannot be discerned through the qualitative data

provided, in support of my research question, it is obvious that the student's experiences added

acculturative stress on top of the typical stress experienced by high school students.

Muslim to Muslim Relationships

Relationships between Muslims appeared to act as an intervening factor for

microaggressions and acculturative stress. These relationships vary between both positive and

negative consequences and may in some cases act as an additional source of acculturative stress.

In many cases Muslim relationships were beneficial. A female participant states,

> "we had two hijabi girls transfer in and it was really nice because that's actually the year
> I started wearing hijab also. So, I felt like now I have more people with me, and we can
> do this together…"

Here, having a larger hijabi population provided a sense of comfort to her allowing her to feel

she was not alone in her experiences. This kind of relationship can help buffer the negative

effects of acculturative stress by providing a sense of belonging.

Interestingly, the male participants did not talk much about relationships between

Muslims beyond gender differences making it more difficult for Muslim women in comparison

to Muslim men. However, a male student mentioned that for him it was more difficult to connect

with his Muslim peers,

> "It was difficult for me. I went through a lot of problems. For my friends, faith didn't
> matter. Then for my Muslim friends, they would either criticize me or tell me to deal with
> it [my problems]."

This lack of support may be due to him being able to separate himself from his religion due to his more "white" appearance as he states. This is further elaborated by a female participant who shared:

> "I didn't wear a hijab and I'm not Arab… the hardest thing was the Arab population that are Muslims, like my brothers and sisters in Islam, did not see me as Muslim, it was really weird."

This comment suggests that while Muslim peers may act as a source of support, they may also in contrast may act as a source of stress if they perceive another Muslim student as not being a good enough Muslim.

Teachers and School Administration

Relationships with teachers were especially noteworthy throughout both focus groups. The male participants did not mention using teachers as a beneficial source of support; however, two male students did mention that if they had a problem with a teacher they would go to the dean for support. Unlike the male students a few female students did mention having their teachers as a form of support for them. A female participant mentioned:

> "…I had a few like really good teachers, and um, I got really close to them too, I would definitely go to them."

Beyond teachers being a positive source of support in times of difficulty, another student mentioned one of her teachers in a positive light for giving her sister and her the opportunity to teach the class,

> "…I was very close to a certain teacher. She was my world history teacher, and in world history, that class, we had a religion unit…Islam was a major one of those religions because it is one of the major, um, monotheistic religions in the world… When she had a question or anything or needed clarification or something, I'd always step in, and I'd be

happy to. And then ever since that year…our world history teacher, she asked the two of us [her sister and her] to give a presentation on Islam.”

This comment raised excitement from the other female participants with many exclaiming

"wow" and mentioning how cool it was that she got to teach her non-Muslim peers about Islam

in a class. She mentions how she loves doing this for her teacher and it seems to act as a tool to

educate regarding Islam including an open forum that she really believes helps spread knowledge

positively. These statements indicate some teachers act as a source for students to talk about

more than just their academic work potentially acting as a buffer for acculturative stress.

Unfortunately, teachers were also often referenced as contributing to negative

experiences for students. When discussing a teacher who had made ignorant comments, a female

student stated:

"...the fact is that he's teaching a class is kind of scary. Cause when the teacher—
someone who has so much control over other people's knowledge, when they say
something that's incorrect, now all those people think it's okay cause their teacher said it,
so that bothered me.”

Negative comments from teachers were mentioned by the male participants as well, such as this

statement:

"I was wearing a 'Free Palestine' shirt. I had one of my teachers, who I was so friendly
with since freshman year, came up to me and he was like 'what does that shirt mean?'
And I explained to him my point of view on Palestine. And he was like 'Do you really
think that's going to stop it?" And I was like I'm not exactly sure. That's why I'm still in
high school.”

There seems to be a disconnect where some teachers, who are in a position of power, are

also ignorant and biased in relation to Muslim students. A part of the problem, as one of the

female participants mentioned, is the teacher's lack of interaction with Muslims:

"...I feel like most of us are probably in the same situation, but I know for me like most people in my high school like I was the only Muslim that they knew, like literally they would tell me you're the first Muslim I've ever met. Like he's a forty-year-old man and I'm the only person he knows, you know it's like that's how, that's kind of, they're in like a little bubble…"

This comment alludes to the teachers behavior stemming from ignorance of not knowing other Muslims. A possible contributor to this ignorance relates to a lack of Islamic education in U.S. public schools. Abdelkader (2020) discusses the anxieties that can arise surrounding Islam being included in curriculum in U.S. schools by examining cases in different school districts across the United States where Islam was mentioned in the classroom, and the reactions that emerged. He concluded that the analysis of the cases was indicative of explicit and implicit fears regarding "Islamicization" of America even though Muslims comprise just 1-2% of the U.S. population. Although through this qualitative data it is inconclusive why teachers were often mentioned for their ignorance towards Muslim students, it does raise questions about multiculturalism in U.S. public schools.

Discussion

This study's purpose was to explore how microaggressions and acculturative stress appear in the lives of immigrant-origin Muslim students attending public high schools. This research question was examined by analyzing focus group data collected for a prior study completed in a Mid-western city in 2013 (PI: Dr. Ashmeet K. Oberoi). Specifically, Four themes of microaggressions were identified and discussed, including: Endorsing stereotypes of Muslims as terrorists, assumptions of religious homogeneity, Islamophobic and mocking language, and alien in own land. Furthermore, three themes related to acculturative stress were also identified: Perceived cultural difference and challenges, perception of social and cultural differences, and

added sense of responsibility. Two additional themes related to acculturative stress were also found: Muslim to Muslim relationships, and relationships with teachers. These themes are viewed as interacting with the previously identified sources of acculturative stress. Two additional themes are identified but not discussed here because of lack of substantive supporting data included exoticization as a theme of microaggressions and Family/Friend serving as a form of support or conflict in acculturative stress.

This paper sought to expand on the research previously done by Dr. Ashmeet Oberoi. Her 2014 dissertation specifically evaluated the research question "What is the relationship between gender, religiosity, and acculturation of Muslim adolescents and their perceptions of three school contextual variables – perceived support from teachers, school structural support for religious practices, and acculturative hassles – to their academic achievement, educational aspirations, and psychological distress?" (Oberoi, 2014, P.9). Her research consisted of both quantitative and qualitative data (Oberoi and Trickett, 2018), however, for this study I focused on analyzing only the qualitative data through a lens of microaggression and acculturative stress. Microaggressions which were not explicitly explored by Dr. Oberoi were identifiable in her focus group data; this is due to the questions she asked pertaining to discrimination and perception of experiences (view Appendix A1 for question list).

In addition, Dr. Oberoi explored the concept of acculturation. Like in her findings, this study echoed the dichotomy between teacher's serving as a form of support and a source of conflict for Muslim students. In addition, Dr. Oberoi points to acculturative hassles such as seeking out social and structural support in school, "Muslim students had to constantly negotiate structural supports at school during the school year" (Oberoi, 2014, P.24). This study takes that idea and identifies it as a new form of microaggression defined as an *added sense of*

responsibility. Under this umbrella theme, I was able to link several experiences Muslim students faced such as being asked or expected to speak on behalf of the entire religion, needing to seek out prayer room spaces, and being tasked with educating peers as sources of stress not experienced by most high school aged students. This responsibility was described in both positive and negative connotations ranging from "annoyance", and "hardest part" to making the individual "stronger." While this concept will need to be explored further in research, it is important to note as a possible stressor that can result in positive and negative impacts on Muslim adolescents in America.

High school aged adolescents in American public schools undergo immense stress related to fitting in, academics, and developing their identity. Muslim high schoolers face even greater challenges than average high schoolers as microaggressions were experienced as stemming from their peers, teachers, and school administration. These challenges are marked by acculturative stress which Sirin et al. (2013) noted can increase internalization of mental health symptoms in high school years. Muslim American students who wear identifying traditional garments, such as the hijab, appear to face more overt microaggressions than those who are non-Muslim passing (Johnson & Nadal, 2010, as cited in Nadal et al., 2012). This alludes to both a gendered form of microaggression as well as racialization of the Islamic religion and a conflation that Muslims are mainly Middle Eastern or must wear the hijab. This qualitative analysis seemed to support the notion of hijabi women having increased difficulties due to them being unable to fit in with the American majority easily as Muslim males. As illustrated in the analysis of *Islamophobic and Mocking language*, both male and female students mentioned more frequent microaggressions for women who wore the hijab. This concept is further deepened by the potential relationships between Muslim students favoring another Muslim student who looks more traditionally

Muslim; as one female stated, "I didn't wear a hijab and I'm not Arab… the hardest thing was the Arab population that are Muslims, like my brothers and sisters in Islam, did not see me as Muslim, it was really weird." This suggests that beyond Non-Muslim Americans conflating Arab and Muslim identities there may also be a perception amongst Muslims that there are aspects of the religion, like choosing to wear a hijab, that may link one closer to Islam.

In connection with the analysis, it is apparent that the source of a lot of information surrounding Islam is from media depictions of Muslims. Previous research by Lajevardi (2021) evaluated the relationship between media and mass perceptions of Islam. She found, despite having a small substantive size, experimental effects were significant enough to suggest exposure to negative coverage of Muslim Americans and Muslims internationally can impact mass attitudes and policy preferences. Although her study was not focused on high school aged adolescents, there appears to be similarities in perceptions from media impacting how students respond and interact with Muslim students. For example, in the *Assumption of Religious Homogeneity* analysis a male participant stated that his friend once told him that, "you're nothing like what I see on TV." This statement suggests the friend's knowledge of Islam is mainly derived from representations in media. Furthermore, propaganda surrounding Islam was heavily discussed in the male focus group , there exists a recognition throughout the focus group that the media plays a role in the development of attitudes towards Muslims. However, this would need to be evaluated further in future research to determine the precise impact media is having on adolescent perceptions of Muslims and Islam.

Considering proposed patterns, I was unable to discern if the Muslim students who reported microaggression scenarios discussed acculturative stress more; this is because I ended up choosing to not evaluate the frequency of themes and instead focus on analyzing the themes

as they emerged. I did notice, as discussed, that Muslim women were mentioned on numerous occasions to have more difficult experiences than male Muslim youth. It was also mentioned by both female and male students that women who choose to wear the hijab face additional microaggressions, both subtle and overt. While negative stereotypes were identified as a theme of microaggressions, I observed a new source of microaggression being called on to give the Islamic perspective that has not previously been discussed in the. Unfortunately, teachers unexpectedly did not always serve as a beneficial resource for Muslim students and were also mentioned as being perpetrators of microaggressions in the experiences of these students. Lastly, media was identified, more so by the male participants, to be a perceived source of the negative perceptions of Islam.

Implications for Theory, Prior and Future Research, and Intervention

Ideally, by bringing awareness to the many microaggressions identified, as well as forms of acculturative stress that may be related to those microaggressions, non-Muslim teachers and students will not only educate themselves but not be bystanders when witnessing overt or subtle forms of microaggressions. This paper also strives to encourage schools to re-evaluate their curricula to consider adding more educational opportunities to learn about Islam and not leave the added responsibility of teaching or speaking on behalf of their whole community to Muslim students. Potential interventions include incorporating more history regarding Islam into the United States public school curricula. For example, recently, there have been frequent debates over what should and should not be taught in classrooms across America. Education surrounding Islam has not been immune to this debate. In Tennessee, one existing school standard for K-12 curriculum is to "analyze the continued conflict between Israel and surrounding Arab nations, including the West Bank and Jerusalem and the peace processes in the Middle East (e.g., Camp

David Accords)" (American Muslim Advisory Council, personal communication, 2023). The American Muslim Advisory Council encouraged a change in this, as this standard fails to recognize the importance of Jerusalem to all three Abrahamic faiths including Islam and does not teach the history of displacement of Arab populations with the creation of Israel, nor discusses growing critiques about Israeli human rights violations (American Muslim Advisory Council, personal communication, 2023). The one-sided teaching of the conflict between Israel and Palestine is one way education surrounding Islam has been avoided, or taught as equated to violence, in the classroom. The first step to combatting hate is education, Rahat Zaidi (2017) provides a framework of anti-Islamophobic curriculum aimed at elementary level children grades one through six. This framework focuses on basic learning of Islamic symbols and Muslim traditions to understanding Islam's impact on civil society (Zaidi, 2015). Furthermore, other researchers have also proposed changes in curriculum including Noor Ali (2022) who proposes her framework, Muscrit, which is similar to CRT in its incorporation of Muslim lived experiences into high school curricula.

In terms of teachers and school administration, they should seek to practice radical empathy as called for by Terri Givens (2021), although presented to encourage equality in a racial lens, it emphasizes moving beyond the base level of emotions to consciously commit to recognizing one's own biases and understand the origins of them. This theory for change could be beneficial for teachers in recognizing their own biases and how they may influence their students with the end goal being to create more inclusive environments. As Willoughby (2012) explained teachers giving voice to prejudice or bias allows for students to believe it is okay replicate those overt or subtle behaviors. Thus, it is crucial that teachers do not perpetuate

microaggressions but rather be a form of support for Muslim students coping with acculturative stress.

Acculturative stress, as illustrated through this study and others, including Dr. Ashmeet Oberoi's 2014 dissertation, is a complex issue that is dependent on the individual's perception of experiences. One way to potentially intervene in the negative consequences of acculturative stress is providing counseling in schools. Over half of schools grades Kindergarten-12th do not require counselors (Annual Reports and Information Staff & Elias, 2022). Illinois public schools have a student to counselor ratio of 626-to-1 which is significantly higher than the 250-to-one ratio recommended by the American School Counselor Association (Koumpilova, 2021). While Chicago public schools, where the students in this study attended, do staff counselors at every campus the average caseload for a counselor in Chicago is 665 students with some having as many as 1,000 (Koumpilova, 2021). Although it may be difficult to find staff or funding for training, the impact a counselor can have on a student has been proven to be beneficial and according to a study done in Chicago, mental health services are enhanced by collaboration with influential community members (Atkins et al., 2003).

An important aspect to explore further may be related to the impact technology has on Muslim American high-school aged students especially given the frequent references to media perceptions throughout the male focus group in this study. Future research should not only explore the patterns I found in more depth but further consider the implications of some of the relationships that potentially buffer or add to the stress a Muslim student is feeling. Although not applied in this study, examining microaggressions and acculturative stress through an ecological model such as Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979) may provide additional context situating findings and taking into account wider community level influences. Further, the

addition of a techno-subsystem to Brofenbrenner's model focused on the influence of technology in adolescent development, as proposed by Johnson and Puplampu (2008), may be important to examine given how frequently students in this study referenced media as a factor in perceptions of Islam.

Some additional themes were identified in my analysis but not explored due to the lack of related dialogue which could provide potentially beneficial research in future studies. Exoticization was found as a theme in the female focus group however, it was not discussed enough to be included within the analysis. Nevertheless, the notion of excessive questioning surrounding traditional garb and food is something that could be studied more in future studies. Furthermore, family/friend support and conflict was identified in the male focus group as a potential coping tools for Muslim male students but would need to be considered further in analysis to determine the impact it has on acculturative stress.

Strengths & Limitations

The focus groups used in this study were previously conducted by Dr. Ashmeet Oberoi for her dissertation in 2014, thus, it is important to recognize findings from this study would need to be explored with more recent focus groups to better understand the impact of microaggressions on acculturative stress in current times. Having larger samples to work with in various cities could also assist with generalizability of the study as this is only reflective of Muslim high school students in Chicago and its suburbs in 2014. When considering the generalizability it is also important to consider the history effects. While discrimination, including microaggressions, has never ceased, there have been periods that see increases in prevalence. Former President Donald Trump's executive order 13769, commonly known as the Muslim ban, placed extreme immigration restraints on Muslim majority nations of Iran, Iraq,

Libya, Syria, Somalia, Sudan, and Yemen (Chishti et al., 2018). An ACLU article conducted

interviews with several first generation Muslim immigrants, a woman named Haya shared how

she had become accustomed to the discriminatory systems surrounding immigration in the

United States however, "here was Trump literally saying, I'm going to ban Muslims, live on TV.

Just hearing those words was confirmation that people like me and my family are not equal. It

felt like violence" (Mukpo & Rafei, 2021). This ban may have contributed to increases in

acculturative stress for first and second generation Muslims in America. Beyond the acts of

Donald Trump, heightened Islamophobia appears to follow political cycles often being used in

far-right rhetoric in the media around the times of elections. Running on Hate, a report conducted

by Muslim Advocates, found that between 2016 and 2018 elections were becoming increasingly

Islamophobic with 80 races using blatantly anti-Muslim rhetoric and of those, 64 percent

previously held office or have a presidential endorsement (Muslim Advocates, 2018). This

potential pattern indicates that while the focus groups for this study having been conducted in

2014 may be a limitation, the experiences being discussed are still of utmost importance as both

microaggressions and acculturative stress is still prevalent for Muslims in the U.S.

       This study also did not include a quantitative aspect and had a small sample size which

cannot be used for statistical analysis instead, patterns were evaluated. As previously mentioned

in Dr. Oberoi's dissertation, a limitation to her sampling procedure, was the recruitment of

Muslim students through mosques, Islamic cultural centers, Islamic weekend schools, MSAs,

and Islamic conferences and seminars which may have contributed to the sample being higher in

religiosity or higher in ethnic identity (Oberoi, 2014). Nevertheless, a strength of these focus

groups lied in its diversity as it ended up being composed of individuals from various ethnic

identities. Despite having many ethnic backgrounds included, there were no African American

Muslims included in the study and therefore future research should explore the microaggressions and acculturative stress experienced by African American Muslim students in United States public schools.

In addition, I view my positionality as both a strength and a limitation. I was not the one to conduct the focus groups which provided me the strength of being an independent reader of the transcripts. However, not being present during the focus groups also indicates I was unable to pick up on behavioral cues or facial expressions which during conversation can often illustrate meaning as well. Further, not being Muslim allowed me to view conversations with more secular objectivity nevertheless, I recognize not being Muslim also means I am unable to fully understand the context surrounding the experiences these Muslim students have discussed. Throughout this study my goal has been to center the voices of the students to ideally limit any potential bias I may bring due to my positionality.

Conclusion

The current study illustrated some important findings about Muslim high school students such as identifying the kinds of microaggressions Muslim students face as well as forms of acculturative stress discussed. The application of Nadal et al. (2012)'s framework of microaggressions was a unique contribution of this study. This paper also expanded upon Dr. Oberoi's prior finding of a responsibility of Muslim students to present Islam in a positive light by providing a nuance that an added sense of responsibility should be classified as its own form of acculturative stress. Furthermore, the study sought to illustrate how Muslim to Muslim relationships and teachers can either buffer or add to the difficulties Muslim high school students face. While this study does illuminate many hardships it also seeks to show how Muslim adolescents cope and seek to understand those hardships. This paper highlights the importance in

recognizing microaggressions Muslim students in public high schools face to not only bring

awareness but also encourage U.S. public schools to reevaluate curricula and policies to allow

for increased belongingness amongst students.

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Appendix A1

Focus Group Questions: School Experiences of Muslim Young Adults who Attended Public Schools in U.S.

Ashmeet Oberoi, 2014, 96-98

I am trying to understand the school life of Muslim students who attended high school in US. By school life, I mean what the daily experiences were like, what kinds of relationships you had with others at school, the stresses and joys of being a Muslim, and so on. What I would like at this point is to gather some general background information and then ask for you to tell me in your own words what it's like being a Muslim in an American high school. If the situations raised in some of the questions didn't happen to you but happened to someone you know, feel free to tell me about them.

I want to assure you that this conversation will be confidential and that you will not be identified in any way when I transcribe or report the findings. At the same time, I request all of you to respect the confidentiality of your peers' responses and to keep that information confidential and not expose any information to anyone else outside of the focus group. Of course, you may choose not to answer any question if you do not wish.

(1) Domain: Background questions on what it is like to be a student at that high school: Focus Group Question: First, could you tell me a little about yourself and what high school you went to?

Specific Probes:

  a) How big was the school? How big were your classes?

  b) City/Suburb/Rural?

  c) How diverse was it?

(2) Domain: The role their religion played in the school experiences: Now I'd like to learn something about if being a Muslim mattered in what school was like for you.

Focus Group Questions:

  I. Was your religion a big deal in your school? What was the school like for a Muslim student like yourself attending it?
  II. Could you give me some examples of ways in which your religious beliefs, values, and customs played a role during a typical day at school?

III. How respectful was your school to your religious customs? (e.g. Place to pray, dietary restriction, religious holidays, religious /cultural clothing)

IV. Did you have an opportunity to educate or explain Islam and the culture to other students and at your school?

V. How do you think recent socio-political events and how Islam is portrayed in the media play a role in your school life?

VI. In your opinion as a Muslim, does it make a difference if you are a male or female? Do you find that you are treated differently?

VII.   How did culture play a role in your school life?

VIII.   Did you face cultural misconceptions of any kind?

(3) Domain: Social relations at School: Now, I'd like to know about your relationships with your teachers, classmates and friends at school.

Focus Group Questions:

I.   What were your relationships like with your teachers?

II. What were your relationships like with other students at school?

III. Did religion (being a Muslim) affect who you hung out with or who you were friends
with?

IV. How does family influence your choice of friendships and relationships?

Specific Probes:

- Did any of them act in a manner or said something that was discriminatory or stereotypical? For example, something discriminatory may be if the teacher denies or treats you differently from other students because of your religion. Stereotypical, would be if they make stereotypical comments or questions about your culture (e.g. Do you speak English, are you allowed to go outside or your home?).
  - What kind of relationships you had with non Muslim peers?
  - What kinds of activities did you participate with them in school? (E.g. did you
    have lunch with your non Muslim peers?)
  - What kinds of activities did you participate with them after school- (For example, going out to movies, birthday parties, etc?)
  - Did you have a strong friendship with any of your non-Muslim peers from school? (Discuss the difference between friends and acquaintances).
  - Were there other Muslim students in your high school? How did the presence
    of other Muslim students affect your behavior? Did you feel any pressure to conform to Islamic and cultural norms because of other Muslim students at school? For instance, as a Latina student my friend was told she was "acting white" because she took advanced placement courses, which were primarily filled with white students.

(4) Domain: Sources of Joy and Stress or Conflict: Now I'd like to focus on those positive and challenging experiences of being a Muslim in your high school.

Focus Group Questions:

     I. What were the joys or positive aspects of being a Muslim in your school? Could you give me an example of a situation(s) that stood out as rewarding?
    II. Could you describe to me aspects of your school or school experience that you found stressful because you are a Muslim? Could you give me an example?
    III. During your time there, were there any situations that stood out as unusually difficult or challenging?

Specific Probes:

- Were there any practices / policies in your school that made you feel that you were different, did not belong there, or did not fit in?
- Were any of your school's policies or practices discriminatory? For example, placement practices or only pork containing foods at lunch.
- Were any of the policies/ practices conflicting with your religious and cultural beliefs? For example, gender integrated physical education classes.
- Did anything make you feel like hiding or compromising your religious and or cultural identity? For example, you wanted to dress differently to fit it in with others at your school; you felt you could not bring food from home because it would be weird and people would ask questions.

(5) Domain: Social Support, how they cope or adapt: Clearly there was a lot to handle even on a regular day at school. So, now I want to know who or what helped you to keep going or what helped you to handle any challenges at school that were due to being a Muslim.

Focus Group Questions:

     I. When you had a school-related problem or issue specifically related to being Muslim in that school, or were just irritated at something related to school, what did you do? Is there anyone you turned to for support and guidance at school? Could you give me an example or two?
    II. Was there a Muslim Student Association (MSA) in your school? If so, what kind of resources did they provide you with? Were you a member of the MSA? What kind of support did you get from the MSA?

(6). Finally, imagine someone you know who is also a Muslim and is about to start as a freshman in your high school, what advice would you give to that person?

Is there anything else you might like to add on this topic before we close? THANK YOU!!!

Appendix A2

E-mail Notice for Focus group Recruitment: School Experiences of Muslim Young Adults who Attended Public Schools in U.S.

Ashmeet Oberoi, 2014, 99

Hi,

You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by Ashmeet Oberoi, graduate student, Department of Psychology, University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC). The purpose of this study is to understand the school experiences of Muslim adolescents in public schools and the role religion and culture plays in it. The research study explores what family, school, and community level factors played a role in your school experiences, what your day at school looked like, your relations with your peers, teachers, and other school staff; how you negotiated religious and cultural identities at school and the stressors and resources at your school.

You are a possible participant in this study if you are at least 18 years of age, identify yourself as Muslim, and have graduated from a public high school in U.S. not more than 3 years ago. Your participation in this research is entirely voluntary.

Appendix A3

Demographic Survey for Focus Groups: School Experiences of Muslim Young Adults who
Attended Public Schools in U.S.

Ashmeet Oberoi, 2014, 100

Name:

Gender: Male   Female

How old are you (in years)? _____

Do you identify yourself as a Muslim?   Yes   No

Did you attend high school in USA?   Yes   No

Your high school was: Public   Private

What year did you graduate from high school?_____

Were you born in USA? Yes   No

If not, at what age did you come to USA?_____

Are you a follower of Islam? Yes   No