

## ABSTRACT

Title of Document: YOUTH EXCHANGE AND  
PEACEBUILDING POST 9/11:  
EXPERIENCES OF MUSLIM HIGH SCHOOL  
EXCHANGE STUDENTS

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In the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the U.S. government initiated a youth exchange program to bring Muslim students to the U.S. for a school year. The Youth Exchange and Study (YES) program was created to help reduce tensions, and foster mutual understanding and respect between people in the U.S. and the Muslim world. It is commonly assumed that exchange programs promote cross-cultural understanding and goodwill, leading to a more peaceful world. Drawing on literature in the fields of peace education, intergroup relations, and international educational exchange, this study explores the connections between youth exchange and peacebuilding in our post 9/11 world.

This qualitative, interview-based study examines the experiences of twenty-one Muslim high school exchange students participating in the YES program in the 2007-2008 school year. The study participants were between 16 and 19 years old and came from eight countries in the Middle East and Asia. The study highlights the exchange students' experiences living with American host families and attending American high schools. The study also explores how the exchange students carried out their role as young ambassadors – helping Americans understand their countries, cultures, and religion – and how they dealt with sometimes being labeled as terrorists.

The experiences of the exchange students in this study provide evidence that youth exchange can foster changes in attitudes, affects, skills, and behaviors that are likely to contribute to a more peaceful world. The program structure and duration facilitate the formation of close personal relationships, as well as tremendous personal growth. The program goals and expectations also contribute to the students' success as young ambassadors. The students were able to correct inaccurate stereotypes and develop skills in cultural mediation. This study also demonstrates that youth exchange incorporates many of the key components of peace education programs.

Recommendations for program changes include focusing more directly on peace and peace education, addressing conflict issues, building skills in conflict mediation, developing leaders for peace, and training local coordinators in peace education.

YOUTH EXCHANGE AND PEACEBUILDING POST 9/11:  
EXPERIENCES OF MUSLIM HIGH SCHOOL EXCHANGE STUDENTS

By

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## Dedication

In loving memory of Daddy, our anchor

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the exchange students who so generously and cheerfully shared their experiences with me. Their enthusiasm, optimism, and belief in a better future are truly inspiring. I am grateful to the exchange students' natural parents for having the courage and the trust to allow their children to participate in the exchange program. Special thanks go to the community coordinators who took time to help me arrange interviews, and shared their own insights with me. I also appreciate the host parents who shared their stories with me, even though I was not able to use that data for this study. Thank you to Oksana Chorny of PAX who hired me as a community coordinator and introduced me to the world of youth exchange. Oksana helped me to identify participants for this study, but more importantly, she has been an enthusiastic supporter and a good friend.

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## **List of Abbreviations**

ACES	American Cultural Exchange Service
AFS	American Field Service (officially known as AFS)
AIFS	American Institute for Foreign Study Foundation
CSIET	Council on Standards for International Educational Travel
ECA	Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, U.S. Department of State
PAX	Program of Academic Exchange
YES	Youth Exchange and Study Program
YFU	Youth For Understanding

## Chapter 1: Introduction

On the bright, clear morning of September 11, 2001, I crossed the National Mall on my way to work, and came to an abrupt standstill as I watched black smoke fill the sky over the Pentagon. Two tourists taking photos of the U.S. Capitol asked me, in heavily accented English, what was happening. I had no answer. Minutes later, people began pouring out of nearby office buildings, looking frightened and determined to get home. I joined the throngs making their way out of the city, still not comprehending what was happening, and certainly not having the slightest notion of how that day would be felt around the world for years to come.

In the days following the attacks, Americans were recipients of a tremendous outpouring of care and concern from people the world over. At the same time, the evening news flashed images of people dancing in the streets in parts of the Middle East. It was the beginning of the “war on terror,” the invasion of Afghanistan, and eventually the war in Iraq. In the months following the September 11 attacks, the U.S. government developed other, less visible, responses to terrorism and the increasing tensions between the U.S. and the Muslim world. One of these responses was the Youth Exchange and Study (YES) Program, designed to promote cross-cultural understanding between the U.S. and the Muslim world. The YES program, begun in 2003, brings high school students from countries with significant Muslim populations to the U.S. for an academic year.<sup>1</sup> According to the U.S. Department of State website (2008a), “The program is vital

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<sup>1</sup> The U.S. State Department determines which countries are invited to participate in the program. “Significant” is defined in terms of political significance and foreign policy objectives, as well as demographics (Persiko, 2007). Not all of the students participating in the YES program are Muslim, but all come from countries determined to have significant Muslim populations.

to expanding communication between the people of the United States and the partner countries in the interest of promoting mutual understanding and respect.”

### ***Purpose of Research***

The purpose of this research is to better understand the meaning that Muslim exchange students give to the exchange experience, and through their stories to explore the connections between youth exchange and peacebuilding in our post 9/11 world. In recent decades, student exchange programs and study abroad opportunities have become a common feature of the educational landscape. Students studying in another country gain not only knowledge and skills imparted through formal schooling, but also cross-cultural skills and broadened perspectives that many recognize as positive contributors to global understanding and world peace (Bachner, 1991a). This sentiment is reflected in the Public Diplomacy Council recommendation that the number of exchanges be increased “to repair and build U.S. relationships with the peoples of the Muslim World” (Ballow, 2004, p.121).

Although it is commonly assumed that exchange contributes to mutual understanding and global peace, we know very little about the relationship between student exchange and peacebuilding (Bachner, 1991a, 1991b; Bachner, Zeutschel, & Shannon, 1993). Bachner (1991b) posits that the lack of research in this area is due to “researchers not having formulated questions relating to the role of exchange in conflict reduction, possibly because the existence of such a role seems intuitively justifiable” (p. 147). Yet, we also know that exchange does not always have positive outcomes for the hosts and exchangees (Bachner 1988; Furnham & Bochner, 1986; Hammer & Hansel, 2005/06; Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001). Indeed, given the many stresses and

difficulties of cross cultural adjustment encountered by both students and hosts, “some degree of unpeacefulness, or conflict, would seem to be inherent in the exchange experience” (Bachner, 1991b, p. 140). It is, therefore, important to ask the questions and try to understand the relationship between exchange and peacebuilding.

Does student exchange contribute to a more peaceful world? Specifically, how does exchange change and reshape the students involved in the exchange? How do exchange students understand their experiences? What is it like to be a Muslim teenager in an American family, school, and community? In *The Exchange Student Survival Kit*, Bettina Hansel (1993) writes,

Exchange programs themselves will never bring peace to the world, but they do provide a way for young people to live in another culture and learn how other people give meaning to their own lives and to the messages they send and receive. (p. xiv)

Exchange programs may not be able to single-handedly create the peaceful world for which we long, but the exchange experience may change people in ways that may help us learn to live together more peacefully on this small planet. Through listening to the experiences of Muslim high school exchange students in the U.S., this study helps to deepen our understanding of the relationship between youth exchange and peacebuilding in our post 9/11 world.

### ***Research Questions***

This study addressed the following research questions:

- How do Muslim high school exchange students make meaning of their exchange experience in the U.S.?
- In what ways does youth exchange contribute to peacebuilding post 9/11?

I define peacebuilding as activities and programs that impart knowledge, skills, behaviors, and attitudes for creating a more peaceful, just, and sustainable world. Peacebuilding is a future-oriented process and one that fosters critical thinking and compassion for all people and the environment. For the purposes of this research, I define youth exchange as programs in which high school age students (generally, 15 to 18 years old) spend an extended period of time (usually a semester or a school year) in another country as part of an organized program. Although some scholars and practitioners differentiate between the terms *intercultural* and *cross-cultural*, I use these terms interchangeably in this study.

### ***My Path to this Research***

My involvement with youth exchange began in 2004, the second year of the YES program, when I became a local coordinator with the Program of Academic Exchange (PAX). PAX is one of the implementing organizations for the YES program for the U.S. Department of State. For four years, I worked with a small group of four to six YES students in our community. My role included recruiting and interviewing potential host families, registering the students for school, conducting student and host family orientations, and providing support to the students and host families throughout the school year.

During my first semester as a doctoral student, I started to wonder about the connection between youth exchange and peacebuilding. In a class entitled “Education for Global Peace,” we read Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr. and excerpts from the Qur’an. I thought about the students in my local “cluster” that were far away from their home countries and cultures. In my own mind, I made the assumption that exchange programs

and other efforts that bring people together across cultural and ethnic boundaries are essentially “good” and help to create a more peaceful world. However, I also realized that I did not know much about the connection – do such efforts really contribute to peace, and if so, how? What happens when young people live with a family in another culture? How does this change the student and the family? How can youth exchange be a force for peace after 9/11? These questions led me to this research topic.

The journey towards this research, however, really began when I joined the Peace Corps, many years ago. I was young, idealistic, and wanted to help make the world a better place. For two years I lived on a small, windswept island in the far north of the Philippines. The houses were built of stone, and the grass roofs were tied down with heavy ropes in the typhoon season. I stayed with a host family and shared a bedroom with my younger host sister and brother (and often several neighborhood children). I quickly had to re-evaluate my need for privacy, my understanding of individuality, my definition of right and wrong, and just about everything else about myself and my culture. Living with a host family presented me with an intense immersion into the culture – a learning experience which would have been hard to duplicate had I lived on my own.

One of the most memorable moments of my Peace Corps experience happened many months after my arrival. I came home late one evening, tired and muddy from a day of harvesting *uve* (a root crop that is a staple food on the island). In the stone kitchen with walls blackened by the smoke of thousands of cooking fires, my host father lifted the basket of *uve* from my back and called out, “Mother, come look at our daughter!” It was the first time he referred to me as *anak taya*, “our daughter.” I was no longer just the tall, white *Amerikana* who mangled the local language – I was part of the family. The

experience changed the way I thought about myself and my place in the world. Through the lens of friendship, caring and love, I started to see the world as a much smaller and interconnected place.

After my Peace Corps service I worked in a variety of jobs, many of them connected in some way to promoting intercultural understanding (Radomski, 1990/1991, 2003). I became more and more convinced of the importance of building personal relationships across cultures as the foundation for creating a better and more peaceful world. Results of a public opinion survey reinforced this belief: “Many of those Americans who feel most concerned about and involved with Third World development say they have had a personal experience that has affected them” (Joy, 1987, p. 11). These experiences over the years led me to want to explore the connections between youth exchange and peacebuilding, particularly in our current post 9/11 world.

### ***Significance of the Study***

David Bachner labeled the assumption that exchange programs are “fundamentally beneficial, provide effective educational experiences for the participants, and further cross-cultural cooperation and understanding” the *Good Effects Premise* (Bachner & Zeutschel, 1994, p.1; Bachner, 1988). Perhaps because it seems to be “common sense” that exchange contributes to conflict reduction and a more peaceful world, there has been very little investigation into this assumption (Bachner, 1991b; Bachner, Zeutschel, & Shannon, 1993). This research was designed to help fill that gap. This qualitative study provides a window into the experiences of a small group of Muslim teenagers who spent a school year in the U.S. on a high school exchange program. Through this window, we get a glimpse of what the exchange experience means to them,

and how they have been shaped by sharing cultures and religions with their American host families and peers. Through their stories I attempt to understand something about what lies behind the *Good Effects Premise* – what leads us to believe that exchange is inherently a good thing, and that it contributes to a more peaceful world.

Bachner (1991b) identified a number of other weaknesses in the exchange literature, including the following:

...a lack of knowledge of background data or of the context from which persons are responding; an over reliance on tabulatory survey techniques; and a seeming reluctance to utilize less conventional but promising “depth” approaches (e.g., life stories, autobiographies, intensive taped interviews). (p. 145)

My review of the research on exchange reveals that in the last twenty years there have been some studies that use qualitative, in-depth methods and/or address issues of context (e.g., Constantine et al., 2005; Laubscher, 1994; Sarroub, 2005). However, I found that the bulk of the research on exchange still relies heavily on survey techniques, and fails to address context (beyond the nationality of the students or hosts). Moreover, most of the research about exchange is focused on international college students and study abroad programs. There are far fewer studies aimed at understanding the experiences of high school age students (e.g., Bachner & Zeuschel, 2009; Hammer & Hansel, 2005; Hansel & Chen, 2008).

Accordingly, this study helps to fill these gaps in the research base by the following design features: examination of the relationship between exchange and peacebuilding; use of qualitative, in-depth methods; focus on experiences of youth (high school) exchange students; and attention to context. Bachner (1991b) contends that more research is needed to inform both theory and practice in international exchange. The

more we learn about the connection between youth exchange and peacebuilding, the better prepared we are to make policy decisions and develop programs that effectively contribute to peace.

### ***Scope of Research***

For this qualitative research study, I conducted fourteen semi-structured responsive interviews (Rubin & Rubin, 2005) with twenty-one Muslim exchange students participating in the Youth Exchange and Study (YES) program. The exchange students were between 16 and 19 years old and came from the following countries: Egypt, Ghana, India, Indonesia, the Philippines, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Thailand. In the U.S., the YES students lived with American host families for the duration of the ten-month exchange year. All of the interviews were conducted at the end of the exchange year (May through early July 2008), when the students could reflect back on their experiences in the U.S.

Although the interviews were the primary source of data, my experience as a local coordinator with the YES program also informs the study. Through a descriptive and analytical process, I examine how Muslim exchange students give meaning to the exchange experience. I then look at the experiences of the exchange students through a number of lenses related to peacebuilding and intercultural understanding.

### ***Conceptual Framework***

I undertook this research using a qualitative, interpretive / constructionist paradigm (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Creswell 1998; Mertens, 2005). Through in-depth interviews, I sought to understand how Muslim high school exchange students in the U.S.

make meaning of the exchange experience. The choice of methods is based on my understanding of the world as a place in which there are multiple realities (Mertens, 2005) and that “approaching people with a goal of trying to understand their point of view, while not perfect, distorts the informants’ experiences the least” (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998, p. 25). I was guided by a belief that “at the heart of interviewing research is an interest in other individuals’ stories because they are of worth” (Seidman, 1998, p. 3). Therefore, I put the stories and experiences of the participants at the forefront of this study.

David Bachner’s work (1991a, 1991b) provided an important conceptual underpinning for examining the connection between peacebuilding and youth exchange. Bachner identifies five ways in which exchange can be a positive force for peace: exchange promotes positive cross-cultural contact; improves cross-cultural attitudes, reduces prejudice, and corrects inaccurate stereotypes; develops personal traits which enhance liking and respect for other cultures; enhances cross-cultural skills; and develops leadership and international involvement (Bachner, 1991a, pp. 1-5). Bachner contends that most exchange programs have a value orientation towards international understanding and peace:

This value orientation, and exchange’s fundamental nature as an action-based field directed toward constructive ends, places exchange very much in the company of peace studies. Much like exchange, peace studies as a field has recognized the relationship between conflict and misunderstanding, and has also placed a strong value, programmatically and intellectually, on international cooperation and the disavowal of hegemony (Bachner, 1991b, p. 140).

In my literature review, I focus on three bodies of literature that seem to be most relevant to understanding the relationship between youth exchange and peacebuilding:

*peace and peace education, intergroup relations, and international educational*

*exchange*. It is through the lenses of Bachner's work (1991a, 1991b) and these three bodies of literature that I examine the connection between the participants' meanings of exchange and the contribution of exchange to peacebuilding.

### ***Organization of this Dissertation***

This dissertation is organized in a traditional format with a review of literature and discussion of methodology preceding the study findings. I begin in Chapter 2 by reviewing three bodies of literature: peace and peace education; promoting intergroup relations; and international educational exchange. I introduce the Youth Exchange and Study (YES) program in Chapter 3, providing background information about the program, how it is implemented, and results of evaluations and studies. Chapter 4 focuses on the research methodology for this study. In Chapter 5, I address the broader context within which the exchange takes place, highlighting the often tense relations between the U.S. and the Muslim world. Chapters 6 through 10 focus on the experiences of the exchange students. Chapter 6 looks at the students' backgrounds and their motivations for participating in the exchange. In Chapter 7, I discuss the students' experiences living with American host families. Chapter 8 follows the students' experiences at school, examining how they make friends and practice their religion. In Chapter 9, I focus on the role of the students as young ambassadors. The students' reflections on what they learned during the year and their plans for the future are addressed in Chapter 10. Returning to the concepts introduced in the literature review, Chapter 11 focuses on the study results as related to peacebuilding and peace education. Chapter 12 provides a summary of the study, as well as ideas for programmatic changes and suggestions for further research.

## Chapter 2: Review of Literature

There are several bodies of literature that may help us better understand what lies behind the *Good Effects Premise* and how student exchange may contribute to peacebuilding. Each of these bodies of literature is far broader than I am able to present here, but I will present an overview of historical developments, relevant issues, and current dialogue in each field. In the first section of this review I discuss the peace literature including definitions and strategies for peace. I focus mainly on peace education, but also touch on diplomacy and religion, since both are relevant to the YES program.

In the second section of this chapter, I review theories of intergroup relations from the field of social psychology. The contact hypothesis and social categorization theory help to explain how intergroup contact can either increase or decrease prejudice and discrimination, or alternatively cooperation and understanding. In this section I discuss the research pertaining to intergroup relations and prejudice reduction, as well as how thinking about intergroup relations has developed and changed over recent decades.

The third part of the literature review focuses on international educational exchange, particularly youth exchange. I discuss the history and the organizational goals of exchange, student motivations, impacts of exchange, crossing cultures, friendships, and host family experiences. I conclude this section by introducing Bachner's (1991a, 1991b) framework for understanding how student exchange contributes to conflict reduction and peacebuilding.

## **A. Peace and Peace Education**

*Since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace should be constructed.*

– Preamble of the UNESCO Constitution, 1946 (cited in Sinclair, 2004, p. 23)

### ***What is Peace?***

Johan Galtung, a leading scholar in the field, defines peace as “what we have when creative conflict transformation takes place nonviolently” (1996a, p. 1). Peace is not static; it is a dynamic, creative, and ongoing process. Indeed, according to Galtung (1996a) “the test of peace is in the ability to handle conflict” (p. 1). However, genuine peace is recognized as much more than the absence of war and violence. The absence of physical violence, certainly a critical component of peace, may be defined as the “negative peace” (Galtung, 1969). The foundation of “positive peace,” however, is social justice, harmony with nature, and citizen participation in government (Galtung, 1969; Harris & Morrison, 2003). Galtung (1996a) distinguishes between three kinds of peace: direct peace (absence of violence), structural peace (indirect), and cultural peace (legitimizing).

Structural peace can be understood as the societal and institutional conditions (social, political, and economic) that promote human dignity, meet basic human needs, and foster social justice (Galtung, 1996a). Cultural peace refers to the social norms associated with religion, culture, and ideology that legitimate peaceful attitudes and behaviors between individuals and groups. In the negative sense, cultural violence serves to justify direct and structural violence (Galtung, 1996a). Galtung (1996b) refers to culture as the “great legitimizer of violence, but also of peace” (p. 6). For the purposes of

this research I will use Galtung's (1996a, 1996b) concept of genuine peace that incorporates all three types of peace - direct, structural, and cultural peace - as well as creative and nonviolent processes for handling conflict.<sup>2</sup>

Smoker and Groff (1996) explore other facets of peace and peace theory. They remark on the move in Western peace research away from the concept of peace as the absence of war and towards more holistic paradigms. Their model of "peace thinking" comprises seven levels:

1. peace as the absence of war
2. peace as the balance of international forces
3. peace as no war and no structural violence on macro levels
4. peace as no war and no structural violence on micro levels
5. intercultural peace
6. holistic Gaia peace<sup>3</sup> (peace with the environment)
7. holistic inner and outer peace (all prior levels and inner peace)

(Smoker & Groff, 1996, p. 31)

The first two levels represent negative peace, and the next five levels represent progressively more inclusive types of positive peace. Harris and Morrison (2003) describe intercultural peace (level 5) as peace which "exists when different religious and ethnic groups live together harmoniously" (p. 13). Level six highlights the importance of cultivating peace between human beings and the natural environment. Smoker and Groff (1996) suggest that true peace (level 7) includes inner, as well as outer, dimensions of peace. They point out that unresolved inner conflicts tend to feed outer conflicts through negative attitudes, scape-goating, and prejudice. They also charge that Western peace researchers have neglected the concept of inner peace, even though it is the basis of the

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<sup>2</sup> Galtung (2002b) places the attacks of September 11, 2001 in the context of a cycle of retaliation for the "enormous U.S./West violence – direct, structural and cultural – since the Second World War" (p. 303). He advocates deep self-reflection for all parties, as well as dialogue and education to promote understanding and respect between cultures and nation.

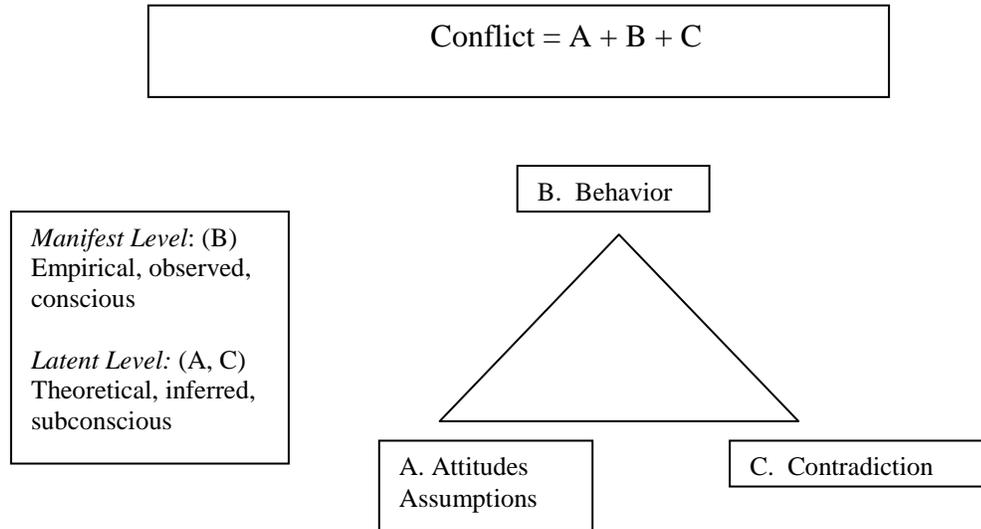
world's religious and spiritual traditions. I understand that all seven levels of peace are integral to genuine peace. For this research, however, I will place special attention on intercultural peace.

In order to fully understand peace, it is necessary to examine the nature of conflict. Galtung (1996b) proposes a theory of conflict formation, in which conflict is the sum of attitudes, behaviors, and contradictions (refer to Figure 1 on the next page). The outward violent or destructive behavior (B) forms the top of the triangle. Beneath the overt behavior there are attitudes and assumptions (A), and contradictions (C), which can be understood as the differences in goals of the involved parties. Much like the proverbial iceberg, only the tip (overt behavior) is visible most of the time. Moreover, in this model, conflict may develop in any sector and progress in any direction, as well as multiply or spiral out of control. However, Galtung points out that contradictions do not necessarily lead to conflict; when handled creatively and nonviolently, disagreements over goals may result in positive transformations. Indeed, that is the goal of peacemaking.

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<sup>3</sup> “Gaia” peace refers to the Gaia hypothesis, named after the Greek Goddess of the Earth. This ecology-oriented hypothesis proposes that living and nonliving entities are part of a single interdependent system.

Figure 1: The Conflict Triangle (Galtung, 1996b, p. 72)



### ***Causes of Violence***

There are a number of theories about the root causes of violence. Harris and Morrison (2003) identify three main categories of belief about the causes of violent behavior. First, some people theorize that violence is simply part of human nature and that aggressive tendencies are biologically passed down from one generation to the next. There is evidence that males are more violent than females in nearly all human societies, pointing to at least some biological basis for violence (Harris & Morrison, 2003). Still, researchers have found “little concrete evidence that humans are intrinsically violent by virtue of our genes” and most peace researchers look beyond biological explanations of violence (Harris & Morrison, 2003, p. 118).

A second set of theories proposes that the cause of violence is frustration over not being able to fulfill personal goals (Harris & Morrison, 2003). Frustration often leads to anger, which may then erupt into violent behavior. Galtung's (1996b) theory of conflict cited above is based on the belief that a contradiction in goals leads to conflict and sometimes outward violence. Violence and wars between or within countries can also be attributed to differences in goals related to religious beliefs, economic systems, ethnic groups, and political ideologies (Harris & Morrison, 2003). Competition over scarce resources (such as land, oil, or water) is often an underlying cause of violence. Edward Azar (2002) emphasized the role of universal and nonnegotiable human needs (such as the need for food, security, and the recognition of identity) as a primary cause of conflict.<sup>4</sup> Within this conceptual framework, "interest based" approaches to building lasting peace require first and foremost an understanding of the interests and values of the parties in conflict (Davies & Kaufman, 2002). Interest-based approaches help build positive peace and reduce structural violence by attending to underlying values and interests, as well as through utilization of creative, collaborative, and nonviolent problem-solving processes (Davies & Kaufman, 2002).

A third category of theories about the roots of violence focuses on the role of social conditioning (Harris & Morrison, 2003). These theories examine how children learn that violence is (or is not) an acceptable behavior in society. While there may be an underlying conflict of goals or interests, how one learns to deal with the resulting

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<sup>4</sup> Azar (2002) discusses three broad groups of universal human needs that individuals attempt to satisfy, often through the formation of identity groups. These needs include physical survival (food, clothing, energy, water, shelter, safety and security); access to or participation in social institutions and political processes; and acceptance or recognition of identity. There is a complex relationship between these needs and deprivation in one area often leads to problems in other areas. Azar points out that human needs are motivating factors in development as well as conflict, and attention to such needs in development processes is key to reducing and managing conflict.

frustration and anger is often determined by social norms and customs. Many contemporary societies (including the U.S.) reinforce violent behavior through educational systems that celebrate war heroes and interpret history through a lens of war, rather than peace (Harris & Morrison, 2003). Portrayals of violence are commonplace in the mass media, raising concerns that the media promotes violence, or at the very least leads viewers to become numb to such images (Harris & Morrison, 2003). “Humankind may have had more bloodthirsty eras, but none as filled with images of violence as in the present” (Gerbner, 2000, p. 399).<sup>5</sup>

Educational, economic, and political systems often reward competition rather than cooperation, inevitably resulting in winners and losers. This competitive paradigm is evident at many levels of U.S. society, from the local elementary school to national and international policies (Harris & Morrison, 2003). In competition, we tend to see people “as ‘others,’ divided from ourselves, and we treat each other as competitors, enemies, opponents or rivals” (Lin, 2006, p. 64). Moreover, most schools do not focus on helping children understand social justice, or on building skills in critical thinking and cooperative problem-solving (McCarthy, 2002). Neither do they cultivate love, caring,

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<sup>5</sup> A study by Gerbner (2000) concluded that long-term exposure to television programs gave people the feeling that they were living in a “mean and gloomy” world. Heavy viewing was also associated with feeling of insecurity, danger, and vulnerability. In a study of U.S. national and local coverage of international issues, the FrameWorks Institute (Bales, 2001) found that the dominant media frame presented the world as a dangerous and scary place. Aside from the issue of whether or not such portrayals promote violence, there are implications for public willingness to get involved in global issues. If the world is a dangerous and scary place, many may choose to stay home and build fences instead of bridges. Bales (2001) recommends that organizations looking to build support for positive international engagement emphasize the difference between mediated world views and actual experiences with people from other countries, including student or professional exchanges. In other words, personal experiences with individuals from another culture may lessen the impact of violent media images and temper isolationist and defensive tendencies.

and respect for other people and the natural world, the building blocks of peace (Lin, 2006). In the words of one educator, “How can I teach peace when the book only covers war?” (Finley, 2003). For this research, I understand violence to be primarily caused by differences in goals, interests, and needs, but reinforced by social and cultural systems that promote (or at least condone) violence as an appropriate means of solving problems.

### ***Strategies for Achieving Peace***

*We will not learn how to live together in peace by killing each other's children . . . we can choose to work together for peace . . . and we must.*

– Former U.S. President, Jimmy Carter (2002, p. 20)

Just as there are many different definitions of peace, there are also many strategies for achieving peace. One widely recognized way of categorizing strategies for peace is Galtung's (1996b) taxonomy of peace work: peacekeeping, peacemaking, and peacebuilding. *Peacekeeping* efforts are aimed at maintaining order and preventing violence. Often third-party intervention is necessary to end violence and bring the participants (individuals, groups, or nations) to an agreed upon settlement. The goal of this approach is to bring an immediate halt to the overt violence. Once the violence has stopped, *peacemaking* strategies can help opposing forces gain the skills to settle their disputes nonviolently. Conflict mediation and resolution programs fall into this category. Dialogue between the parties in conflict is the hallmark of this approach. Peace workers have used this strategy in classrooms, in offices, in communities, and between opposing groups in areas of intractable conflict around the world. Peacekeeping and peacemaking strategies are generally associated with negative peace – stopping the violence and

imparting the knowledge and skills for people to resolve their disagreements nonviolently.

The third category of peace work, *peacebuilding*, goes beyond peacekeeping and peacemaking to promote structural and cultural peace, in which individuals develop a “desire to learn how nonviolence can provide the basis for a just and sustainable future” (Galtung 1976, cited in Harris & Morrison, 2003, p. 11). Peacebuilding efforts seek to create a culture of peace and promote nonviolent approaches to resolving conflicts at all levels of society. Whereas peacemaking is often undertaken by politicians and governments, peacebuilding is a “planned activity, based on bottom-up processes” (Bar-On & Adwan, 2006, p. 309). Moreover, peacebuilding is focused on creating positive peace by creating an active democratic citizenry committed to social justice, nonviolence, and living in harmony with the environment.

Alger (1999) identifies twenty-four instruments in the “tool chest” for peacebuilders. The strategies, presented in general order of appearance in history, range from diplomacy and balance of power to human rights and ecological balance.<sup>6</sup> He presents peace education as the final “tool” in the tool chest for peacebuilders, but one which encompasses all of the others. Furthermore, Alger (1999) maintains that the “successful employment of all that we have learned about peacebuilding in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century is dependent on peace education” (p. 38).

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<sup>6</sup> Alger’s (1999) twenty-four tools for peace: diplomacy; balance of power; collective security; peaceful settlement; disarmament/arms control; functionalism; self-determination; human rights; peacekeeping; economic development; economic equity; communication equity; ecological balance; governance for commons; humanitarian intervention; preventative diplomacy; track II diplomacy; conversion; defensive defense; nonviolence; citizen defense; self-reliance; feminist perspectives; and peace education (p. 16).

Another way to understand strategies for achieving peace is provided by Harris and Morrison (2003, p. 16):

1. Peace through strength
2. Peace through justice
3. Peace through transformation (pacifism)
4. Peace through politics (institution building)
5. Peace through sustainability
6. Peace education

The strategy of peace through strength relies on tactics of force and deterrence. The basic idea is that one country will not attack another if they believe they could not win in a battle with them. This approach dominates most government policy, as is evident in support for armed forces and the growing weapons industry. The peace through justice strategy is based on the assumption that peace will be attained only when there is social justice. This approach focuses on eliminating poverty and hunger, preserving human rights, combating oppression, and promoting democracy. Peace through justice addresses the structural aspects of violence and is often carried out by individuals and non-governmental organizations.

Peace through pacifism is based on the principle of nonviolence, but pacifism does not imply inaction. In the tradition of Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr., pacifists take an active, but nonviolent, approach to combating injustice and hostility. The strategy of peace through politics focuses on creating international institutions charged with promoting cooperation, resolving conflicts, and keeping peace in the world. The chief example of this strategy is the creation of the United Nations. The hope is that such internationally focused organizations will provide a forum for peoples and nations to solve their problems peacefully. Peace through sustainability gives emphasis to the interconnections between humans and the natural environment. Human beings depend on

natural resources, but must learn to respect the environment and foster the sustainability of the natural environment for future generations.

The sixth strategy is peace education, which refers to “teaching about peace – what it is, why it doesn’t exist, and how to achieve it” (Harris & Morrison, 2003, p. 25). Peace education conveys knowledge, builds skills, and attempts to change attitudes and behaviors in an effort to create a more peaceful world. Harris and Morrison (2003) point out that these six strategies overlap and multiple strategies may be employed at the same time. Furthermore, each of these strategies has unique strengths and weaknesses.<sup>7</sup> Peace education, however, addresses all of the strategies, their uses, and their consequences.

### ***Peace Education***

*Establishing a lasting peace is the work of education; all politics can do is keep us out of war.* – Maria Montessori (cited in Harris & Morrison, 2003, p. 48)

#### What is Peace Education?

Peace education is widely recognized as a critical strategy for achieving peace. And yet, as leaders in the field recognize, it has “many divergent meanings for different individuals in different places” (Salomon, 2002, p. 4). In his article entitled, “The Elusive Nature of Peace Education,” Bar-Tal (2002) remarks that peace education programs “differ considerably in terms of ideology, objectives, emphasis, curricula, contents, and practices” (p. 28). Reardon (2000) suggests that this diversity results from the way peace education efforts developed to meet local needs in diverse situations around the globe.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> For a discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of each strategy see Harris and Morrison (2003).

<sup>8</sup> Reardon (2000) and Harris (2002a and 2002b) discuss the development of the field of peace education.

Still, many leaders in the field have attempted to identify the essence or the core of peace education. Bar-Tal (2002) states that although peace education programs are quite diverse, they share a common objective:

They all aim to foster changes that will make the world a better more humane place. The goal is to diminish, or even to eradicate, a variety of human ills ranging from injustice, inequality, prejudice, and intolerance to abuse of human rights, environmental destruction, violent conflict, war, and other evils in order to create a world of justice, equality, tolerance, human rights, environmental quality, peace, and other positive features. (p.28)

Betty Reardon (2000), a well-known peace educator, puts forth the following broad working definition as a basis for a holistic peace education curriculum:

Peace education is the transmission of knowledge about requirements of, the obstacles to, and possibilities for achieving and maintaining peace, training in skills for interpreting the knowledge, and the development of reflective and participatory capacities for applying the knowledge to overcoming problems and achieving possibilities. (p. 4)

Reardon's definition focuses on conveying knowledge and building skills for peace. She also emphasizes the development of capacities that will enable people to become active participants in achieving their potentials and solving problems relevant to their own lives.

Harris (2004) presents five postulates of modern peace education:

1. It explains the roots of violence
2. It teaches alternatives to violence
3. It adjusts to cover different forms of violence
4. Peace itself is a process that varies according to context
5. Conflict is omnipresent (Harris, 2004, p. 6)

Peace education begins with a basic understanding of how and why conflicts arise. Addressing the roots of violence involves learning about the "other" and our common bonds as human beings. Peace education also involves teaching about alternatives to violence and building skills to handle conflicts nonviolently. Postulates three and four recognize the many forms of violence (and of peace), as well as the

importance of context. “Peace holds different meanings in different cultures, as well as different connotations for the spheres in which peaceful processes are applied” (Harris, 2004, p. 7). Furthermore, peace itself is a process, not an end product. Postulate five, which conveys a sense of realism about the nature of humankind, accepts that conflict is a fact of life and that educators must prepare students to deal with conflict nonviolently and work towards a more peaceful world.

It is clear that peace educators strive for more than merely the cessation or absence of violence – they seek to impart a commitment to basic human rights, social justice, and values such as love, compassion, and tolerance (Harris & Morrison, 2003, Lin, 2006). Moreover, the majority of peace educators advocate participatory and pro-active approaches to teaching peace. Experiential learning and critical thinking are important components of effective peace education programs (Amster, 2006; McCarthy, 2002). At the heart of all peace education, though, lies a commitment to build bridges of love and compassion (Lin, 2006). The ability to get beyond cultural, racial, ethnic, religious, or other differences and to see each other as human beings is key to building a more peaceful world. Ross and Lou (2008) encourage the cultivation of “standpoint thinking,” defined as the ability “to understand the world as others see it” (p. 5). Seeing the world through the eyes of another (or the “other”) helps to cultivate respect, empathy, and caring. Lin (2006) maintains that study abroad is an effective tool for building cross-cultural understanding enabling participants “to see others as people who are not, after all, fundamentally different from themselves; rather, students learn we are all human beings sharing very similar concerns and passions” (p. 66).

In the 1970s, Brazilian educator Paulo Freire (1970) introduced educational approaches designed to help people understand the sources of their oppression and develop creative, nonviolent strategies for overcoming these conditions. The educational processes advocated by Freire often challenge the status quo and engender conflict. However, when conflict is resolved nonviolently, it can lead not only to freedom and justice, but also to a more genuine peace. Although he was not known as a peace educator, Freire's work has had a strong impact on the field of peace education and its pedagogical approaches (Harris, 2004; Reardon, 2000). "Proponents of critical pedagogy have generally embraced peace education and social justice as cornerstones of an improved present and a brighter future" (Amster, 2006). Peace educators have taken up Pope Paul's challenge that "If you want peace, work for justice," and incorporate lessons about economic and social justice into their programs (Reardon, 2000). The teachings of Mahatma Gandhi and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. have also had a profound influence on peace educators. Both Gandhi and King taught that there can be no peace without justice.

One of the most influential peace educators of the Twentieth Century was Maria Montessori. Following World War I, Montessori, an Italian physician and a pioneer of peace education, introduced the idea that peaceful pedagogy could help to build a more peaceful world (Harris 2004). She advocated non-authoritarian teaching methods in which children could develop critical thinking skills and make decisions about their own learning. Montessori believed that young people needed to learn to think critically and question governments' claims about the necessity of war. She also believed the education should nurture and develop the spiritual and loving nature that children bring to the world.

Vriens (1999) argues that peace education works indirectly by instilling in young people a sense of responsibility for the future of the world.<sup>9</sup> Studies have shown that children who learn peaceful ways to respond to conflict carry those skills and attitudes into adulthood (Harris, 1999). Building on this idea, Vriens (1999) recommends an approach to peace education that takes into account the everyday lives of children and their emotional and cognitive development. Gandhi was also a strong believer in the importance of teaching and learning from children:

“...if we are to reach real peace in the world and if we are to carry on a real war against war, we shall have to begin with the children, and if they will grow up in their innocence, we won't have to struggle, we won't have to pass fruitless idle resolutions, but we shall go from love to love and peace to peace...”  
(Mohandas K. Gandhi, Speech at Montessori Training College, 1931)

### Types of Peace Education

There is no question that peace education is a vast and diverse field. In an attempt to understand the many voices and approaches, peace educators and researchers have developed a number of ways of describing and categorizing the field. Peace education efforts may be examined in light of Galtung's three strategies for achieving peace: peacekeeping, peacemaking and peacebuilding. According to Berlowitz (1994), the majority of peace programs in U.S. public schools could be categorized as peacekeeping and peacemaking activities, designed to reduce violence at the school level. Harris and Morrison (2003) point out while that violence prevention has been a primary concern in schools, there has been little discussion among professional educators about peacebuilding, which requires a longer-term focus. In contrast, Iram (2006) maintains

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<sup>9</sup> Based on studies in the U.S. and Europe in the last fifty years, Vriens (1999) provides an interesting discussion of how children understand war and peace.

that most education efforts fall into the category of peacebuilding because they convey a “commitment to nonviolence, enhancing the capacity for peace, and fostering positive attitudes” (p. 5). While some exchange programs (such as Seeds of Peace, 2008) are aimed at peacemaking between groups in conflict, I would categorize most student exchange programs as peacebuilding activities, contributing to longer-term goals of building bonds of friendship, promoting tolerance, and facilitating cross-cultural understanding.<sup>10</sup>

Betty Reardon (2000) makes a distinction between education *about* peace and education *for* peace. Based in established disciplines, education *for* peace includes international education, multicultural education, and environmental education. Education *about* peace promotes “the development and practice of institutions and processes that comprise a peaceful social order” (Reardon, 2000, p. 5). This category includes conflict resolution training, human rights education, and peace studies. Salomon (2002) maintains that the socio-political context in which peace education takes place determines its challenges, goals, and the manner of treating the participants. He divides peace education efforts into three context-based categories: peace education in regions of intractable conflict, in regions of interethnic tension, and in regions of experienced tranquility. Peace education programs in regions of intractable conflict and interethnic tension tend to focus on violence prevention (negative peace), as well as changing attitudes related to the collective “other.” In regions of that are relatively tranquil, peace education attempts to cultivate positive peace by building skills and promoting an overall culture of peace.

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<sup>10</sup> These are only a few of the goals of exchange. I will discuss the goals of exchange programs more fully in the section on youth exchange below.

Leading peace educator Ian Harris (2004) identifies five interrelated categories of peace education: human rights education, international education, environmental education, conflict resolution, and development education. Human rights education focuses on honoring the basic dignity of all people and ensuring universal human rights that supersede the laws of governments. This approach also promotes cross-cultural understanding and seeks to reduce stereotypes and prejudice between peoples. Harris (2004) provides examples of peace camps in the Middle East in which participants come to know and respect “others” as fellow human beings. International Education helps prepare students to become compassionate and responsible global citizens. Students learn about global interconnections and the positive and negative impacts of globalization on people around the world. International education also teaches about the diversity of cultures and the importance of working together to solve problems. Harris and Morrison (2003) note that student exchange programs have been promoted as a way of exposing young people to different cultures and preparing them to be global citizens. Closely related to international education is development education. This approach focuses on structural violence, human development, and social justice. “The goal is to build peaceful communities by promoting an active democratic citizenry interested in an equitable sharing of the world’s resources” (Harris & Morrison, 2003, p. 74). Environmental education, as the name suggests, focuses on the interdependence of humanity and the natural world, as well as responsible and sustainable development.

Conflict resolution education gives students the knowledge and skills they need solve problems creatively and nonviolently. Conflict resolution programs often develop skills in active listening, effective communication, needs identification, creativity, and

cooperative problem-solving (Davies & Kaufman, 2002). Harris (2004) remarks that this type of peace education is generally aimed at creating safe schools. However, many adult and out-of-school youth programs also build skills in conflict resolution. Examples of such peace education programs include “citizens’ diplomacy” workshops (see Davies & Kaufman, 2002) and youth camps like Seeds of Peace (2008). With the above examples it is not difficult to see how some peace education efforts fall logically into several of the five categories identified by Harris (2004). In a review of the efforts peace educators around the world, Sinclair (2004) found that the most effective programs employed a comprehensive approach to peace education, incorporating aspects of human rights education, environmental education, citizenship, and conflict resolution.

The concept and practice of peace education as discussed here has been developed largely in the West in the last century. However, it is important to note that other cultures may develop other paradigms for peace education. For instance, Köylü (2004) argues that peace education has a firm foundation in Islam, although the teachings of Islam have often been misunderstood or misapplied to support intolerance and violence. He encourages Islamic countries to embrace peace education, which “may serve as a tool for raising the consciousness of Muslim people, solving their basic human problems, and achieving true peace” (Köylü, 2004, p. 74).

### Multicultural Education, Coexistence, and a Culture of Peace

Much has been written in the last few decades about multicultural education. Shapiro (2002) remarks that multicultural education is the “authentic human face of globalism – a witnessing of the diversity of human experience, and a recognition of the complex, multifaceted range of human expression and creativity” (p. 67). Multicultural

education instills in young people an appreciation for diverse cultures, as well as an understanding of both differences and commonalities across cultural boundaries. It also helps transform and expand students' world views and see "others" as fellow human beings. International students can be a valuable resource for multicultural education, bringing different perspectives and worldviews into the classroom (Breuning, 2007; Wilson 1985a, 1985b).<sup>11</sup> Indeed, youth exchange organizations actively promote exchange students and exchange returnees as a resource for schools (e.g., PAX website, 2008; Wilson, n.d. from YFU website).

Multicultural education, however, has been criticized for superficially focusing on holidays and festivals, rather than on more troubling issues of racism, discrimination, and prejudice today and throughout history (Gordon, 2004; McCrimmon, 2004). Critics claim that the "tourist" approach to multicultural education is basically a feel-good exercise which does not expose students to the complexity and more disturbing aspects of intercultural relations. Moreover, Gordon (2004) states that multicultural education should be as much about "*how* we teach kids as it is about *what* we teach them" (p. 33). In the tradition of Paulo Freire, Gordon (2004) maintains that genuine multicultural education "must empower students to make changes in society rather than condition them to adapt to it" (p. 32). In this way, multicultural education has the potential to address structural violence and contribute to the development of a more peaceful world.

In recent years, a new area of peace education called "coexistence work" has gained popularity (Reardon, 2000; Weiner, 1998). Coexistence work brings together people from opposing sides of ongoing conflicts. As the name suggests, they explore

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<sup>11</sup> Breuning (2007) notes that Americans look to study abroad to increase intercultural competencies, but overlook the role of international students in providing intercultural experiences at home.

ways to coexist in the current climate, as well as plan for a better future. Coexistence work is based on three assumptions:

First is the assumption that irreconcilable differences and intractable conflicts must not be permitted to escalate into total conflict; second is our assumption that our human fate is ultimately indivisible; and third is the assumption that helping people see the human face of others is an indispensable prelude to humane action. (Weiner, 1998, p. 13)

Coexistence is a practical and incremental approach to peace. Although we often subscribe to the “big dream” of finding the ideal solution to complex and long-running conflicts, Dajani (2006) urges instead to go for the “small hope” – finding creative solutions that will help people live together in the current world.

Reardon (2000) remarks that the most influential peace education concept in recent years has been the idea of a “culture of peace.” The United Nations General Assembly (1998) declared the years 2001 through 2010 as the International Decade for a Culture of Peace and Non-Violence for the Children of the World. As defined by the United Nations, “the Culture of Peace is a set of values, attitudes, modes of behavior and ways of life that reject violence and prevent conflicts by tackling their root causes to solve problems through dialogue and negotiation among individuals, groups and nations” (UNESCO, 2008). Education for a culture of peace embraces tolerance, multiculturalism, nonviolence, justice, and respect for the environment. A culture of peace is “now becoming a kind of short-hand description of what peace educators have meant as the goal of global transformation . . . seeking a fundamentally human perspective on education for a planetary future” (Reardon, 2000, p. 15).

Reardon (2000) questions whether schools as we know them are the most effective method for societies for educating and socializing our children towards a culture

of peace. Many people have documented the emphasis on conflict, war, and competition that permeates schools in the U.S., from the teaching methods to the instructional materials and institutionalized systems of expectations and rewards (Eisler, 2004; Finley, 2003; Harris & Morrison, 2003; Lin, 2006; McCarthy, 2002). In recognition of the role that education plays in transmitting culture, Eisler (2004) calls for a radical shift from an education system that teaches dominance and violence to one that celebrates partnership and peace. There is now a large body of peace education theory that “could help inform children during their school years about how to construct peace, but this understanding of peace theory and peace practice is being ignored by mainstream educators” (Harris, 2002b, p. 27). Lin (2006) also calls for a dramatic transformation of educational theory and practice to create the “school for love”:

The school for love is an environment that provides students with daily experience of working cooperatively and building bridges of understanding and respect. In all, school for love aims to help students form strong values and habits as loving people who are provided with an abundance of opportunities to experience the joy and power of love, and who learn how to transform our world through practicing universal love and unconditional forgiveness.  
(Lin, 2006, p. 23)

Lin advocates the development of integrated intelligence – intellectual, emotional, moral, spiritual, and ecological. Only through an integrated, holistic education can we help students become wise and loving global citizens.

### Peace Education after September 11, 2001

In our current turbulent world, many peace educators feel a renewed sense of urgency about teaching peace. Some contend that peace and moral education should provide the foundation for all other education (Cheng and Jacob, 2003). Issues such as cultural imperialism and religious tolerance have been brought to the forefront. Ginsberg

and Megahed (2003) maintain that educators should be “encouraged to think critically about topics like ‘terrorism’ and Islam, so that they can help their students learn about and analyze the related issues” (p. 208). Cheng and Jacob (2003) recommend an increased emphasis on media literacy so that young people are equipped to critically examine and interpret media messages.

Some educators have found that the general climate of fear and insecurity that has prevailed in the U.S. since 9/11 poses a particularly challenging environment for teaching tolerance and respect for human rights (Fritzsche, 2006). Anti-Muslim and anti-Arab incidents have increased, creating an urgent need to build religious, ethnic, and cultural tolerance and understanding. One strategy put forth by Funk (2007) builds on the current focus on security. He recommends broadening the definition of security to a more encompassing “human security” as a basis for teaching peace and justice. Amster (2006) notes that the events of September 11 have brought the topic of peace into classrooms across a wide spectrum of academic disciplines. It has also provided opportunities for students to *get out* of the classroom and learn about peace and justice issues through participation in community and campus activities (Amster 2006).

### ***Diplomacy***

Diplomacy – dialogue and negotiation between representatives of states – is one of the oldest means of facilitating peaceful relations between nations (Alger, 1999). Although an in-depth discussion of diplomacy is beyond the scope of this paper, I will discuss a few concepts relevant to youth exchange programs. One type of diplomacy which has gained recognition in recent years is “preventative diplomacy.” Alger (1999) describes preventative diplomacy as involving fact-finding, confidence building and early

warning systems that prevent disagreements from turning into violent conflicts. Others define preventative diplomacy more broadly. Bedjaoui (2000) argues that educational exchange programs build cross-cultural understanding and person-to-person links, and as such are a valuable type of preventative diplomacy: "...any undertaking or initiative aimed at facilitating the promotion of exchanges and cooperation in the field of education must be welcomed and encouraged" (p. 41).

"Public diplomacy" (also referred to as "cultural" or "citizen" diplomacy) refers to government sponsored programs that primarily involve nongovernmental actors. This type of diplomacy is based on "the concept that the individual has the right, even the responsibility, to help shape U.S. foreign relations, 'one handshake at a time.'" (Mueller, 2008, p. 3) Rugh (2004b) defines American public diplomacy as "programs intended to support our national interests by providing information and interpretation to foreign audiences about matters relating to the United States" (p. 145). U.S. public diplomacy has included Voice of America, as well as publications and media releases in local languages. For the last sixty years, exchange programs have been a mainstay of U.S. public diplomacy efforts (Campbell, 2005). Hundreds of thousands of U.S. and foreign teachers, students, artists, athletes, professionals, and scholars have participated in these government-sponsored (but often privately implemented) programs since the 1940s (Ballow, 2004). The prestigious Fulbright Scholarship program is the most-well known of these programs, but there are many others, including youth programs and the Youth Exchange and Study (YES) program. Mueller (2008) maintains that Americans who host foreign visitors and students are also citizen diplomats – representing the U.S. and sharing their culture with others.

Exchanges give people a chance to meet and get to know one another on a personal level, dispel negative stereotypes, and form cross-cultural friendships. Exchanges have “fostered countless continuing international connections through dialogue and collaboration, promoted more enlightened thinking, and encouraged deeper and lasting international understanding” (Ballow, 2004, p. 109). As such, exchanges are an important tool for peacebuilding. Many U.S. government-sponsored exchange programs also help participants develop leadership skills in the hopes of cultivating more globally-aware leaders committed to international cooperation. As of 2003, the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs estimated that more than 200 current and former heads of state and 1,500 cabinet-level ministers had participated in U.S.-sponsored exchanges (Djerejian, 2003).<sup>12</sup>

Ballow (2004) maintains that the lasting positive effects of exchanges can be seen even in places where U.S. foreign policy is highly unpopular, including the Islamic world. Rugh (2004b) recommends exchange programs as “a powerful support for American public diplomacy . . . because face-to-face encounters have proven to be the most effective” (p. 158).<sup>13</sup> Keith (2004) strongly encourages support for youth exchange programs between the U.S. and the Arab and Islamic worlds, stating that “high school exchange programs are comparatively inexpensive, yet priceless” (p. 21). In recognition of the vital role of exchanges in public diplomacy, the U.S. Department of State (2008a) has increased its resources for exchange programs with the Muslim world since the

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<sup>12</sup> While not part of official public diplomacy efforts, the U.S. Department of State also recognizes the important role of U.S. higher education in cultivating world leaders. The Department of State website (2008b) provides an impressive list of world leaders educated at U.S. colleges and universities.

<sup>13</sup> Despite strong anecdotal evidence that exchanges are one of the most effective tools of public diplomacy, the Report of the Advisory Group on Public Diplomacy recommends more sophisticated research to substantiate this claim and to elucidate the specific contributions of exchange (Djerejian, 2003).

attacks of September 11, 2001. One of the new programs that emerged is the Youth Exchange and Study Program (YES).

“Citizens’ diplomacy” (also called “second-track” or “multi-track” diplomacy) is another key tool for peacemaking and peacebuilding. Citizens’ diplomacy involves business people, religious leaders, teachers, students, community leaders and others without official representative status coming together to try to understand the causes of conflict and find workable solutions to problems.<sup>14</sup> Citizens’ diplomacy “complements ‘first track’ or official diplomacy, opening up opportunities for communication, cross-cultural understanding and joint efforts to explore how the needs of the parties might be addressed” (Davies & Kaufman, 2002, p. 2). It is based on the belief that people in all parts of society must be involved preventing violence, resolving conflict, and building peace. McDonald (2002) delineates three categories of peacebuilding: political, economic, and social. Citizens’ diplomacy is focused on the social peacebuilding – “working with people, working with the heart” (p. 56). McDonald (2002) highlights citizen-to-citizen exchange programs (not government-sponsored) as an important type of citizens’ diplomacy.

Often citizens’ diplomacy efforts take the form of facilitated, face-to-face dialogue at workshops, retreats, or camps (for example, Davies & Kaufman, 2002; Galtung & Tschudi, 2002). These programs can be considered a type of peace education. Together, participants from opposing sides of a conflict explore the root causes of conflict, develop skills in conflict transformation, and search for creative, nonviolent solutions to problems. It is an empowering, participatory process. Seeds of Peace

(2008), a summer camp which brings together young people from opposing sides of ongoing conflicts (primarily in the Middle East), is an example of such an initiative.

### ***Religion and Peacebuilding***

*In order for us human beings to commit ourselves personally to the inhumanity of war, we find it necessary first to dehumanize our opponents, which is in itself a violation of the beliefs of all religions. Once we characterize our adversaries as beyond the scope of God's mercy and grace, their lives lose all value.*

– Former U.S. President Jimmy Carter (2002, p. 18)

The relationship between peace and religion is complex, but it is one that must be better understood if there is ever to be peace in the world. The world's great religions share a common commitment to peace, and yet throughout history wars and countless acts of violence have been carried out in the name of the same religions (Harris 2002a). "The role of religion," notes Allport (1954/1979), "is paradoxical. It makes prejudice and it unmakes prejudice" (p. 444). After receiving the Nobel Peace Prize, former U.S. President, Jimmy Carter, remarked:

The present era is a challenging and disturbing time for those whose lives are shaped by religious faith based on kindness toward each other. We have been reminded that cruel and inhuman acts can be derived from distorted theological beliefs as suicide bombers take the lives of innocent human beings, draped falsely in the cloak of God's will. (Carter, 2002, p. 17)

How can we understand the relationships between religion and conflict, and religion and peace? To answer this question, social psychologists have explored the ways that individuals understand and practice their own religion. In his influential book, *The Nature of Prejudice*, Allport (1954/1979) suggested that people who practiced "institutionalized" religion were mainly concerned with the political and social aspects of

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<sup>14</sup> *People Building Peace II: Successful Stories of Civil Society* provides many examples of civil society groups working for peace, ranging from business and arts programs to citizen peacekeeping and faith-based efforts (van Tongeren, Brenk, Hellema, & Verhoeven, 2005).

religion, and were likely to harbor more prejudices than people who practiced what Allport called “interiorized” religion and who were more committed to a basic creed of brotherhood. Studies since that time have demonstrated that the case is not so straightforward. People do not divide themselves neatly between internalized and institutionalized religious beliefs. Batson and Stocks (2005) propose a third dimension – religion as quest. In their model, quest-seeking individuals approach religion as a quest for understanding the meaning of life. Their research revealed that these individuals consistently showed less prejudice than either of the other groups.

Another consideration in the paradox of religion and peace concerns which teachings are internalized (Batson & Stocks, 2005). All world religions teach tolerance and compassion for others. At the same time, many religions have a doctrine of exclusivity, stating that followers of that religion are God’s “chosen” people and the only “true” believers. Depending on which of these doctrines is more important to the individual, and to what degree, may help to determine the level of prejudice towards others. “Internalization of a doctrine of universal compassion as a master motive may unmake prejudice; internalization of a doctrine of election may make it” (Batson & Stocks, 2005, p. 424).

Religion is more than a system of beliefs. Allport (1954/1979) recognized that “the chief reason why religion becomes the focus of prejudice is that it usually stands for more than faith – it is the pivot of the cultural tradition of a group” (p. 446). Indeed, although the Abrahamic faiths of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam share a common heritage and many common beliefs, the cultures associated with each religion have developed quite differently. Today, religious divisions “march hand in hand with ethnic

and national divisions” (Allport, 1954/1979, p. 446). Religion is inextricably intertwined with other group identities. Thus, inter-state and inter-ethnic conflicts often take on religious overtones even when the underlying disagreements are not religious in nature. In the words of former U.N. Secretary General, Kofi Annan (2005), “It is a gross oversimplification to speak of a Christian or Muslim or Buddhist civilization; doing so only creates boundaries where none need exist” (p. 95).<sup>15</sup>

Increasingly, people of different faiths are recognizing that if religions are going to be part of the solution to the turmoil in the world, then religious leaders and followers alike will have to reach out across deep and sometimes frightening religious divides to discover their common humanity and work together towards peace. In the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of 9/11 there has been increased emphasis on interfaith dialogue as a promising path to peace. Typical of interfaith dialogue efforts, the Institute of Interfaith Dialog (2008) was founded on the belief that peace can be achieved “by sharing different perspectives, by listening to each other from the space of love, respect, tolerance, mercy, and compassion.” Participants at a post September 11 interfaith conference hosted by the U.S. Institute of Peace (2003) highlighted the need for interfaith dialogue to be conducted in all segments of religious communities and to develop a common agenda for justice and action across religious lines.

In October of 2007, 138 Muslim leaders from around the world issued a call for peace to the world’s Christian leaders. The document, titled “A Common Word between Us and You” emphasizes the shared roots and many common beliefs of the two religions:

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<sup>15</sup> While I understand Kofi Annan’s point about creating boundaries between religions, throughout this paper I use the term “Muslim world” to refer to followers of that faith, as well as the countries that have large Muslim populations. I use this term not to emphasize differences, but because the YES program and much of the post 9/11 dialogue is framed in this manner.

Muslims and Christians together make up well over half of the world's population. Without peace and justice between these two religious communities, there can be no meaningful peace in the world. The future of the world depends on peace between Muslims and Christians. (A Common Word website, 2007)

In response, over 300 Christian leaders endorsed a letter in support of interfaith dialogue and pledged to begin working together towards a more peaceful world (A Common Word website, 2007).

While historically most interfaith dialogue participants have been men, increasingly women and youth are becoming involved (Smith, 2007). Many college campuses now sponsor interfaith programs, but Smith (2007) remarks that engaging high school youth in interfaith dialogue is challenging due to their many other interests and the demands on their time. The key to involving youth, she states, is linking dialogue to social action projects. In this way, young men and women come to know each other as individuals while working side-by-side on meaningful projects. "Simple friendship just might be the 'real' ticket to bridging religious divides and promoting lasting peace" (Ahmed & Holladay, 2005, p. 4). It is beyond the scope of this paper to give a complete picture of the interfaith dialogue movement. Suffice to say, however, that interfaith dialogue has the potential to be a powerful force for peace in a world that is often divided along religious lines.

## **B. Promoting Positive Intergroup Relations**

*Walk together, talk together, o ye peoples of the earth;  
Then and only then, shall ye have peace.*  
– From the Sanskrit (cited in Kinkead, 1962)

Personal contact is often assumed to be the key to reducing prejudice and fostering positive relations between groups in conflict. In this section, I will examine the literature related to promoting positive intergroup relations. The contact hypothesis and social categorization theory, both from the field of social psychology, have made significant contributions to our understanding of intergroup relations and prejudice reduction (Brewer & Gaertner, 2004). I begin this review with a look at the history and major tenets of the contact hypothesis. I then discuss social categorization theory and its contribution to understanding intergroup relations and prejudice reduction. Next, I discuss how researchers have drawn from both traditions to develop more integrated models of intergroup relations. Finally, I look at some directions for future research, and examine selected studies involving foreign students and/or Muslim participants in intergroup contact situations.

### ***The Contact Hypothesis***

For more than fifty years, the “contact hypothesis,” articulated by Gordon Allport in his 1954 book, *The Nature of Prejudice*, has been widely recognized and researched as a strategy for reducing intergroup prejudice, stereotypes, and conflict (Dovidio, Glick, & Rudman, 2005).<sup>16</sup> The assumption underpinning the contact hypothesis is that much

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<sup>16</sup> I use Allport’s (1954/1979) definitions of prejudice and stereotypes. *Prejudice*: “Ethnic prejudice is an antipathy based upon a faulty and inflexible generalization” (p. 9). *Stereotype*: “Whether favorable or

prejudice and intergroup conflict is the result of unfamiliarity between groups of people, and, under the proper conditions, contact between group members will tend to reduce prejudice and intergroup tension:

Prejudice, (unless deeply rooted in the character structure of the individual) may be reduced by equal status contact between majority and minority groups in the pursuit of common goals. The effect is greatly enhanced if this contact is sanctioned by institutional supports (i.e., by law, custom or local atmosphere), and provided it is of a sort that leads to the perception of common interests and common humanity between members of the two groups.  
(Allport, 1954/1979, p. 281)

Pettigrew (1986) traces the origins of the contact hypothesis to the human relations movement in the U.S., which sought to improve relations between religious and racial groups in the aftermath of World War II. The movement rested on the assumption that intergroup conflict was the result of individual prejudice, a direct result of ignorance about others (Pettigrew, 1986). Increased contact, then, could provide the remedy for this individual ignorance about people in other groups, which in turn was expected to lead to more peaceful relations. In the years following World War II, activists following this line of reasoning organized summer camps, dinners, and other community events to bring together Americans of various ethnic, religious, and racial groups.

The contact hypothesis is strongly rooted in early studies of relations between blacks and whites, and Jews and Christians in the U.S. (Allport, 1954/1979; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2005). Pettigrew (1986) points out that “the contact hypothesis has been, from its inception, value-laden and perceived as relevant for social policy” (p. 175). Indeed, early research about segregation and the effects of contact made significant contributions to the

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unfavorable, a stereotype is an exaggerated belief associated with a category. Its function is to justify (rationalize) our conduct in relation to that category” (p. 191).

U.S. civil rights movement and school desegregation efforts (Dixon & Rosenbaum, 2004; Pettigrew 1986).<sup>17</sup> During this time, social scientists moved away from thinking of prejudice as an individual trait, and began to focus more on the institutional and social aspects of prejudice and intergroup tension (Pettigrew, 1986). Furthermore, researchers found that education by itself was a “woefully insufficient remedy” for intergroup prejudice (Pettigrew, 1986, p. 173). As a result, policymakers and researchers alike began to explore how best to structure contact situations in order to reduce tensions and negative attitudes between groups.

Over the years, a wide range of intergroup policies and programs, from school and housing integration to international exchange programs and multinational sports events, have been based on the seemingly common sense notion that increased contact will result in more favorable intergroup relations (Amir, 1969, Cook, 1978, Pettigrew & Tropp, 2005).<sup>18</sup> Exchange programs, for instance, give the student from abroad a first-hand opportunity to get to know people in another culture, and “appreciate, understand, and perhaps even adopt that latter’s way of life” (Amir, 1969, p. 163).

Personal contact is typically thought to reduce prejudice and lead to more positive relationships. Yet, as Allport noted in 1954, “The case is not so simple” (1954/1979, p. 261). It is generally recognized that contact alone is not sufficient to reduce intergroup prejudice and conflict (Allport, 1954/1979; Hewstone & Brown, 1986; Kenworthy, Turner, Hewstone, & Voci, 2005; Forbes, 2004). In some situations, contact may have little impact on prejudice, or may even result in an increase in prejudice and negative

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<sup>17</sup> The landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision was based in part on the assumption that contact between black and white students in the classroom would result in cross-cultural awareness and more positive relations between the races (Dixon & Rosenbaum, 2004).

attitudes (Allport, 1954/1979; Amir, 1969; Brewer, 1996; Hewstone & Brown, 1986; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006).<sup>19</sup> Thus, the key question for researchers has been, "In what types of contact situations, with what kinds of representatives of the disliked group, will interaction and attitude change of specified types occur – and how will this vary for subjects of differing characteristics?" (Cook, 1962, p. 76). In 1947, Robin Williams, Jr. presented 102 testable propositions on intergroup relations and the reduction of intergroup tensions (cited in Pettigrew & Tropp, 2005, p. 263). Based largely on the work of Williams, Allport (1954/1979) developed a detailed taxonomy of contact variables (see Table 1) reflecting the complexity of the relationship between contact and prejudice reduction.

Allport's hypothesis highlighted several key conditions of contact likely to lead to a reduction in intergroup prejudice: equal status, institutional support, intergroup cooperation in pursuit of common goals, and opportunity for personal acquaintance. Since these variables (derived largely from research on race relations in the U.S.) provided a starting point for decades of research on intergroup relations and conflict reduction (Hewstone & Brown, 1986; Brewer & Gaertner, 2004; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2005), they merit some discussion at this point.

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<sup>18</sup> See Watson (2003) for a discussion of how the contact hypothesis provided the foundation for the Children's International Summer Villages (CISV), a multi-cultural summer camp.

<sup>19</sup> Examples of contact situations that do not necessarily improve intergroup relations are plentiful in history (race relations in the South of the U.S.; Anti-Semitism in Europe, for instance) as well as in current times (Shiite and Sunni Muslims in Iraq; ethnic groups in Kenya, etc.).

Table 1: Kinds of Contact  
(Allport, 1954/1979, pp. 262-263)

Quantitative aspects of contact:

- (a) Frequency
- (b) Duration
- (c) Number of persons involved
- (d) Variety

Status aspects of contact:

- (a) Minority member has inferior status
- (b) Minority member has equal status
- (c) Minority member has superior status
- (d) Not only may the individual encountered vary thus in status, but the group as a whole may have relatively high status or relatively low status.

Role aspects of the contact:

- (a) Is the relationship one of competitive or cooperative activity?
- (b) Is there a superordinate or subordinate role relation involved; e.g. master-servant, employer-employee, teacher-pupil?

Social atmosphere surrounding the contact:

- (a) Is segregation prevalent, or is egalitarianism expected?
- (b) Is the contact voluntary or involuntary?
- (c) Is the contact "real" or "artificial"?
- (d) Is the contact perceived in terms of intergroup relations or not perceived as such?
- (e) Is the contact regarded as "typical" or as "exceptional"?
- (f) Is the contact regarded as important and intimate, or as trivial and transient?

Personality of the individual experiencing the contact:

- (a) Is his initial prejudice level high, low, medium?
- (b) Is his prejudice of a surface, conforming type, or is it deeply rooted in his character structure?
- (c) Has he basic security in his own life, or is he fearful and suspicious?
- (d) What is his previous experience with the group in question, and what is the strength of his present stereotypes?
- (e) What are his age and general education level?
- (f) Many other personality factors may influence the effect of contact.

Areas of contact:

- (a) Casual
- (b) Residential
- (c) Occupational
- (d) Recreational
- (e) Religious
- (f) Civic and fraternal
- (g) Political
- (h) Goodwill intergroup activities

Equal Status: Allport (1954/1979) stressed the importance of equal status within the contact situation. Over the years, studies have generally confirmed the importance of this variable (Brewer & Gaertner, 2004; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2005). Research indicates there are positive effects of contact when individuals perceive their status *within the situation* to be equal, even if their status coming into the situation is not equal (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2005). Moreover, when contact is unequal within the situation, it can result in the reinforcement of the inequality, as well as accompanying negative stereotypes (Brewer & Gaertner, 2004).<sup>20</sup>

Support of institutions or social norms: Early studies of interracial housing projects in the U.S. indicated a positive relationship between institutional support and changes in attitudes about interracial interaction (Brewer & Gaertner, 2004). Programs sanctioned by an accepted authority group, including religious organizations, generally carry with them a sense of legitimacy, as well as expectations that help to guide intergroup relations in a positive manner (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2005). While laws cannot directly change attitudes, Pettigrew and Tropp (2005) maintain that “the passage of the civil-rights legislation has been instrumental in establishing anti-prejudicial norms in contemporary American society” (p. 266). Furthermore, if one views prejudice as a social structural problem, it follows that changes in social institutions and support from accepted authorities will have an impact on social norms and patterns of prejudice.

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<sup>20</sup> An exception to this finding is when contact is between members of a majority group and higher status member of a minority group, which has been shown to result in positive outcomes (Amir, 1969; Pate, 1995). Furthermore, the meaning of “status” among researchers and study participants varies widely, adding to the level of complexity surrounding this condition (Tropp, 2006). Contact researchers have also tended to focus on the perspectives and attitudes of majority status groups as related to prejudice against minority status groups, and in the process have generally neglected the perspectives and attitudes of minorities in the contact situation (Tropp, 2006).

Cooperation in pursuit of common goals: Attainment of common goals requires individuals, regardless of larger group affiliation, to engage in cooperative, rather than competitive, behavior. Allport (1954/1979) cited U.S. Army studies during World War II which found that white soldiers in mixed combat units had significantly more positive attitudes towards blacks than their counterparts in all white units. Allport concluded that a critical element fostering attitude change was the joint pursuit of combat goals.<sup>21</sup> Sports teams that include members of different racial or ethnic groups provide common examples of this phenomenon in today's world (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2005).<sup>22</sup>

The classic study demonstrating the impact of common goals was conducted in 1954 by Muzafer Sherif and colleagues at a summer camp for boys in Robbers Cave, Oklahoma (Sherif, Harvey, White, Hood, & Sherif, 1961). Upon arrival at the summer camp, the researchers divided the eleven-year-old campers into two separate groups. They nurtured a strong sense of identity within each group, and then promoted competition between the two groups. After the two groups developed extremely negative and antagonistic attitudes towards each other, the researchers introduced situations requiring intergroup cooperation in order to solve complex problems that affected the entire camp (such as repairing the camp's main water supply or moving a stuck vehicle). The result of the intervention was a sharp decrease in negative stereotypes and an increase in favorable attitudes between members of different groups. Many studies since

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<sup>21</sup> While most research tends to support this finding, Amir (1969) reviewed studies of the Israeli Army and concluded that "it is doubtful whether intergroup contact in the army situation really changes and improves ethnic relations," (p. 340) leading to questions of generalizability of the contact hypothesis across ethnic and racial groups.

<sup>22</sup> Promoting interracial or interethnic cooperation on sports teams or in combat units may reduce prejudicial attitudes towards fellow teammates, but probably increases negative attitudes towards the "common enemy," thus creating or reinforcing intergroup conflict on a different, possibly larger scale. In a review of classroom interventions designed to reduce prejudice, Pate (1995) found that cooperative

the Robbers Cave experiment have demonstrated that intergroup cooperation in pursuit of common goals resulted in increased intergroup friendships and reduced ingroup bias (Brewer & Gaertner, 2004).<sup>23</sup>

Personal Relationships: Allport (1954/1979) presented evidence that personal *acquaintance* with a member of the other group lessened prejudice and negative attitudes, while *casual* contact between members of groups in conflict was more likely to increase prejudice and solidify unequal relationships. Cook (1962) coined the term “acquaintance potential” to describe “the opportunity provided by the situation for the participants to get to know and understand one another” (p. 75).<sup>24</sup> Cook (1978) theorized that acquaintance with a non-stereotypical individual could correct negative stereotypes and allow individuals to discover similarities in values and beliefs. In contrast to casual contact (for example, tourism or everyday street contact), a personal relationship or friendship is likely to result in more favorable attitudes towards the individual, *and* towards the other group as a whole (Hewstone & Brown, 1986). The concept of friendship has been a major focus of more recent research on intergroup contact (Pettigrew, 1998).

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experiences that do not include competition with other teams or groups seem to be more effective over the long-term than those that involve competition.

<sup>23</sup> This concept of intergroup cooperation has been applied with positive results in the classroom in the form of “cooperative learning” programs (Brewer & Gaertner, 2004; Cook, 1985; Pate, 1995; Stephan & Stephan, 2005). Classroom activities are structured so that cooperation between members of different groups is necessary to accomplish a shared goal or attain a reward. Meta-analytic research has demonstrated that cooperative learning programs generally result in more positive intergroup attitudes and intergroup friendships than do competitive or individual learning situations (Stephan & Stephan, 2005). Cook (1985) found that minority students in cooperative learning classrooms regularly surpassed their peers in traditional classrooms in academic achievement and self-esteem. Cooperative learning situations have also been shown to be linked to perceptions of higher self-efficacy than competitive or individualistic approaches (Bandura, 1994).

<sup>24</sup> Cook (1962) found that foreign students attending small, more rural U.S. colleges had significantly more interactions and more personal interactions with Americans than foreign students in larger communities. They concluded that students in small communities had more opportunity to get to know Americans and form cross-cultural friendships due to proximity (and presumably distance from other foreigners) and to the social expectations in smaller communities.

Allport's theory of intergroup contact predicted changes in attitudes and a reduction in prejudice mainly as a function of the four situational conditions described above. In the last fifty years, researchers have explored these and other contact variables with a variety of groups and contexts. The Robbers Cave research provided a valuable model for laboratory experiments on the contact hypothesis, most of which found positive benefits of contact, but also demonstrated the complexity of contact situations, even under highly controlled experimental conditions (Brewer & Gaertner, 2004). Stephan (1987) developed an intergroup contact model in which societal factors interact with situation and person factors and number of behavioral, cognitive, and affective mediating variables to determine the outcome of contact. In other research, some of the variables found to reduce prejudice and promote positive attitudes include frequency and duration of contact, features of the contact setting, personality and expectations of participants, presence of intergroup anxiety, structure and outcome of cooperative tasks, and status equalization (Brewer & Gaertner, 2004; Hewstone & Brown, 1986). Over the years, research on intergroup contact has demonstrated the relevance of more than fifty different mediating variables (Forbes, 2004), leading to many criticisms of the contact hypothesis. Stephan (1987) likened the contact hypothesis to "a bag lady who is so encumbered with excess baggage that she can hardly move" (p. 17). A decade later Pettigrew (1998) remarked that the contact hypothesis had accumulated so many conditions that it would "rarely predict positive results from contact, although research typically finds positive results" (p. 69).

### *Social Categorization Theory*

For the last several decades, social categorization theory, comprising social identity theory and self-categorization theory, has furnished a vital conceptual framework for studies on intergroup relations (Brewer, 1996). This approach highlights some of the cognitive processes influencing intergroup behavior. According to Hogg (2004), categorization is “probably the most basic and essential of all cognitive processes” (p. 205). Social categorization theory rests on the premise that individuals understand the world in terms of discrete social categories – groups to which they belong (ingroups) and groups to which they do not belong (outgroups). Group membership is defined on the basis of the perception of commonality with other ingroup members, rather than on the basis of frequency or quality of interaction (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Categorization allows individuals to organize and understand the world around them, providing mental short-cuts for processing stimuli, predicting outcomes, and guiding behavior (Hogg, 2004). Indeed, categorization is a “necessary tool which allows us to cope with a far too complex world” (Detweiler, 1986, p 72).

Social groups also contribute to individual identity. Tajfel (1981) defines social identity as “that *part* of an individual’s self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership” (p. 255). Tajfel (1981) hypothesized that individuals strive to enhance their self-esteem, and as a result will tend to remain in groups, or choose to become a member of groups, from which they derive positive benefits and personal satisfaction. Social identity may be positive or negative. A negative social identity may cause an individual to attempt to leave the group, or, if

leaving a group is not possible (for instance, ethnic or racial groups), then individuals may change their interpretation of the group's attributes to make the group more personally acceptable, and/or engage in political or social action to change the intergroup situation (Tajfel, 1981). People may also change their attitudes about a group in order to maintain consistency with the prevailing attitudes that are important to their social identity (Pate, 1995).

Social identity is based to a large extent on comparisons between the ingroup and relevant outgroups (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). The existence of multiple social groups is a key concept in this theory:

No group lives alone – all groups in society live in the midst of other groups. In other words, the 'positive aspects of social identity' and the reinterpretation of attributes and engagement in social action only acquire meaning in relation to, or in comparison with other groups. (Tajfel, 1981, p. 256)

In this perspective, differences *within* categories are generally minimized, and differences *between* categories are accentuated, resulting in the belief that “they” are not like “us” (Brewer, 1996). One of the main characteristics of this schema is bias towards ingroup members and discrimination or negative attitudes towards outgroup members (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). The “intergroup accentuation principle” holds that fellow ingroup members are perceived to be more similar to one's self than members of the outgroup (Brewer, 1996). “Because of their basic importance to our own survival and self-esteem we tend to develop a partisanship and ethnocentrism in respect to our ingroups” (Allport, 1954/1979, p. 42).

While such bias and discrimination are not evident in all intergroup relations, Tajfel and Turner (1986) maintain that “in-group bias is a remarkably omnipresent feature of intergroup relations,” and “the mere awareness of the presence of an out-group

is sufficient to provoke intergroup competitive or discriminatory responses on the part of the in-group” (p. 13). Furthermore, negative behaviors of individuals in the outgroup are often used as a basis for making unfavorable generalizations and reinforcing negative stereotypes about the entire outgroup (Stephan, 1987).<sup>25</sup> Group membership has a powerful influence on individual attitudes and behaviors, and often (though not always) results in intergroup relations “characterized by preferential treatment of ingroup members, mutual distrust, and intergroup competition” (Brewer, 1996, p. 292).

Another distinguishing feature of social categorization is the perception of ingroup variability and outgroup homogeneity (Quattrone, 1986). People tend to view fellow ingroup members as possessing a wide range of individual characteristics, but outgroup members are often lumped into one large, undifferentiated category. “They” are all the same, but “we” are all individuals. Hogg (2004) describes this process as “depersonalization” in which “people in groups appear attitudinally, affectively, and behaviorally relatively homogeneous” (p. 208). Research on stereotypes confirms the persistence of such broad categorical beliefs, even in the face of evidence to the contrary (Quattrone, 1986).<sup>26</sup> Lack of knowledge about an outgroup contributes to the perceived homogeneity of the outgroup, but research has also shown that ingroup members “assume that the individual differences of which they are aware are all the individual differences that are to be found” in the outgroup (Quattrone 1986, p. 27). In other words, it is

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<sup>25</sup> Intergroup bias and discrimination occurs even under conditions of minimal ingroup affiliation (in which individuals do not have long-term or deep connection to the group) and in the absence of prior intergroup conflict or competing goals (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Allport (1954/1979) noted that irrational categories (those formed without adequate evidence) were as easily formed as rational categories, and perhaps more easily formed when strong emotions were involved.

<sup>26</sup> Allport (1954/1979) commented that the presentation of facts has little effect on strongly-held categorical beliefs and attitudes: “When a fact cannot fit into a mental field, the exception is acknowledged, but the field is hastily fenced in again...” (p. 23). This phenomenon has also been documented in the field of

difficult for ingroup members to even imagine outgroup members as unique and varied individuals. Moreover, interaction with individual outgroup members who exhibit stereotypical or negative attributes tends to reinforce the perception that “they” are all like “that” (Stephan, 1987). Some research has demonstrated that intergroup bias can be lessened when people perceive greater individuality of outgroup members (Quattrone, 1986).

Tajfel (1981) describes how intergroup behavior can be arrayed along a continuum from “interpersonal” to “intergroup.” At one extreme, people interact with each other as individuals based on personal characteristics; at the other extreme they relate to each other as members of a particular group or category (such as race, gender, ethnic group, etc.). Tajfel (1981) points out that the “nearer is a social situation to the intergroup extreme, the stronger tendency will there be for members of the ingroup to treat members of the outgroup as undifferentiated items in a unified social category, i.e. independently of the individual differences between them” (p. 243).

The vast majority of interactions fall between the extremes, however, the higher degree of tension or conflict between groups, the more likely it is that behavior will be based on group membership rather than individual characteristics (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). One might wonder at this point whether competition, tension, and conflict are inevitable result of intergroup contact. Turner & Reynolds (2004) argue that this is a common, but by no means inevitable outcome. Yet, “social conflict can be a rational reaction to people’s historically evolved understanding of themselves” in their social world (Turner & Reynolds, 2004, p. 271). The challenge, then, is to better understand the

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communications: “If the facts don’t fit the frame, it is the facts that are rejected, not the frame” (Bales, 2001, p. 12).

psychological processes involved in intergroup situations and the conditions and interventions that lead to more peaceful intergroup relations. Table 2, below, summarizes the characteristics of ingroups and outgroups.

Table 2: Characteristics of Ingroups and Outgroups  
(adapted from Maddy-Weitzman, 2005)

**INGROUP:**

Part of social identity  
Members are similar to self  
Individual variability  
Positive attributes and emotions  
Distinct from outgroup

**OUTGROUP:**

Not part of social identity  
Members are different from self  
Lack of individual variability  
Negative attributes and emotions  
Distinct from ingroup

**POTENTIAL NEGATIVE OUTCOMES OF CONTACT:**

Negative stereotyping of outgroup  
Accentuation of differences between groups  
Ingroup favoritism  
Ethnocentricity  
Prejudice against outgroup  
Discrimination against outgroup  
Competition, tension, and conflict

***Integrating Social Categorization Theory and the Contact Hypothesis***

By combining elements of contact theory and social categorization theory, researchers have developed three main models for understanding how interpersonal contact can lead to positive intergroup relations: *deategorization*, *recategorization*, and *mutual differentiation* (Brewer & Gaertner, 2004). These three models differ on the structural representation of the contact situation, the psychological processes believed to promote attitude change, and the mechanisms by which the attitudes are generalized (Brewer & Gaertner, 2004). One of the major issues concerning the validity of the

contact theory is the extent to which the positive effects of interpersonal contact generalize to more positive attitudes and behavior towards the outgroup as a whole. A primary factor thought to affect generalization is the degree to which the group identity is made salient in the contact situation. Accordingly, the issue of group salience is highlighted in each of the models presented below.

The *deategorization* or *personalization* model articulated by Brewer & Miller (1984, cited in Brewer, 1996) is based on the assumption that contact will be most effective in reducing prejudice and intergroup conflict when interactions are highly personalized. This model promotes relations on the interpersonal end of the continuum described above, and emphasizes the importance of situations with high “acquaintance potential” as defined by Allport (1954/1979) and Cook (1962). The salience of the group in this model should be minimized so that people relate to each other as unique individuals. Building personal relationships across groups is thought to help “de-otherize” individuals, disconfirm negative stereotypes, and reveal the heterogeneity of the outgroup (Miller, 2002). Laboratory experiments have shown decategorization to be effective in reducing ingroup bias (Brewer, 1996).

A second model, *recategorization* or the “*Common Ingroup Identity Model*” (Gaertner, Dovidio, & Bachman, 1996; Gaertner & Dovidio, 2000) proposes reducing prejudice by recognizing a superordinate group to which both groups may claim identity. In this scheme, members of groups in conflict are “re-categorized” as members of a larger, common group. Again, the salience of the original groups is minimized, but in this case a superordinate group provides a common identity. This model emphasizes Allport’s condition of cooperation in pursuit of common goals. Experimental research

has shown that “to the extent that participants perceive the combined team as a single entity . . . evaluations of former outgroup members become more positive” (Brewer, 1996, p. 294). Those concerned with building world peace might ask, as Allport did in 1954, “Can humanity constitute an ingroup?” (1954/1979, p. 3). Although loyalties to increasingly larger groups take time to develop, and the “national orbit is the largest circle of loyalty that most children learn,” Allport believed “there is no necessity for the process to stop there” (p.46).

In the *subcategorization* or *mutual differentiation* model developed by Hewstone and Brown (1986), contact between individuals is more likely to result in positive behavior or lessened prejudice towards outgroup members as a whole when the individuals are seen as representative or typical of the outgroup. Some research has demonstrated that when individual outgroup members are viewed as atypical, biased attitudes and stereotypes about the outgroup remain in place (Hewstone & Brown, 1986). In contrast to the two other approaches, this model requires that group membership remain salient during intergroup contact in order for positive effects to be generalized.

More recently, researchers have suggested that some combination of the above models may be useful in understanding intergroup relations and facilitating generalization (Brewer, 2003). Miller (2002) remarks, “For most groups between whom there is strife, any contact at the interpersonal level occurs in the presence of category-identifying information” (p. 400). In line with this idea, some research has shown that personal interaction “within moderate or higher levels of category salience” promotes generalization (Miller, 2002, p. 400).

The *dual identities* approach proposed by Gaertner, Dovidio, and Bachman (1996) recognizes that individuals may perceive themselves to be members of a subgroup and a superordinate group simultaneously, essentially combining aspects of the recategorization and subcategorization models. The dual identities model recognizes the need, thought to be especially important for minority groups, to maintain the identity of the subgroup (Brown, 2000). In this model, individuals' subgroup and superordinate group identities are salient at the same time, a condition which research suggests enhances the likelihood that the positive benefits of contact will generalize to other outgroup members (Gaertner et al., 1996).

Another approach to understanding intergroup relations is *cross-cutting identities* – the notion that social identities are not only nested, but also overlap with each other (Brewer, 1996; Hewstone & Brown, 1986). Each individual, in other words, is a member of a great number of social groups of varying importance to them at different times and in different situations (groups based on age, gender, race, religion, ethnicity, nationality, occupation, etc.). Brewer (1996) posits that social identity is a factor of two opposing motivational forces – an individual's need for inclusion (to belong to a group) and differentiation (to be different from others). Individuals must strike a sort of equilibrium between belonging and being different, which is manifested in how they define their own groups. Brewer (1996) observes that “recategorization at the level of a superordinate common identity is potentially unstable because it does not satisfy the need for differentiation/exclusiveness” (p. 297). This theory helps explain why, as Allport (1954/1979) noted, “There seems to be special difficulty in fashioning an in-group out of an entity as embracing as mankind” (p 43). In the cross-cutting identity model, multiple

social identities may be salient simultaneously, which tends to reduce the importance of any one identity and may create a reluctance to discriminate against outgroup members who are also members of an ingroup (Brewer & Gaertner, 2004). This approach promotes personalization across category boundaries as individuals perceive commonalities based on membership in other groups (Brewer, 1996).

### The Contact Hypothesis Revisited

In the last decade, Pettigrew's (1998) "reformulated" theory of intergroup contact has become influential in the field. In this integrated, longitudinal model the processes of categorization described above come into play sequentially during the contact experience (see Figure 2). The model begins with the four key conditions as identified by Allport (1954/1979) and Cook (1962), and supported by decades of research: equal status, cooperation in pursuit of common goals, institutional support, and acquaintance potential. Other factors that researchers have been found to impact the outcome of contact (such as equal status outside of the situation) are defined as facilitating conditions.

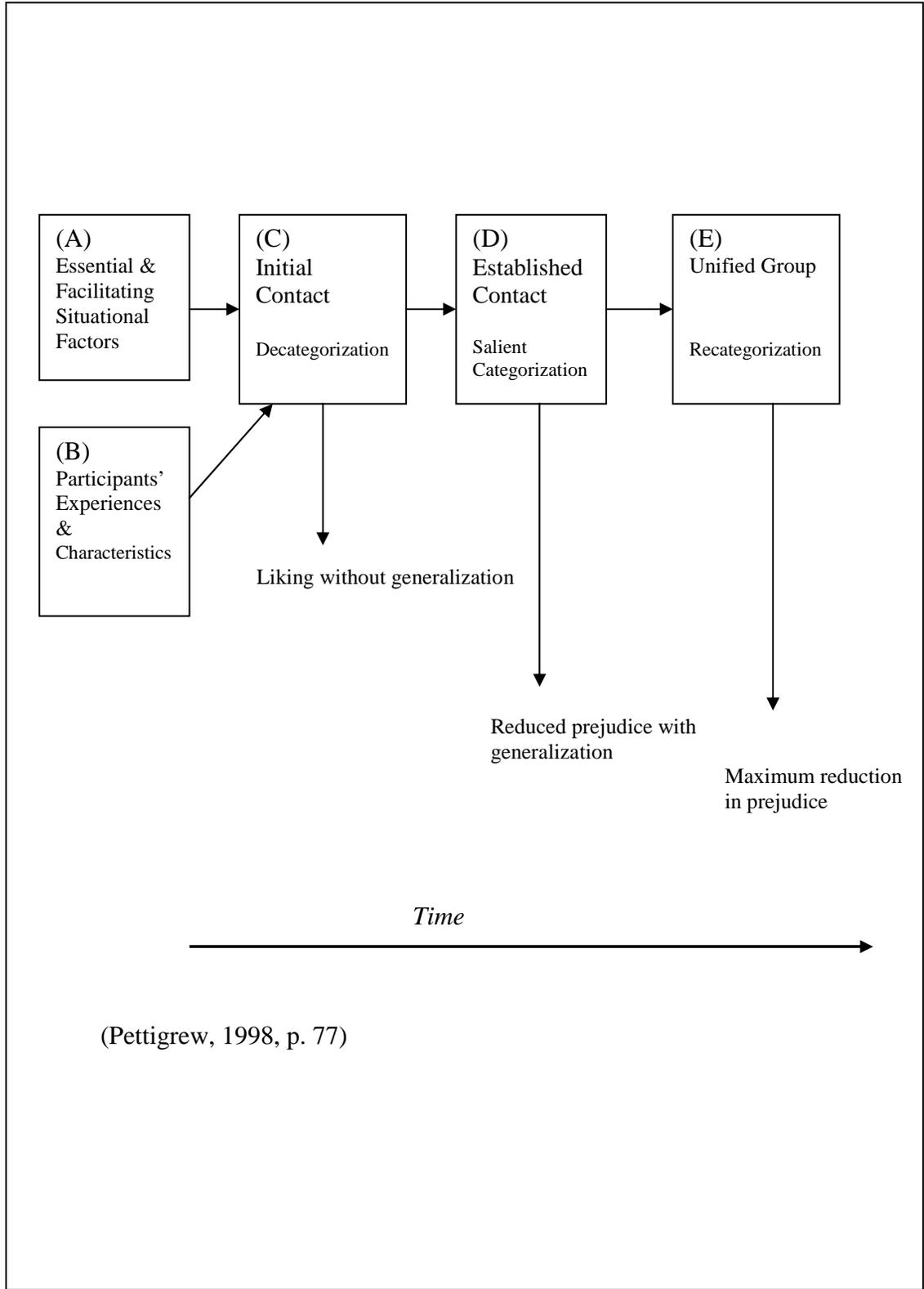
Pettigrew emphasizes the influence of institutional and societal norms, and notes that a lack of normative support may render the attainment of other essential conditions of contact far more difficult. Likewise, the experiences, characteristics, and expectations that individuals bring to the situation, as well as their interpretations of the situation, help shape the outcome of contact. Even with ideal contact conditions, individuals with strong prejudices may resist attitude change. Previous experiences can also have a powerful impact on the processes and outcome of contact. For instance, intergroup miscommunication can have long-lasting, cumulative effects:

Initial miscommunication inhibits communication effectiveness in the current circumstances and again in remembering what previously happened during subsequent communication attempts. Thus, like rabbits, categorization-related miscommunication doesn't just add up – it multiplies! (Detweiler, 1986 p. 73)

A key contribution of Pettigrew's model is the *time* factor. Pettigrew theorized that during the early stages of contact decategorization allows individuals to relate to each other on a personal level, which helps to reduce anxiety. As the contact situation unfolds and the "other" is seen as less of a threat, the salience of the groups may be increased to facilitate the likelihood of generalization. Finally, a superordinate group identity will serve to strengthen positive intergroup relations and reduce prejudice and discrimination. These stages often overlap, and some situational or contextual elements may be more important at one stage than another. The optimal scenario for reducing intergroup prejudice involves contact over an extended period of time, allowing for the development of cross-group friendships and a superordinate group identity.

Pettigrew's reformulated contact model (1998) identifies the development of cross-group friendships as an especially powerful factor in improving intergroup relations. Building on the work of Allport (1954/1979) and Cook (1962) regarding the acquaintance potential of contact situations, Pettigrew theorized that friendship invokes several critical processes that mediate attitude change: learning about the outgroup, changing behavior, generating affective ties, and ingroup reappraisal. First, learning about the outgroup helps to correct negative stereotypes about outgroup members. Cross-group friendships have also been shown to result in changed behavior towards outgroup members. Furthermore, the bonds formed through friendship encourage positive emotions and empathy, resulting in lessened anxiety about dealing with outgroup members.

Figure 2: Pettigrew's Reformulated Contact Theory



Pettigrew & Tropp (2006) suggest that reducing feelings of threat and anxiety results in decreased prejudice and more positive attitudes towards the outgroup. Other research has shown that anxiety and uncertainty are negatively related to effective intercultural communication (Gudykunst & Nishida, 2001). Forming cross-group friendships, then, may help reduce anxiety and facilitate communication and understanding between groups. Furthermore, cross-group friendships may also lead to a reassessment of favoritism to one's ingroup, as the differences between "us" and "them" become less compelling.

However, research on friendship has also shown that people tend to make friends with people who are like themselves, a phenomenon called "homophily" (Kadushin & Livert, 2002). Even when people from different groups are in daily contact with each other (such as Israeli Jews and Arabs in urban areas), acquaintances and friendships are highly homophilous unless other conditions of positive contact, such as equal status and cooperative tasks, are present (Kadushin & Livert, 2002). Conscious manipulation of contact conditions appears to be the most promising way of facilitating cross-group friendships.

In a recent meta-analytic study, Pettigrew and Tropp (2006) reviewed 713 independent samples from 515 studies of intergroup contact. They found that the overwhelming majority of contact situations resulted in positive outcomes. Studies designed to meet Allport's optimal conditions achieved significantly higher positive effects than other studies. Notably, however, they also found positive outcomes in most of the situations that lacked one or more of the key conditions. Although 94% of the studies demonstrated a reduction of prejudice or an increase in positive attitudes towards

the outgroup, only 19% of them adhered to Allport's conditions for contact (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). Thus, Pettigrew and Tropp conclude that Allport's conditions are *facilitative*, rather than *essential* for positive outcomes – a finding which represents a key amendment to Pettigrew's 1998 model. Indeed, no single condition was identified as essential in reducing prejudice and promoting positive intergroup relations. While the condition of institutional support was shown to be particularly relevant, positive outcomes generally appeared to be a function of a number of *facilitating conditions operating together*, rather than as separate factors. The researchers posit that “the process underlying contact's ability to reduce prejudice involves the tendency for familiarity to breed liking” under a wide range of conditions (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006, p. 766).

#### Directions for Future Intergroup Contact Research

Five decades of research has produced a sizeable body of research on intergroup contact and the reduction of prejudice and tension. Contact theory has been applied (with mixed success) to a wide range of social issues and contexts including the resolution of ethno-political conflicts, racial desegregation of schools and public housing, cooperative learning programs, professional and student exchange programs, and the integration of mentally and physically disabled children in schools (Amir, 1969; Cook, 1985; Pate, 1995; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2005).<sup>27</sup> Despite the long history of research, there are still significant gaps in our understanding of intergroup contact.

First, generalization remains a key concern. It is unclear to what extent the results of many highly controlled laboratory experiments (in which participants are often

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<sup>27</sup> See Pate (1995) for a review of educational programs and interventions aimed at reducing prejudice.

assigned to random groups that have no history of tension) are generalizable to the real life situations (Brewer & Gaertner, 2004). As Bramel (2004) points out, “if one sets up an experimental situation in which people can only experience harmonious relations, won’t they end up tending to say they can get along?” (p. 62). Conditions in the real world, of course, are generally more complex than experimental conditions. There are also many unknowns regarding how, and under what specific conditions, the positive effects of contact in the real world are likely to generalize beyond the specific situation (the school or sports team, for instance), or from individual acquaintances and friends to the larger groups (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006; Brewer & Gaertner, 2004).

The bulk of research on intergroup contact has been conducted in the United States or Western Europe.<sup>28</sup> Although in recent years more research has been conducted in other locations and with a wider variety of groups, researchers have questioned how the contact hypothesis holds across different cultural and ethnic groups (Dixon, 2006; Hamm et al., 2005; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2005). As Pettigrew (1986) noted two decades ago, social-psychological theories “too glibly assume universality across time, situations, and cultures” (p. 179). Not only do individuals from different cultural or ethnic groups perceive and react to contact differently, but it is also probable that the optimal conditions for promoting positive intergroup contact vary substantially across cultures and ethnic

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<sup>28</sup> Amir (1969) remarked that most of the “relevant studies have been conducted in the United States, and almost all of these have dealt with contact between the white majority group and a minority group, and in most cases, the minority group members were African-Americans” (p. 163). Evidence of this continued trend is presented by Pettigrew and Tropp (2006) in their meta-analytic test of intergroup contact theory. Seventy-two percent of the 713 samples were from the U.S. The researchers detected no significant differences in effects of contact, or in effect sizes between U.S. and other geographic regions represented in the study. However, the small proportion of studies conducted outside the U.S. (and many of these were conducted in Western Europe) warrants further research in a wider diversity of cultures and countries.

groups.<sup>29</sup> Tropp (2006) calls for recognition of the differing perceptions and experiences that minority and majority groups bring to contact situations and how their attitudes and responses to contact are shaped by their unique group histories. She maintains that different conditions may be required in order for the results of contact to be positive for *both* the majority and minority status groups.<sup>30</sup> Since groups in conflict often differ in status, cultural, ethnic, and religious backgrounds, it is clear that future research needs to reflect the reality of a diverse world.

Another direction for future research focuses on the potential uses of modern communications technologies for promoting positive intergroup contact. Some researchers have begun to examine the impact of virtual contact on intergroup attitudes, particularly Internet-based “pen-pal” type programs.<sup>31</sup> Clearly, modern technology (video, computers, satellite-conferencing, etc.) is being used in a variety of intergroup contact situations, such as “introducing” participants to each other prior to the actual contact situation, cooperative learning activities, and post-contact networking. Such uses of modern technology warrant further exploration.

Social categorization theory has made substantial contributions to our understanding of the cognitive processes of intergroup relations. However, as Pettigrew

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<sup>29</sup> Even within the U.S., recent studies reveal that white Americans react differently to contact with Hispanics, Asian-Americans, and African-Americans, depending on the context (residential, school, or work) and the size of the minority group (Dixon, 2006; Dixon & Rosenbaum, 2004). The researchers suggest various reasons for this outcome, including differing stereotypes about minority groups, some of which are more negative and enduring than others. Another study (Hamm et al., 2005) found significant differences in cross-group friendships of various ethnic groups.

<sup>30</sup> For instance, she suggests that trust-building is an especially important component of contact situations for minority group members (Tropp, 2006).

<sup>31</sup> Austin (2006) reports on an ICT (information communications technology) program to link teachers and students in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, and across the boundaries of mainstream and special needs schools. The researchers conclude that the program was successful in enhancing intercultural understanding and learning. They stress the importance of strong institutional support over a sustained period of time, as well as relevant curricular work. They also suggest that geographic distance may lessen feelings of threat and anxiety, thereby facilitating positive outcomes of contact.

(1986) remarked, contact researchers have too often focused on “cold cognition to the relative exclusion of affective considerations” (p. 179). Researchers have begun to explore how affective reactions, such as anxiety and feelings of threat, impact intergroup relations, as well as how affective and cognitive processes operate in tandem in contact situations.<sup>32</sup> This is a promising direction for future research (Brown, 2000; Kenworthy et al., 2005; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006; Pettigrew et al., 2007).

Most research has focused on the conditions of contact, and more recently on the cognitive and affective processes, rather than on content and context of intergroup experiences. For example, Ben-Ari and Amir (1986) found that a common feature of successful programs involving Arabs and Jews in Israel was that they avoided discussing politics and national issues. However, many others question whether or not relations between groups in conflict can be improved by contact which ignores the broader social and political context, including issues of structural and cultural violence (Galtung & Tschudi, 2002; Glazier, 2003; Maoz, 2002). Collaborative research efforts between contact theorists and practitioners involved in implementing and evaluating peace education and conflict resolution programs would help to bridge this gap.

As early as the Robbers Cave experiment, researchers recognized that multiple contact situations might be important to positive outcomes, and yet few studies have explored the variables of frequency, timing, and duration of intergroup contact.

Pettigrew and Tropp (2006) point out that most research has focused on short-term

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<sup>32</sup> Affective processes may be more significant in reducing prejudice than cognitive factors, such as learning about the outgroup (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). Other research has demonstrated that empathy, perspective-taking, and reduction of anxiety can be powerful mediating factors in intergroup relations (Gudykunst & Nishida, 2001; Kenworthy et al., 2005; Pettigrew et al., 2007).

intergroup contact situations. They emphasize the need for more longitudinal studies examining the cumulative effects of intergroup contact.

Decades of research reveals that most intergroup contact leads to positive outcomes (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006), and yet many real-life situations around the globe demonstrate that intergroup contact is as likely to result in tension and conflict as the opposite (Forbes, 2004). Therefore, Pettigrew and Tropp (2006) suggest that greater attention should be focused on the conditions that lead to increased prejudice and inhibit the positive outcomes of contact.<sup>33</sup>

### *Selected Studies*

In this section, I discuss the results of a number of studies related to intergroup contact and the improvement of intergroup relations. I divide the studies into four categories, each of which has relevance to this research study: international summer camp programs; school programs in the Middle East; studies about contact and Western attitudes about Muslims; and research on contact and foreign students.

#### International Summer Camp Programs

Watson (2003) conducted a longitudinal evaluation of the Children's International Summer Villages (CISV), a program that brings together students as young as 11 for experiential, cross-cultural summer camps. CISV founder Doris Allen cited the contact hypothesis as important influence in developing the program (Watson, 2003) and the organization's website (CISV International, 2008) states their belief that "peace is possible through friendship – and the real difference can be made by starting with

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<sup>33</sup> For example, Yang, Power, Takadu, and Posas (2004) identified some of the key conditions under which contact between immigrants and host country nationals leads to conflict and intergroup tension.

children.” Results of the survey indicate that the CISV experience was very influential in helping participants develop friendships and cross-cultural communication skills. In addition, 89% of respondents said they learned things they would not have learned in school, and the majority said that the experience influenced their educational and career choices, as well as helped them develop leadership skills (Watson, 2003, pp. 46-57).

Seeds of Peace is another example of a peacebuilding program for youth that is based on belief that contact between opposing groups can have positive results. Founded in 1993, Seeds of Peace “empowers young leaders from regions of conflict with the leadership skills required to advance reconciliation and coexistence” (Seeds of Peace website, 2008). The experience begins with a summer camp in Maine and then encourages positive relationships between alumni “Seeds” through regional meetings, workshops, and projects. Alumni form a network of youth leaders (primarily in the Middle East) that focuses on reconciliation, coexistence, and peacebuilding. Maddy-Weitzman (2005) conducted a qualitative study of the Seeds of Peace program for her doctoral dissertation. She concluded that an important part of the program’s success in promoting cross-group friendships and breaking down stereotypes is its mixed model approach to categorization. For instance, during the summer camp participants have an opportunity to get to know each other as individuals over meals or during free time (deategorization). They interact as members of their groups (subcategorization) during facilitated coexistence sessions, while other camp activities are designed to facilitate a common ingroup identity (recategorization). The subcategorization activities tended to be more confrontational, whereas other activities emphasized coexistence. She found this mixed model to be particularly effective in promoting positive cross-cultural relationships

because individuals responded differently to the three approaches. One critical issue that had to be dealt with during and after the camp experience was asymmetrical power structures. In this case, the mixed categorization approach helped to lesson the power issues during some interactions, and therefore contributed to more positive results. She also found that Seeds of Peace was particularly good at developing cooperative activities aimed at common goals. Maddy-Weitzman contends that the follow-up activities after the camp (such as joint planning of peacebuilding activities) are the key to the long-term impact of the program.

### School Programs in the Middle East

Tal-Or, Boninger, and Gleicher (2002) describe a program, intentionally designed to meet Allport's conditions for positive contact, that brought young Israelis, Palestinians, and Jordanians together for a two-week medical technology course. The participants, who lived together in dormitories, worked cooperatively on group-oriented projects. The researchers reported that many meaningful cross-group friendships developed and participants came to view each other more as individuals than as members of the opposing group. Unfortunately, at the time of publication the program was at risk of ending due to the intensity of the broader conflict in the region.

Glazier (2003) observed the interaction of young Arab and Jewish children in a bilingual and bicultural school in Israel. She suggests that striving for the reduction of prejudice between these two groups is not enough; the goal should be cultural fluency, the ability to "move back and forth between cultures, to embrace one's own culture while understanding its relationship to the cultures of others" (Glazier, 2003, p. 161). Glazier recommends attention to pedagogy and curriculum. In this case, the curriculum was

meaningful to students' everyday lives. Rather than focus on "safe topics" such as holidays and customs, teachers helped students engage with the controversial issues in their lives. She also notes the importance of duration of contact: "It is the overlap of experiences of being in one another's company...that allows students to begin to develop cultural fluency" (Glazier, 2003, p. 161).

### Contact and Western Attitudes about Muslims

Christian and Lapinski (2003) lend support for the contact theory in their survey of American high school students' attitudes, knowledge, and stereotypes about Muslims and the practice of Islam. The most significant finding of the survey, conducted six months after the attacks of 9/11, was that students who reported knowing or interacting with Muslims were significantly less likely to hold negative stereotypes of Muslims and Islam. They were also more likely to have positive attitudes towards Muslims.<sup>34</sup> In addition, the more knowledge the students had about Islam (as measured by a multiple choice test), the fewer negative stereotypes they held and the more positive their attitudes about Muslims.

A recent study conducted in Germany (Pettigrew, Christ, Wagner, & Stellmacher, 2007) found that even indirect cross-group friendship – having a friend who has an outgroup friend – is negatively associated with prejudices against Muslims and foreigners living in Germany. Surprisingly, they found that such indirect contact reduces prejudice at similar levels as direct friendship with a foreigner. "The potency of indirect contact means that intergroup contact has positive consequences, not only for the participants but

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<sup>34</sup> While the results seem to endorse the contact hypothesis, the study is somewhat thrown into question by the authors' failure to reveal how many students engaged in what type of contact with Muslims. The

also for non-participants, whose friends and acquaintances had such contact” (Pettigrew et al., 2007, p. 422).<sup>35</sup>

### Contact and Foreign Students

Despite the common assumption that exchange programs lead to positive interpersonal and intergroup relations, studies have revealed mixed results, indicating the complexity of the relationship (Hull, 1978; Klineberg & Hull, 1979; Spaulding & Flack, 1976; Stroebe, Lenkert, & Jonas, 1988). Foreign students often find it difficult to build meaningful relationships with people in the host country, especially if opportunities for contact are not a structured part of the program (Hull, 1978; Klineberg, 1976). Hull (1978) found that the more contact the foreign student has with local people (even if some of it is negative) the more likely that the student will be satisfied with the overall experience.

In a more recent study, Spencer-Rodgers and McGovern (2002) examined the relationship between intercultural communications affect (defined as negative affect associated with perceived linguistic and cultural barriers) and prejudice towards foreign students at two U.S. universities. The researchers suggest that the adverse emotions (feeling uncomfortable, impatient, or frustrated) associated with intercultural communication can lead to prejudice, as well as intergroup tension and hostility. The survey revealed that intercultural communications affect was strongly related to prejudice towards foreign students. Contrary to expectations, however, high levels of social

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authors estimate that less than two percent of the population in this small Midwestern community were likely to be Muslim, thus leading one to wonder about opportunities for any kind of contact with Muslims.<sup>35</sup> The same study (Pettigrew et al., 2007) found that having a foreign or Muslim friend reduced both the perceived threat to the individual and the perceived collective threat to society from foreigners. Indirect contact, however, had a much stronger impact on perceived collective threat than on individual threat. The

contact between American students and foreign students in this study did not moderate the connection between intercultural communication affect and prejudice. Indeed, high levels of social interaction with foreign students were associated with increased perceptions of threat.<sup>36</sup> The researchers posit that more frequent social contact may make the difficulties of communicating across cultures more psychologically salient.

Kamal and Maruyama (1990) surveyed Qatari college students in the U.S. Their findings lend support to the contact hypothesis in that direct contact between Qatari students and Americans increased the Qatari students' liking for Americans as people. Significantly, however, it did not increase their liking for the U.S. government or its policies (which has implications for government-sponsored exchange programs). The researchers also found that having cross-cultural friendships had a positive impact on the Qatari students' social adjustment and their general satisfaction with school.

Nesdale and Todd (2000) carried out a long-term test of the contact hypothesis at an Australian university, in which they assessed the impact of an intervention designed to promote contact between Australian and international students in residence halls. They examined the extent to which contact was generalized to other outgroup members, as well as the extent to which three variables (cultural stereotypes, cultural knowledge, and cultural openness) mediated the contact outcomes. Consistent with the contact

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authors speculate that direct contact (friendship) may be necessary to demonstrate a stronger reduction in perceived personal threats from the outgroup.

<sup>36</sup> This finding is in contrast to the study cited above (Pettigrew et al., 2007) in which cross-group friendship tended to reduce perceptions of threat. In part, the difference in findings may be attributed to the fact that the three-item, quantitative social contact scale used by Spencer-Rodgers and McGovern (2002) did not distinguish between casual and close personal relationships. In addition, the researchers did not discuss the extent to which the social contact conformed to the conditions specified by contact theory. The researchers also stated that most participants had relatively little social contact with foreign students (although evidently they could identify high and low levels of contact within this group). While I had a number of questions about this research, the conclusions of the researchers sound plausible, particularly for more casual contact over a short period of time.

hypothesis, Australian students in the intervention group reported greater cross-cultural contact, a finding that the researchers point out is noteworthy because members of the dominant cultural group often feel threatened by contact with minority group members (as in Spencer-Rodgers & McGovern, 2002 cited above). The Australian students participating in the intervention also reported more contact with outgroup members beyond the residence hall (generalization), and displayed more intercultural knowledge and openness (confirming the positive effect of the mediating variables). Clearly, this study lends support for the contact hypothesis for the majority group (the Australians), but the impact of the contact experience on the international students was less apparent.<sup>37</sup>

### C. International Educational Exchange

*All the good people agree,  
And all the good people say,  
All nice people, like us, are We  
And everyone else is They.  
But if you cross over the sea,  
Instead of over the way,  
You may end by (think of it) looking on We  
As only a sort of They!*  
-- Rudyard Kipling<sup>38</sup>

In a world made smaller each day by advances in communications and transportation technologies, student exchange programs have become a common means of promoting positive contact between individuals of different racial, ethnic, cultural, and religious backgrounds – the sort of personal contact that many assume will result in reduced prejudice and increased understanding and cooperation. Governments,

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<sup>37</sup> The researchers posit that the intervention failed to produce a significant impact on the international students because they started from a higher level of international commitment, knowledge and openness than the Australian students.

<sup>38</sup> From Rudyard Kipling's poem entitled, "We and They," 1926, cited in Storti, 2001, p. 105.

universities, and private sector organizations have all invested in international student exchange, and for a variety of reasons ranging from fostering mutual understanding and building global competitiveness to promoting political ideologies and strengthening national security (Altbach & Lulat, 1985; Bu, 2003; Stephenson, 2007; Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001). Building cross-cultural understanding, however, has been an enduring objective of international student exchange (Bachner, 1991b; Stephenson, 2007).

A review of literature on international educational exchange necessarily involves drawing from a number of academic disciplines. As Bachner (1991b) points out, exchange is more of a field of endeavor rather than an academic discipline, with “outcomes designed to benefit the individual participant and their reference groups rather than contributions to an accumulating, collective body of knowledge” (p. 139). As such, exchange draws from and contributes to many disciplines, including social psychology and peace education as discussed above.

In this paper, I refer to programs for high school students as “youth exchange” and those for college students as “study abroad.” I use the terms “exchange student” and “international student” interchangeably, although I recognize that some people make a distinction between exchange students (either high school or collegiate) who participate in an organized program, and international or foreign students who arrange for their sojourns independently.

Although quite different on many accounts, the history and development of high school and collegiate exchange are inextricably intertwined and will therefore be discussed together. In the last fifty years, a considerable amount of research has been

conducted involving international students and study abroad programs at the collegiate level (Ward et al., 2001). Much less research has focused on high school exchange (Bachner, 1988; Wiley, 2005).<sup>39</sup> Given this imbalance in the literature, for the discussion below I draw upon the literature pertaining to study abroad and international college students, making the assumption that the findings from collegiate studies are likely in many cases to have some relevance for high school exchange.

### *Overview of Exchange*

International student exchanges vary on a multitude of characteristics including (but certainly not limited to) age of the student, duration of sojourn, goals of the program, nationality of student, host country, motivation and personality of students, and the broader context of the exchange. Bachner recognizes the wide array of exchange experiences while capturing the essential elements in his definition of international educational exchange:

(1) a sojourn in another cultural milieu, (2) which is extensive in duration (i.e. one month or more) and (3) which involves intensive exposure to another culture, its people, and its institutions. (4) Exchange may be undertaken for a variety of personal reasons...although typically it will be for purposes of formal study, language proficiency, skill development, personal development, increased knowledge of the host country, or improved international understanding and relations. (5) The exchange experience may be programmatic (organized) or individualized (independently arranged), and (6) it can occur across a range of educational levels (primary, secondary, collegiate, graduate, professional-technical, and scholarly) (7) In instances of programmatic/organized exchange, the educational content of the experience will be formalized...Even in these instances, however, the *process* of exchange, the *experience* of living in another culture rather than a curriculum, remains its essential feature, and the cross-

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<sup>39</sup> The reasons for this disparity are not difficult to discern – international college students are a sought-after global commodity, and study abroad has become an important part of campus internationalization and global competitiveness strategies (Hira, 2003). The Institute of International Education (2009) reports that there were 671,616 international students studying at U.S. universities in the 2008-09 school year, and 262,416 U.S. students studying abroad for academic credit in 2007-08. The U.S. is still largely a “receiving country” for collegiate study abroad, but both incoming and outgoing flows are on the increase.

cultural learning that comes from the experience is presumed to be exchange's distinctive impact. (Bachner, 1991b, p. 140. Italics in the original).

Despite the fact that exchanges have been a common feature of the educational landscape for many decades, there is no agreed upon classification of types of programs (Bachner, Zeutschel, & Shannon, 1993; Bachner & Zeutschel, 2009; Detweiler & Vaughan, 2008; Engle & Engle, 2003). This lack of a common classification scheme has implications for measuring and comparing the impacts of exchange, as well as for program planning. Bachner and Zeutschel (2009) observe that exchange is a “highly variegated affair” and recommend the development of a typology to differentiate types of sojourn (p. 75). One typology, presented by Engle and Engle (2003) includes the following program components: duration; entry language competence; academic context; housing; provisions for cultural interaction and experiential learning; and guided reflection on cultural experience. These seven elements are arrayed along a series of five levels from short-term study tour to long-term cultural immersion.

### Duration of Exchange

Duration is one of the elements that differentiates one exchange from another and almost certainly has an influence on outcomes (Engle & Engle, 2003). In recent years, “the international community has moved towards short-term programs abroad in a big way” (Hovde, 2002, p. 2). Short-term exchange programs provide opportunities for students who for time, money, or personal reasons could not engage in a longer sojourn. Furthermore, “the majority of U.S. students are simply not willing to spend a year (or even a semester) studying overseas” (Hovde, 2002, p. 2).<sup>40</sup> The trend away from long-

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<sup>40</sup> This statement is reinforced by the American Council on Education (2008) report in which only 18% of the students indicated their preference for a year-long study abroad program.

term exchanges is also evident in the survey of alumni of International Education of Students (IES) programs (Dwyer & Peters, 2004). The researchers report that 72% of the survey participants who studied abroad during the 1950s and 1960s did so for a full year. In contrast, only 20% of the survey respondents from 1990s had participated in a long-term program.

There are recognized trade-offs in the trend towards short-term study abroad, but conventional wisdom and research have generally demonstrated the benefits of longer-term exchanges (Bachner et al., 1993; Bachner & Zeutschel, 2009; Dwyer and Peters, 2004; Grove, 1983; Hansel, 1986; Hansel & Chen, 2008; Knight & Schmidt-Rinehart, 2002; Neppel, 2005; Spaulding & Flack, 1976). “Virtually any goal one can cite for study abroad – inter-cultural understanding, language facility, management of diversity, and others – can be more fully and systematically developed on a long-term program” (CIEE, 2008). Bachner and Zeutschel (2009) found that “the longer the program duration, the higher the overall feeling of success/satisfaction” (p. 61). In another study, high school exchange students on longer-term programs showed significantly greater appreciation and awareness of the host country culture, as well as greater language ability, than those on short-term programs (Hansel, 1986).

A recent study (Hansel & Chen, 2008) found that differences in language fluency between participants in short and longer-term programs were still evident decades after the exchange. Dwyer and Peters (2004) report increased academic and cultural development, as well as personal growth benefits associated with longer stays abroad. In a survey conducted at the University of Maryland, Neppel (2005) concluded that students on semester or year programs reported significantly more growth in cognitive

complexity, liberal learning, personal philosophy, and interpersonal self-confidence, than students participating in short-term programs. Moreover, as Grove (1983) maintains, some key outcomes of exchange, such as the formation of long-lasting and meaningful relationships, and the development of an intercultural perspective, are less likely to result from short-term programs.

### Youth Exchange in the U.S.

While short-term programs are gaining in popularity, youth exchange programs of a semester or year in length (generally considered long-term) still constitute a significant sector of the exchange field. According to the Council on Standards for International Educational Travel (CSIET), the organization that sets standards for U.S. youth exchange organizations, during the 2007-2008 school year (the year this study was conducted) there were a total of 29,004 high school exchange students from other countries studying in the U.S. for a semester or a year. At the same time, U.S. high school students studying abroad for a semester or school year totaled 2,255 (Lee, Jaein, 2008).<sup>41</sup> Multi-year comparisons showed a steady increase in numbers of inbound students, but a five year low in U.S. youth going abroad. In the 2008-2009 school year, however, both the inbound (27,924) and outbound (2,016) numbers of high school students declined from the previous school year (Oliver, 2009), perhaps due to the world economic crisis.

In the U.S., Texas and Michigan host the most inbound students (more than 2,000 each), while nearly one-third of the total exchange students are hosted in the Midwest.

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<sup>41</sup> In the U.S., these flows of students are referred to as “inbound” and “outbound.” These figures include only exchanges sponsored by organizations that meet the CSIET standards and are included in the annual Advisory List. However, CSIET estimates that their listing includes statistics from the vast majority of U.S. exchange organizations in the field (Lee, Jaein, 2008). Although similar information may be available for other countries, I focus here on the U.S. since the YES program is sponsored by the U.S. government.

Inbound students come from an impressive array of countries (101 in all), but more than half hail from only five countries: Germany, Brazil, South Korea, Thailand, China, and Japan (Lee, Jaein, 2008). The Near East region (comprising mostly Muslim countries and Israel) accounted for only 300 of the more than 29,000 exchange students in the U.S. in 2007-08. Only 12 U.S. high school students went to the Near East (4 to Egypt, 8 to Jordan) in the 2007-08 school year (Lee, Jaein, 2008).

In accordance with industry standards (CSIET, 2004) and U.S. government regulations (U.S. Department of State, 2006), youth exchange organizations in the U.S. provide orientations to students (both incoming and outgoing) prior to their exchange experience. If students stay with host families (the most common arrangement), host families are carefully screened, and also receive an orientation.<sup>42</sup> Host parents provide guidance and support, and a deep cultural immersion that is not always possible in other living situations. Local representatives of exchange organizations (often volunteers) register students in local schools, recruit and orient host families, and provide support for the students throughout the exchange year. Many youth exchange organizations also provide re-entry orientation for students prior to their return home.

Clearly, the age of participants is one of the elements that sets youth exchange apart from college study abroad experiences. Along with this comes an assumption that “major personal benefits occur by virtue of the experience’s coming at a relatively early and impressionable age in the life of the exchangee” (Bachner, 1988, p. 274). According to Bettina Hansel (2007), high school exchange students are at a “particularly interesting

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<sup>42</sup> The U.S. government now requires that host families of high school exchange students in the U.S. undergo criminal background checks (U.S. Department of State, 2006).

developmental stage; generally confident in their roles and behavior in their own society, they are still not fully mature in terms of their thinking and values” (p 27).

Another characteristic of youth exchange is that the academic component of the exchange often receives less emphasis. College students generally receive academic credit for their studies, but high school exchange students are less likely to receive academic credit in their home country for their schooling abroad, or to be granted a high school diploma by the host country.<sup>43</sup> Exchange organizations also tend to promote the cross-cultural learning aspects of the exchange experience rather than the academic opportunities.<sup>44</sup> For youth exchange, then, the cross-cultural learning is indeed, as Bachner (1991b) notes, the essential feature of the exchange experience.

### International Student Flows

The term “exchange” can be a bit misleading. Historically (and as in Bachner’s definition above), the term has been used to describe student sojourners in another country. In the broadest sense, students are “exchanged” between societies in a general back and forth flow across borders.<sup>45</sup> However, no one would claim that there is any sort of control or balance of numbers in this flow.<sup>46</sup> The U.S., for example, receives far more of both college and high school students than it sends abroad (IIE, 2009; Lee, Jaemin,

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<sup>43</sup> This statement is based largely on my observations of high school exchange students who have not received academic credit for their studies in the U.S., as well as returning U.S. exchange students who did not receive credit for their year abroad. Many U.S. school systems (including Montgomery County, MD) do not grant high school diplomas to exchange students completing 12<sup>th</sup> grade. However, some exchange students are able to transfer the credits from their exchange year to their home school. Moreover, for individual students academic opportunities in another country may provide a motivation for the exchange.

<sup>44</sup> The goal statements of a number of high school exchange organizations are reviewed in the next section.

<sup>45</sup> Of course, one could also argue that it is the cultures that are “exchanged” rather than the students.

<sup>46</sup> Countries that receive more students than they send abroad tend to be Western countries. Those that send more students than they receive are often countries in rapid growth and lower and middle income countries. Countries in conflict do not tend to be exchange destinations. Security concerns can be an issue for students of any age, but possibly more so for high school students who also require parental approval to participate in the exchange.

2008; Oliver, 2009). Altbach and Teichler (2001) maintain that there is “scant interest in the United States in genuine reciprocal international exchanges” (p. 12). Moreover, the majority of U.S. students choose to study abroad in Europe, although there has been some increase in the numbers of students studying in Africa, Asia, and Latin America (Sowa, 2002; IIE, 2009). The implication for U.S. students is that the broadened worldview that may result from the overseas experience is not likely to extend beyond the boundaries of Western perspectives and ideologies. Furthermore, if people in other countries understand the imbalance in exchange as lack of interest on the part of Americans in learning about their cultures, the exchange program may be viewed as a cultural threat or as an attempt to Americanize exchange participants. It is important to note, however, that many programs do conduct two-way exchanges with particular countries (and increasingly with countries in the south), although not necessarily matching incoming and outgoing numbers.<sup>47</sup> The actual balance in numbers may not be important, but it is conceivable that the overall perception of reciprocity in exchange programs may be an important factor to consider in the examination of the connection between youth exchange and cross-cultural understanding and global peace. Bachner (1991b) contends that “asymmetries will be reinforced by expectations imposed by governments or other program sponsors” (p. 145).

Host and home country policies, economics, and cultures impact the size and direction of international student flows. Student exchange is also intertwined with the process of globalization and changing political, economic, social and cultural

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<sup>47</sup> Some youth exchange programs do offer direct exchange experiences in which students from different countries stay with each other’s families during the exchange. In my experience these are often language-oriented programs. For instance, Bethesda-Chevy Chase High School in Montgomery County, MD offers such a program for students studying French and Spanish.

relationships (Altbach & Knight, 2007; Altbach & Teichler, 2001; Rizvi, 2004). Chen and Barnett (2000) analyzed international flows of students in higher education in 1985, 1989, and 1995 from the perspective of world system theory. The countries examined in the study were divided into three groups – the core, the semi-periphery and the periphery – based on economic status and their links to the other countries. Countries identified as the core represent “political, economic and cultural hegemonic powers” and the relationship between the core and periphery is considered to be hegemonic (Chen & Barnett, 2000, p. 437). The results indicated that the U.S. and other European countries constituted the rather stable core and most African countries remained in the periphery for all three years. The middle group, the semi-periphery showed the most movement as some Asian and Eastern European countries moved closer to the core or to the periphery influenced by global economic and political factors. The researchers concluded that “the flow of international students has become more closely tied to economic development than ever before” (Chen & Barnett, 2000, p. 451). Rizvi (2004) argues that American hegemonic power and economic dominance continued after September 11, with a “new rhetoric of security useful . . . in re-asserting its global authority and pre-eminence in international relations” (p 162).<sup>48</sup> The asymmetry in international exchange is seen by many as characteristic of the process of globalization and Western imperialism (Rhee & Sagaria, 2004).

In recent years, international students have become big business in higher education, and countries compete to attract students to their universities (de Wit, 2002). More than two million college students study in another country today, and the vast majority of these pay for their own education (Altbach & Knight, 2007). International

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<sup>48</sup> As I will discuss in Chapter 3, national security is a dominant frame for the YES program.

students pumped more than \$14.5 billion into the U.S. economy in the 2006-07 school year through payments for college tuition and living expenses (IIE, 2009). Given that international student flows are largely from the south to the north, the international exchange industry can be seen as pulling economic resources away from the world's poorest countries. Equally, or perhaps more, disturbing is the draining away of human resources as many international students stay in the host country after the completion of their studies. Large numbers of international students "who have the potential of producing innovations to alter the world's uneven distribution of wealth, may be recruited into the core" (Chen & Barnett, 2000, p. 451).<sup>49</sup>

The "brain drain" of highly educated people from poor countries has been especially detrimental to local universities and research communities in African countries (Altbach & Teichler, 2001).<sup>50</sup> International students have historically been drawn from the elite classes, both in the south and the north (Altbach & Teichler, 2001).<sup>51</sup> This is not surprising, as international exchange is an expense that few poor people could afford. One ethnographic study concluded that Rotary International recruits middle-class American youth and arranges for them to stay in mostly upper-class environments overseas, reinscribing race and class privilege (Fordham, 2002). The researcher suggests that the exchange experience serves as a kind of cultural capital that helps to reproduce a global business class. Rather than contributing to a more equitable and just world, in

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<sup>49</sup> The "brain drain" is not limited to students who study abroad. Large numbers of students who complete higher education in their own countries take employment in other countries. While the remittances they send home support extended families and contribute to the local economy, it is difficult to put a value on the human resources lost to the home country.

<sup>50</sup> Altbach and Teichler (2001) use the term "brain exchange" rather than "brain drain" in recognition of the complexity of the global migration of human talent. While African countries have been especially hard hit by the exodus of educated citizens, some other countries (they cite examples of India and Taiwan) have experienced significant numbers of international students returning home after the completion of their studies.

some ways international student exchange may serve to reinforce the current inequitable global distribution of wealth and technology (Chen & Barnett, 2000; Fordham, 2002).

Altbach and Knight (2007) also point out that the south to north movement of international students is facilitated by an exchange process dominated by the host countries in the north. “Northern institutions and corporations own most knowledge, knowledge products, and IT [information technologies] infrastructure” (Altbach & Knight, 2007). The terms and conditions of the exchange are generally determined by universities or organizations in the industrialized countries, thus reinforcing existing inequalities. Stephenson (2007) maintains that the tremendous resources available to U.S. institutions and students, combined with an emphasis on global competitiveness, leads many Americans to perceive study abroad as a type of “commodity that has been purchased and that consequently entitles one to ‘quality service’ as the ‘consumer’” (p. 14). She raises questions about the rising consumer mentality of U.S. study abroad programs, and the implications for other exchange goals, such as promoting cross-cultural understanding and peace. Stephenson (2007) also argues that U.S. study abroad programs have been “largely self-centered” and that host culture partners are often viewed as little more than “pleasant backdrop” (p. 14). She urges international educators to take a critical look at how study abroad programs are designed and implemented, and aim for a more globally responsible “fair trade” approach.

Researchers have also found that international students in the U.S. have had to endure prejudice and discrimination. Constantine and colleagues (2005) conducted qualitative research with twelve African students who had studied at U.S. colleges. All of the students experienced racism and discrimination in the U.S., and were disappointed

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<sup>51</sup> Increasingly educators are calling for more diversification in exchange (Altbach & Teichler, 2001).

about the extent to which White cultural values dominated some aspects of their educational experience (Constantine et al., 2005). Rhee and Sangaria (2004) conducted a critical discourse analysis of articles about international students in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* from 1996-1999. The researchers found that articles reflected three “imperialist themes” in their construction of international students as capital, as subjugated Others, and as persons with diminished individual identity. The researchers argue that the U.S. is often perceived as imperialist by people in other countries, and that U.S. educators and policymakers must recognize these beliefs and the relation to behaviors and attitudes with regard to international students (Rhee & Sangaria, 2004).

### ***History and Organizational Goals***

The tradition of international student exchange can be traced back to accounts of traveling scholars more than two thousand years ago (Ward et al., 2001). Over the years, students have migrated to intellectual centers and universities throughout the world. Centers of learning shifted with changes in civilizations, and although the Western countries are now prime destinations for international students, this has not always been the case. For example, some scholars credit the great Islamic libraries of Spain and Egypt for keeping Western culture alive during the Dark Ages in Europe (Altbach & Lulat, 1985).

Although it is generally assumed that the “ultimate goal of international exchanges is to contribute to friendly and peaceful relations among peoples of the world,” there are a host of other social, political and economic motives that have shaped the field (Klineberg, 1970, p. 52). Ward, Bochner, and Furnham (2001) maintain that historically exchange has had two main goals. First, exchange has been used as a tool of foreign

policy, to extend the influence of the state. A modern version of this goal includes providing technical and economic assistance through educational exchange, extending the influence of the host country and sometimes creating overseas markets in the process. Western governments have often viewed international exchange as a means to maintain their influence overseas (Altbach & Lulat, 1985). A second major objective of exchange has been to spread the values of the dominant culture, including religious beliefs and more secular values such as democracy and international harmony. A subset of this second goal is related to leadership development and national self-interest:

...the assumption being that overseas students, who would rise to positions of responsibility in industry or government on returning home, would develop and retain positive attitudes towards the host country which had provided them with an education. (Ward et al., 2001, p. 144)

Campbell (2005) delineates three rationales that have driven U.S. policy on international exchange: peace and mutual understanding, national security, and global competitiveness. Stephenson (2007) cites two similar objectives of study abroad programs. The first, “global community and peace promotion,” is based on the contact hypothesis that increased intercultural contact will lead to greater understanding and eventually a more peaceful world. In contrast, the “growth and benefit” paradigm comprises both personal and national benefits. Students gain greater skills and knowledge, which enhance their careers as well as contribute to a more competitive workforce, thus helping the nation maintain its global position. Both competitiveness and mutual understanding contribute to national security goals. While one rationale may be dominant, they are intertwined and to various degrees several goals be evident in policy decisions and program design at any one time (Campbell, 2005; Stephenson, 2007). In

addition to governments, private organizations, including universities, may also subscribe to any or all of these goals.

Although the majority of international exchanges at both high school and college levels are carried out by private organizations, non-profit groups, and educational institutions, the U.S. government has historically played an important role in providing leadership and setting policy direction (Campbell, 2005). In the U.S., student exchange programs gained popularity throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, but especially after World War II (Bu, 2003). Many people saw exchange as a means to promote global understanding and prevent another world war. During this era, exchanges between the U.S. and Germany helped to ease tensions and allow people to connect on a personal level (Kinkead, 1962). Two of the largest high school exchange organizations, AFS (formerly the American Field Service, AFS-USA, 2008a) and Youth for Understanding (YFU, 2008) conducted exchanges with Germany in the post World War II years.

Beginning in the immediate post war period up to the 1980s the U.S. provided a model for educational exchange with other countries in the world (Altbach & Teichler, 2001). The Fulbright Act, passed in 1946, creatively used the proceeds from surplus war property to fund study abroad. The Fulbright program has since become the flagship of American exchange programs. From the beginning, the intention of the program was to promote understanding and global peace:

The Fulbright Program aims to bring a little more knowledge, a little more reason, and a little more compassion into world affairs, and thereby to increase the chance that nations will learn at last to live in peace and friendship.

– J. William Fulbright (Fulbright website, 2008)

However, Senator Fulbright also believed that it was important to national security “to understand the minds of people in other societies and to have American aspirations and

problems understood by others” (cited in Bu, 2003, p. 155). The Smith-Mundt Act, passed in 1948, funded educational and cultural exchange programs around the world (Bu, 2003).

In 1955, the Institute of International Education (IIE) identified the leading goals of international study programs as the promotion of international understanding and goodwill (Doi, 1958). Interestingly, the IIE cautioned that exchange groups should be realistic or risk being “endangered by setting impossible goals” (cited in Doi, 1958, p. 44). As the Cold War developed, however, the emphasis of student exchange programs sponsored by the U.S. government shifted to more political aims, chiefly building links to other countries to prevent the spread of communism. The strategy for exchange became “a unilateral approach to exporting American culture and American know-how, although ‘mutual understanding’ remained the watchword” (Bu, 2003, p. 156). Exchange was employed to win the hearts and minds of people in strategic parts of the world. In 1982, President Reagan gave youth exchange a boost with the establishment of the President’s Council for International Youth Exchange (Reagan, 1982; Campbell, 2005).

The end of the Cold War and increasing economic and political globalization ushered in a new emphasis on global competitiveness in education, especially in higher education (Hira, 2003). Institutions and countries worldwide competed to attract international students and their pocketbooks. At the same time, the value of international experience as a marketable skill cast study abroad programs in a new light. Private businesses operating in global markets created a demand for employees with foreign language and cross-cultural skills. Study abroad programs and international students on college campuses became important components in the drive to internationalize higher

education (Altbach & Knight, 2007; Altbach & Tiechler, 2001; Van Hoof & Verbeeten, 2005).

For the most part, the goal of fostering international peace and goodwill took a back seat to global competition in the 1990s (Campbell, 2005). “The traditional ideal of a cultural experience as the central element of exchanges has been superseded by the goal of obtaining knowledge useful for the new internationalized professions of the postindustrial era” (Altbach & Tiechler, 2001, p. 17). Political goals did not disappear, however, and the U.S. government-sponsored exchange programs focused on democracy building and leadership development, especially in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union (Campbell, 2005). For example, in the early 1990s, the U.S. Department of State initiated the popular Future Leaders Exchange (FLEX), a youth exchange program aimed at countries of the former Soviet Union, and the model for the YES program (Persiko, 2007).

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 turned the dialogue again to national security and (much like in the Cold War years) winning hearts and minds through student exchange. “One of the consequences of the ‘war on terrorism’ has been to render issues of welfare, social, and cultural policy, including education policy, increasingly subservient to the umbrella narrative of security” (Rizvi, 2004). In this context, the Partnership for Learning (of which the YES program is a part) was born. But national security is only one of the underlying rationales for post-September 11 exchange programs. In its report, “In America’s Interest,” NAFSA: Association of International Educators (2003) states that “openness to international students serves long-standing and important U.S. foreign policy, educational, and economic interests” (p. 1). The

Commission on the Abraham Lincoln Study Abroad Fellowship Program (2005) boldly proposed sending one million U.S. students to study abroad each year. The Commission cites globalization and economic competitiveness, national security, educational value, U.S. leadership, and active engagement in the international community as the basis for their recommendation.

In the world of youth exchange, The Council on Standards for International Educational Travel (2004) stated,

At this time in history, exchange programs are more necessary than ever before. The experience of cross-cultural exchange imbedded in these exchange programs is vital to understanding, which hopefully leads to peace among nations. (p. v)

Today, private youth exchange organizations (many of whom implement U.S. government-sponsored programs) offer an array of program goals related to both personal development and global understanding. For example, the website of Youth for Understanding USA (2008) states that YFU “prepares young people for their responsibilities and opportunities in a changing, interdependent world.” The Program of Academic Exchange (PAX, 2008) “promotes and arranges international student exchange to foster the positive development of the world's young people and to support international peace, friendship, and cross-cultural understanding.” AFS-USA (2008a) “works toward a more just and peaceful world by providing international and intercultural learning experiences to individuals, families, schools, and communities through a global volunteer partnership.” AFS Intercultural Programs (2008) initiated an on-line global “Peace Petition” under the banner, “Friendship leads to understanding, understanding leads to peace.” The mission statements of many youth exchange organizations, then, seem to focus on both personal development objectives and broader

goals of contributing to global understanding and peace; noticeably absent is a focus on national security and economic competitiveness.

### *Student Motivations*

Why do students choose to participate in exchange programs? There is no simple answer to that question. Students cite many different motivations for international exchange, and their motivations do not necessarily coincide with the goals of government or exchange organizations discussed above. Not surprisingly, exchange students from diverse cultures and countries may differ in their motivations and expectations (Altbach & Lulat, 1985; Hull, 1978). Since exchange programs are voluntary in nature, it is likely that most students are somewhat favorably (or at least not extremely negatively) disposed towards the host country. Conflict reduction, then, is probably not part of the motivational base (Bachner, 1991b), as it might be for intercultural youth programs such as Seeds of Peace. On the other hand, it is conceivable that exchange students might be motivated by a desire to increase global understanding and contribute to world peace, particularly if the program in which they are participating articulates such goals.

Studies of motivational factors for college study abroad demonstrate the importance of both push factors from the home country and pull factors towards the host country (Altbach & Lulat, 1985). An early study found that the goals most frequently identified by college students themselves were “personal and professional development and advancement” (Doi, 1958, p. 44). Altbach and Teichler (2001) cite the following motivations for international college students to study in the U.S.:

...high quality of higher education programs in many fields, structured provision of academic programs including course-based degrees or graduate education, opportunity for immigration and academic careers in the U.S., availability of

prestigious fellowships for some, superior marketing of the U.S. institutions of higher education, excellent support services for foreign students at some U.S. universities, the use of English as a medium of academic work, the global influence of the United States, and so on. (p. 11)

A recent study of over 1500 U.S. high school students, published by the American Council on Education (2008), found the “interest of college-bound students in international learning experiences is extraordinarily high” (p. 1). Keeping in mind that these students were not yet enrolled in a study abroad program, they cited the following motivations for wanting to study abroad: expand their horizons by living in another culture (46%); travel and see other parts of the world (27%); learn a different language (9%); improve job prospects (6%); get to know other people (6%); study things you can’t learn in the U.S. (4%); be a better citizen (1%) and promote world peace (1%). While disappointingly few students indicated the promotion of world peace as a motivation, expanding one’s horizons, learning a different language, and getting to know other people are arguably important contributors to building a more peaceful world.<sup>52</sup>

College students from industrialized nations are less likely to be degree-seeking, and they are more likely to choose study abroad for linguistic training and cultural enrichment (Altbach & Lulat, 1985). King and Young (1994) found that “the decision to study abroad was more often related to growth factors than to consideration such as careers or family background” (p. 82). According to a study of college students by Van Hoof and Verbeeten (2005), students’ reasons for studying abroad included the opportunity to travel and live in another culture. International students studying in the U.S., however, rated the significance of their study abroad experience to their academic

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<sup>52</sup> It is unclear from the report whether this web-based survey used closed or open-ended questions. In either case, this study only captures students’ “primary” motivation for study abroad. While promoting

program at home as higher than their peers from the U.S. who had studied in other countries (Van Hoof and Verbeeten, 2005).

Participants in a longitudinal study of German and American high school exchange students cited a number of motivations for exchange including a desire for independence, adventure, and travel, as well as enhanced intercultural understanding and increased language proficiency (Bachner & Zeutchel, 2009). Interestingly, a desire to get away from home (due to problems at school, home, or with friends) proved to be the most important negative predictor of program success. In other words, students who were intent on getting away from home were less likely to view their exchange experience as successful or satisfactory than those who cited other reasons for participating in the exchange program (Bachner & Zeutchel, 2009). An AFS International study found that American high school exchange students most often cited experiencing another culture as the primary motivation for exchange.<sup>53</sup> Learning a new language and “new experiences” were the second and third most commonly cited motivations. Career and school reasons were mentioned by only a few participants. Campbell, Oakley, and Radomski (2006) conducted an email survey of American Youth For Understanding (YFU) program alumni and parents of alumni about their motivations for participating in exchange. The most frequent responses were adventure, exploration of other countries, mastery of new languages, and self-discovery. College and career considerations were not rated as important motivators, although they were rated slightly higher by parents than students. None of the students or parents mentioned contributing to global understanding or world

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world peace may not have been a popular primary motivation, that does not preclude it from being a secondary or tertiary motivation.

<sup>53</sup> Personal communication with Bettina Hansel, then Director of Research, AFS International, March 15, 2006; based on internal data.

peace as a motivational factor.<sup>54</sup> The most common concerns of students and their families centered on the host family (whether they would be a good personality match, welcoming, etc.).

### ***Impact of Exchange***

In most research on youth exchange and study abroad, the impact has been assessed in terms of self-reported changes in students' attitudes (Detweiler & Vaughan, 2008; Laubscher, 1994).<sup>55</sup> In recent years, the tremendous economic impact of international students has likely influenced research in the direction of assessing student satisfaction:

Although it would be unfair to say that the research has generated into customer satisfaction surveys, many of the studies nevertheless look at the adjustment of these students from the perspective of how to reduce their stress and enhance the positive aspects of her sojourn experience. The unspoken assumption is that...students who feel that their study abroad has been worthwhile will provide favourable publicity for the country and the institution where they obtained their education. (Ward et al., 2001, p. 146)

At least in part, the focus on participant outcomes is also driven by the objective of preparing students to work in the global competitive workforce (Stephenson, 2007). In a study of high school exchange organizations, Wiley (2005) concluded that “while organizations advertise many intended outcomes of study abroad, they do not necessarily evaluate the achievement of those outcomes scientifically” (p. 114). According to Wiley,

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<sup>54</sup> The closed-ended survey questions were based on the goals and benefits listed by YFU on their website, and as such did not include contributing to world peace or global understanding. This response was not offered by any of the participants in the open-ended questions.

<sup>55</sup> Detweiler and Vaughan (2008) developed an instrument to measure the impact of study abroad from a liberal arts standpoint (as opposed to gains in technical or content knowledge). The newly-designed scale presents liberal arts learning goals related to critical thinking skills, self-reflection, and a capacity for effective action. At the time of this writing, the instrument, designed as a pre and post-test, had yet to be used on a large-scale.

program evaluations tend to focus on issues of organizational sustainability and student satisfaction, rather than program impact.

Most research on exchange demonstrates positive changes in students' attitudes and behaviors. Van Hoof and Verbeeten (2005) found that college students self-reported as being more mature and worldly adults, gained a better understanding of other cultures, gained an appreciation for their own culture, and found the experience generally enriching personally. Dwyer and Peters (2004) surveyed over 3,400 college students who had studied abroad from 1950 to 1999 through the Institute for the International Education of Students (IES). Respondents reported benefits in personal development, academic commitment, intercultural development and career development. Study abroad is usually a "defining moment in a young person's life and continue to impact the participant's life for years after the experience" (Dwyer & Peters, 2004, p. 1). Williams (2005) found that college students who studied abroad showed a greater increase in cross-cultural communication skills than those who did not go abroad. Interestingly, this study also showed that exposure to other cultures, regardless of whether students studied abroad or had cross-cultural experiences at home, was the best predictor of intercultural communication skills. This finding has implications for the potential impact of exchange students in the host culture.

Hansel (1986; see also Hansel & Grove, 1982) report that high school students who participated in AFS exchanges showed increased awareness and appreciation of the host country and culture, more foreign language appreciation and ability, greater understanding of other cultures and countries, higher levels of adaptability, and more critical thinking skills than their peers who did not go abroad. Boyd (2001) found that

American high school students participating in the International 4-H Youth Exchange (IFYE) said they were more sensitive to other cultures, more aware of global events, and more involved in community activities than prior to the exchange experience.

Participants also reported that their family, friends, and others in their communities were more globally aware as a result of their international experience, a finding validated by surveys of those close to the students.

In a study commissioned by AFS Intercultural Programs, Hammer (2005; Hammer & Hansel, 2005) examined the experiences of over 1500 high school exchange students from nine countries. The study found that students who self-rated as ethnocentric prior to the study abroad experience made positive gains in cultural competence. Compared to a control group, the exchange students had significantly increased intercultural competence, knowledge of the host culture, language fluency, and friendships with people from other cultures. Exchange students also had less anxiety in interacting with people from other cultures, more intercultural networks, and less “polarization” of cultural differences (us/them divisions). A somewhat surprising finding was that the exchange experience seemed to have “little impact on any of the measures used in the study for those students who begin the program in the more interculturally developed stage” (Hammer, 2005, p. 2). The exchange evidently did not carry them to a more advanced level of intercultural development.

AFS Intercultural Programs recently conducted a study aimed at uncovering some of the long-term impacts of high school exchange (Hansel & Chen, 2008). Building on an earlier study that demonstrated positive changes in students who participated in AFS exchange programs as compared to peers who had not gone abroad (Hansel, 1986), this

web-based study surveyed participants from the same era (the early to mid-1980s) to see if they were still different from their peers twenty-five years later. Respondents included 1,920 AFS alumni from fifteen countries (the earlier study included only U.S. participants), and 511 peers who did not go abroad (nominated by the alumni). Results of the study indicate that AFS alumni are significantly different than their peers in a number of ways. The strongest long-term impact is on language – both fluency and number of languages spoken (Hansel & Chen, 2008). Measured by the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI), exchange alumni also demonstrated higher levels of intercultural development than their peers. Alumni reported lower levels of anxiety around other cultures (similar to the finding reported by Hammer and Hansel (2005) in their recent impact study), suggesting that positive benefits seen immediately after an exchange may last a lifetime.

Another significant finding was that AFS alumni were more likely to have been encouraged by their parents to meet people from other cultures and participate in exchange than were their peers. As adults, the alumni hoped to influence their own children in the same way. Overall, high school exchange was likely to be one of the first in a “life-long process of intercultural learning that involves family, friendships, and a biography that frequently included other experiences across cultures such as additional study-abroad experiences, choosing a career involving work with other cultures and living abroad, volunteering for international organizations, hosting people from other cultures, and cross-cultural marriages” (Hansel, 2008, p. 2).

In another study of the long-term impact of high school exchange, Bachner and Zeuschel (1994, 2009) focused on Germans and Americans who participated in high

school exchange students with Youth For Understanding (YFU) between 1951 and 1987. They examined the changes participants' attributed to the exchange and how the participants utilized their exchange experiences in later years. The participants reported long-lasting and meaningful changes in attitudes, skills and behaviors. A large majority of participants said they began to see others as individuals, rather than as stereotypical of their nationality. The majority of exchange participants felt that the exchange experience helped them to gain an international perspective. It also positively influenced their "tolerance, respect for other nations, sense of cultural relativism, attitude of universal brotherhood, [and] desire for peace and cooperation" (Bachner & Zeutschel, 2009, p. 72). Furthermore, participants said that they became more self-confident and acquired useful skills, such as problem-solving and language proficiency. In the follow-up to the original longitudinal study, Bachner and Zeutschel (2009) described the changes in participants' attitudes, behaviors, and skills as falling into two broad categories: self-efficacy (including maturity, self-confidence, and independence) and individualization (including tolerance and the ability to see people as individuals). The study participants reported that the exchange experience influenced them in a positive direction on both of these characteristics.

In what the researchers call the "ripple effect," exchange alumni reported having had an impact on other people's actions or way of thinking, often long after the exchange (Bachner & Zeutschel, 1994, p. 33). Participants reported influencing friends, family members, students, community groups, and colleagues on topics ranging from advising on foreign sojourns to eliminating prejudice and promoting cultural sensitivity. The students also reported that they functioned as "cultural mediators," facilitating contact

and communication between cultures. Bachner and Zeutschel (1994) conclude that “the totality of these purported exchange-induced changes foster an overall attitude of internationalism that would seem to have positive implications for enhancing world peace and cooperation” (p. 37). The researchers make a number of recommendations designed to help exchange alumni apply and share what they have learned through their exchange experience. Recommendations include reinforcing alumni activities, strengthening expectations for returnees to serve as culture mediators, utilizing returnees as classroom resources, and more attention to the qualitative aspects of exchange programs.

Although limited research has been conducted on the impact of the home-stay, generally it appears to be beneficial, particularly for language acquisition and culture learning. Living with a host family gives “the student very rich first-hand experience in living in the target culture and using their language skills with native speakers in the circumstances with direct real-world consequences” (Brecht et al., 1997, cited in Knight & Schmidt-Rinehart, 2002, p. 190). Indeed, the home-stay experience provides the opportunity for developing deep, personal relationships in the host culture. As Hammer and Hansel (2005/06) remarked, “It is the host family’s living experience that provides a key intercultural learning platform and the opportunity for reflection in terms of how the student’s own behavior fits into a particular cultural milieu” (p. 18).

In their study of German and American high school exchange students, Bachner and Zeutschel (2009) cited the host family-student relationship as a “singularly important” part of the exchange, and “the more positive one’s relationship was with the host family, the more one attributed positive impact to the exchange” (p. 59). An important role of the host family, as perceived by the exchange students, was that of

“culture guides,” helping the students navigate the new culture (Bachner & Zeuschel, 1994). They also found that many of the exchange students maintained connections with their host families, even decades after the exchange. In another study, Baty and Dold (1977) report that American students had greater self-confidence and sense of accomplishment after a cross-cultural home-stay experience.<sup>56</sup> Hammer and Hansel (2005/06) found that changing host families during the school year “was not particularly detrimental to the overall experience and learning – including the development of intercultural competence” (p. 22). However, they also found that having multiple host families had a somewhat negative impact on foreign language fluency, which suggests a connection between a successful host family experience and improvement in language.

In addition to the impact of exchange on individuals, it is often assumed that exchange students will have an impact on the host community, and yet there is little research to support this belief. Several studies conducted for the U.S. Department of State assessed the impact of exchange programs in U.S. communities that had hosted many exchange visitors (usually adults) over an extended period of time. The results of all three studies demonstrated that people in the communities thought the exchange programs had a strong positive impact. For instance, 85% of the respondents in the Cincinnati study agreed that participation in exchanges promotes international friendship and peace (IVS, 2001). In the Iowa study, 98.8% of the respondents said “hosting and/or interacting with foreign exchange visitors promotes mutual understanding among Americans and foreigners,” and nearly 90% believed exchange promotes more peaceful global relations (TE Systems, 2005, p. 1). A study conducted for the National Council

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<sup>56</sup> In this study, the home-stay experience was more stressful for the men than the women. The authors posit that this finding may have been due to cultural differences and gendered roles within the home.

for International Visitors (Mueller, 2008), revealed three primary motivations for hosting international visitors. First, families viewed hosting as a means for their children learn about different countries and cultures. Second, many families were motivated by a desire to counter negative stereotypes of Americans. Third, hosts saw advantages to making connections – whether business, education, or social – with people in other countries. Mueller (2008) concluded that “the common denominator among citizen diplomats...is the idealist intent to contribute to improved international relations” (p. 7).

### *Crossing Cultures*

Living and learning in another culture is the defining element of student exchange. Eide (1970) points to the critical role of students as “culture carriers,” representing their own cultures to the hosts, and then carrying the host culture back to their home. Exchange students may function as mediators or bridges between cultures (Bochner, 1981). Effective bridging of cultures, however, first necessitates “learning” a second culture – developing the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and behaviors to understand and operate at least somewhat fluidly in a new culture.

### Culture Shock

When people cross cultures, they are commonly warned about “culture shock.” In 1960, an anthropologist named Oberg coined this term to describe the largely negative effects of being in a new culture – including feelings of sadness, rejection, anxiety, and the inability to cope with the new environment (Furnham & Bochner, 1986). The U-curve model of cross-cultural adaptation was also developed at this time. This theory proposes that sojourners go through a series of stages beginning with the honeymoon

(euphoria), and progressing through crisis (frustration, anxiety, anger) and recovery (culture learning and problem solving) to adjustment (cultural competence) (Furnham & Bochner, 1986). While foreign students often go through ups and downs during the school year, they don't necessarily follow a U-curve pattern, and it is difficult to gauge the impact of variables (in the U.S.) such as the Christmas holidays and winter weather. Despite a good deal of research that has questioned the utility of the U-curve model (Hull, 1978; Klineberg & Hull, 1979; Spaulding & Flack, 1976, Ward et al., 2001), the U-curve (and a later "W curve" with additional ups and downs) is still commonly used by those who advise cross-cultural sojourners (Ward et al., 2001).

Fifty years ago, culture shock was seen through a medical lens as a sort of illness to be healed. More recent models of cultural adaptation view cross-cultural contact as an experiential learning process (Ward et al., 2001). According to the culture learning approach, problems occur when individuals have difficulty managing everyday life in the new culture. Learning about the new culture, then, is the key to successful adaptation and a positive cross-cultural experience (Ward et al., 2001). Within a culture-learning paradigm, Laubscher (1994) concluded that U.S. college students on study abroad programs use an "ethnographic discovery model" of learning another culture. Another contemporary model focuses on "stress and coping" in cross-cultural experiences. This approach emphasizes development of successful coping mechanisms for the new environment (Ward et al., 2001). As discussed above, social identity theory also attempts to explain what happens when people from different cultures come in contact with each other. There are extensive bodies of literature around each of these approaches, as well as models which combine elements of each approach.

## Experiential Learning

The experiential learning model is particularly relevant to culture learning (Hansel, 1985; Katula & Threnhauser, 1999; Lutterman-Aguilar & Gingerich, 2002; McCaffery, 1986). Experiential education, grounded in the work of John Dewey, Kurt Lewin, and Jean Piaget, is based on the idea that “learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through transformation of experience” (Kolb, 1984, p. 38). The experiential learning model as conceptualized by Kolb (1984) is a continuous cycle that includes concrete experience, reflection on the experience, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation using new learning. Exchange is particularly suited to experiential learning because students are able to immediately apply their learnings to help them adapt to their new cross-cultural situations. Hansel (1988) notes that students who live with host families learn the culture in “much the same manner as they learned their first culture – as a member of a family” (p. 180).

The experiential learning process, however, does not automatically happen with every practical experience. The challenge for study abroad and exchange programs is to provide students with support and guidance in reflecting, conceptualizing and using knowledge gained through the cross-cultural experience. Learning may be guided through orientation and training programs, reflective journaling, meetings with advisors or counselors, re-entry workshops, and alumni activities (Hansel, 2007; Kinsella, Smith, & Tuma 2002). According to Katula and Threnhauser (1999), however, many study abroad programs fall short in the task of helping students reflect and learn from their experiences abroad.

## Assessing Cultural Competence

In order to better understand the studies of cultural adjustment, it is useful to look at some of the models and tools used to assess cultural competence. The Cross-Cultural Adaptability Inventory (CCAI) uses a “stress and coping” model to help individuals assess their potential effectiveness in cross-cultural situations based on four characteristics: emotional resilience, flexibility, perceptual acuity, and autonomy (Sunnygard, 2002). Another model, developed by Hampden-Turner and Trompenaars, uses dilemma theory to explore the tensions between opposing culturally-based values. The authors identified “six universal dilemmas” and, according to this theory, as individuals recognize and reconcile cultural differences in these values they become more effective at negotiating the terrain of the new culture (Sunnygard, 2002).

The Development Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS), created by Milton Bennett, posits that as one’s experience of cultural difference becomes more sophisticated, competence in intercultural relations increases (Intercultural Communication Institute, 2008). This model has six stages. The first three stages (denial, defense, and minimization) are categorized as ethnocentric, meaning that one’s own culture is central to reality. The second three stages (acceptance, adaptation, and integration) are ethnorelative, in that one’s own culture is experienced in the context of other cultures. The Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI) is a tool for measuring intercultural competence based on the DMIS (Hammer, 2008). The IDI measures how a person feels and thinks about, and thus reacts to, cultural differences. This instrument was used in the recent AFS studies (Hammer & Hansel, 2005; Hansel & Chen, 2008) discussed above. The study showed that students who were in the Defense stage (tending

to see the world in terms of “us” and “them”) prior to the exchange, moved to the Minimization stage (in which cultural differences are minimized and common humanity is emphasized) by the end of the exchange experience (Hammer, 2005). Of the exchange students who began the year already in the Minimization stage, however, few moved to a more ethnorelative stage of intercultural development (Hansel, 2007).

### Understanding Cultural Differences

Hofstede’s (2008) Cultural Dimensions model provides a useful tool for understanding cultural differences. Hofstede’s model, based on data from more than seventy countries, includes five dimensions that differentiate cultures: power distance, masculinity vs. femininity, individualism vs. collectivism, level of uncertainty avoidance, and long-term vs. short-term orientation. The U.S. ranks high on the Individualism dimension, reflecting individualistic attitudes and relatively loose bonds with between people in society. The U.S. scores low on Power Distance (indicating a greater equality in society) and Uncertainty Avoidance (indicating fewer rules and greater tolerance for a variety of thoughts and ideas). Hofstede’s analysis of the Arab world reveals a high ranking on Power Distance and Uncertainty Avoidance, and a very low ranking on Individualism – clearly the opposite of the U.S.<sup>57</sup> Most Asian countries are also low on the Individualism dimension, indicating that they are strong collectivist cultures.

The Individualism / Collectivist dimension is one that has been shown to be quite important in cross-cultural contact (Triandis, 2001, Ward et al., 2001). Collectivist

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<sup>57</sup> Interestingly, on the Masculinity Dimension, the U.S. scores higher than the Arab world. Hofstede attributes the high U.S. score to the male domination of a significant portion of society and the power structure. For the Arab world, he suggests that the limitations of women’s rights may be due more to religion rather than a cultural paradigm (Hofstede, 2008). One could argue, however, that the line between culture and religion is not clearcut, throwing this reasoning into question.

cultures place a high value on the extended family and larger groups. In collectivist cultures, the interests of the group take priority over individuals' interests and desires. "When individualists and collectivists meet, they bring to the encounter different social attitudes, moral values, and behavioral inclinations" (Ward et al., 2001, p. 15). Hull (1978) found that among foreign students studying in the U.S., those who came from very different cultures had fewer interactions with Americans and were less satisfied with their study abroad experience. Most of the YES students come from collectivist cultures into the highly individualistic U.S. culture. Negotiating this cultural dimension is clearly part of the process of successfully crossing cultures.

### *Encountering Difficulties*

Crossing cultures can be a complex and difficult process and, as discussed above, contact alone does not guarantee increased understanding or improvement in intergroup relations. Furnham and Bochner (1986) caution that although "idealists regard it as self-evident that educational exchange must lead to improved international relations," evidence indicates the following:

...the connection between inter-group contact and inter-group attitudes is very complex, such that contact may either increase or reduce mutual tolerance and understanding, depending on a very large matrix of interaction variables. Indeed...there have been instances where educational exchange has led to a worsening of cross-cultural attitudes. (p. 39)

Exchange students who have unpleasant or difficult experiences, may go home with unfavorable opinions and even increased prejudice against the host culture. Therefore, examining the problems and challenges faced by exchange students, is important to understanding exchange outcomes. Furnham and Bochner (1986) suggest

that foreign students face four types of problems. First, as adolescents, they face some of the same problems and stresses of identity and growing up as young people in any culture. Second, since they are students, they must deal with the challenges of school work. Attending school in a new culture undoubtedly presents tensions that students may not have faced in their home cultures. In a recent article about Muslim students on U.S. campuses, Anwar (2007) remarks that Muslim undergraduate students require more assurance and support than graduate students because of the greater maturity of the older students. High school students, it could be assumed, might require an even greater level of support.

Third, exchange students experience problems similar to those faced by anyone living in another culture, such as language problems, racial discrimination, homesickness, misunderstandings, gender relations, dietary concerns, and making friends (Furnham & Bochner, 1986; Schmidt-Rinehart & Knight, 2004; Ward et al., 2001). A recent case study of international students in the U.S. revealed that “students from the Middle East, Africa, East Asia, Latin America, and India endured far greater difficulties in U.S. institutions than students from Canada and Europe” (Lee, Jenny 2004, p. 28). The author attributes many of the difficulties to neo-racism based on skin color, culture, and national origin.

Cultural adjustment problems have been the target of a number of research studies (e.g. Constantine et al., 2005; Knight & Schmidt-Rinehart, 2004; Swagler & Ellis, 2003), although almost always at the collegiate level. It is fairly well documented that personality, culture of origin, and destination greatly affect the types of problems encountered by exchange students (Bachner, 1988; Ward et al., 2001). It is likely that

age also has an impact on cross-cultural adjustment, but little research has been done in this area (Hull, 1978). Exchange students who live with host families, may also experience problems within the host family situation (Bachner, 1988; Hammer & Hansel, 2005/06; Knight & Schmidt-Rinehart).

A fourth problem area often faced by exchange students involves the pressure of representing their countries as young “ambassadors” (Furnham & Bochner, 1986). This ambassadorial role is often an expectation placed upon the students by the exchange organization in an effort to increase understanding between cultural groups (Hansel, 2007). With adequate preparation and support (as encouraged by Bachner, 1991a), this “problem area” can provide the student with valuable skills (such as leadership and public speaking) that may in the long-run facilitate conflict reduction and peacebuilding. Indeed, many stressful situations, if handled successfully will contribute to skills-building and the development of intercultural competence (Hansel, 1988). Exchange organizations often provide orientations and support services to participants to help them work through academic, social, and personal issues. As a final thought on difficulties in crossing cultures, it is important to recognize that the burden of adjustment falls on the student (Bachner, 1988; Hull, 1978). While peers, teachers, and host families certainly make accommodations and provide support, it is the sojourner who must adapt to the host culture. Moreover, Arthur (2004) maintains that majority of research about foreign students has focused on their problems and paid too little attention to strategies that lead to a successful sojourn.

### *Cross-Cultural Friendships*

One way that exchange programs may engender peace is through the interactions of the students with their peers, both during their exchange experience and after their return home. Peer education theory provides some insight into why this might be effective. According to UNESCO (2003) peer education is based on the premise that people are more likely to change their behavior on the basis of peer influence than in reaction to scientific or rationally presented evidence. There are a number of behavior change theories that support this model, but one thing that they have in common is the importance of role models or influential peers. This is important in examining student exchange because many programs (including the YES program) promote leadership development in hopes that participants will rise to positions of leadership and influence others in their home countries. Indeed, in 2003, then Secretary of State Colin Powell remarked that thirty-nine heads of governments were former participants in the U.S. sponsored International Visitors Program (Djerejian, 2003).

As discussed above in relation to the contact hypothesis, cross-group friendship can also be a crucial factor in dispelling stereotypes and reducing prejudice. Friendships can be useful in helping exchange students adjust to, and learn about, their host culture (Bachner & Zeutchel, 1994; Hull, 1978; Klineberg & Hull, 1979). In addition, friends are often an important source of social and emotional support. The friendship patterns of international students can be divided into three categories, each serving a distinct function (Furnham & Bochner, 1986). The first network is made up of friends from the same country, and provides familiar support and affirms culture-of-origin values. The second network includes relations with host nationals, primarily to facilitate the academic

and professional aims of the student. The third network comprises foreign students from other countries and functions as a recreational and social support group. Although friendships with host nationals would tend to be most beneficial for both culture learning and promoting cross-cultural understanding, many studies have shown that this is the least salient of the three networks (Ward et al., 2001).

Many studies (mostly with college students) report that international students say their closest friends are from the same country (Hull, 1978; Klineberg & Hull, 1979; Spaulding & Flack, 1976; Ward et al., 2001). Research has also shown that “the ability and willingness to interact meaningfully with host culture peers are largely dependent upon cultural distance” (Ward et al., 2001).<sup>58</sup> The greater the distance or differences between the two cultures, the less likely that an international student will have close friends in the host culture. Contrary to the research presented above, a qualitative study of international students in the U.S. found that most of participants reported having satisfying friendships with Americans (Gareis, 1995). Another study found that international students who had social networks in the U.S. that included both home country and American friends reported being more satisfied with their lives (Swagler and Ellis, 2003). Gareis’ (1995) study also revealed the different meanings of friendship across cultures. Americans often refer to people they have know for only a short period of time as “friends,” while international students said that friendships in their home countries developed over a longer period of time. It is likely that cultural meanings of friendship impact not only how friendships are made across cultures, but how they are reported to researchers.

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<sup>58</sup> Cultural distance can be roughly defined as the degree of socio-cultural differences between the two cultures.

## *Host Families*

As host families and exchange students negotiate the terrain of everyday life their lives intertwine, shaping and reshaping the meaning of the experience for each. If the student goes home with more positive feelings about Americans after the school year, that is only half the story. As Furnham and Bochner (1986) note,

All contact has two-way reciprocal consequences...To ascertain better the true impact of the exchange experience, it is necessary to consider both the exchange students themselves and the receiving groups in the host culture. (cited in Stephenson, 1999, p. 2)

Although the vast majority of high school exchange students live with host families, there is surprisingly little research available on the experience of hosting (Mueller, 2008). In a survey conducted by CSIET (Lee, Jaein 2007) through its member organizations, host families were asked about their motivations for hosting and the benefits of hosting. Interest in youth exchange and the cross-cultural experience were the leading motivations for hosting a student. Some families also said that they were motivated to host by the potential benefits for their own children. A majority of respondents reported that the exchange experience was a learning experience, including learning about another culture and gaining a different perspective on the United States. Families also reported that that cultural experience was an important benefit of hosting.

The *Host Family Survival Kit* (King & Huff, 1997) provides practical advice based on the experiences of past host families. The authors describe stages of host family adjustment that mirror the cultural adjustment of the exchange students. They state that host families often enter into the experience expecting to share their culture with a foreign student, only to find that they themselves have changed as a result of being a host parent. King and Huff (1997) also suggest that as a result of the exchange experience,

host families become more sensitive to different cultural perspectives and feel “linked into a larger international community” (p. 68). In a survey of American host families of adult exchange visitors, Lowe, Askling and Bates (1984) concluded that exchange provides an opportunity for hosts to develop personal relationships, cross-cultural understanding, and international networks, which together may encourage “citizens to become more involved in international affairs and make a greater contribution to the nation’s willingness to pursue peace between nations” (p. 58).

An in-depth study of fifteen host families of high school exchange students (AFS Center for the Study of Intercultural Learning, 1993) found the most common type of hosting experience was one in which the family reported a mid-year crisis, but ended the year on a positive note. The researchers found that respect and communication were important to bridging cultural differences and making the home-stay experience a positive one for both family and student. They also report that attitudes of both the student and the hosts were key in bridging cultural differences. An authoritarian or controlling attitude on the part of a host parent was associated with power struggles with the students. Furthermore, host families thought that students who spent a lot of time seeking advice and support from their natural families (usually via the telephone) did not adjust as well to being part of the host family.

In an effort to make hosting a positive and successful experience, the exchange organizations that implement the YES program provide information and advice for host families. They also present some thoughts on what it means to host an exchange student. For instance, the YES Host Family Handbook (PAX, 2007) promises that “no link can be more personal and enduring than the bond that arises between families, when they ‘share’

their children with one another” (p. 37). A former host parent describes her experience with a YES student: “I think it is very important for my children to realize that we can live with someone from the opposite side of the world and have them become part of the family” (PAX, 2007, p.36). The U.S. Department of State (2008c) maintains a locator service for potential host families looking for an exchange organization. The website proclaims, “America needs you to host exchange students!” and encourages Americans to be “volunteer diplomats” because hosting an international exchange student “promotes mutual understanding and respect between the people of the United States and the people of other countries.”

Arnold (2004) conducted a study which measured life skills development of American teenagers participating in the International 4-H Youth Exchange (IFYE) to Japan and Americans teens who hosted Japanese students in their homes. She found that both groups – those who went abroad and those who were hosts – developed similar life skills including appreciating another culture, making new friends, being resourceful, learning to be tolerant, and understanding differences, and being comfortable with another culture. The students who went abroad rated some of the items higher than the host group, but the differences were only significant on four of the seventeen items. The results suggest that the experience of being a host sibling to an exchange student can provide opportunities for significant learning and growth. Other research has indicated that the relationship between the exchange student and the host sibling may be an important factor in the success of the experience for the exchange student (AFS Center for the Study of Intercultural Learning, 1993).

Studies of families that host U.S. college students participating in study abroad programs also provide some insights into the hosting experience. Knight and Schmidt-Rinehart (2002) examined the “homestay advantage” for American college students studying in Spain and Mexico. In interviews with host families they found that the majority of hosts saw their role extending well beyond the basics of providing food and shelter, to one of teacher, tutor, and counselor. Difficulties in the homestay situation were often attributed to poor communication and lack of interaction between the student and host family (Knight & Schmidt-Rinehart, 2002; Schmidt-Rinehart & Knight, 2004).

In a study conducted in Chile (Stephenson, 1999), host families were asked to list advantages and disadvantages of hosting. The cultural differences between the hosts and the students were perceived as the greatest *advantage* for hosting a study abroad student. Host families enjoyed sharing cultural traditions with the U.S. students. Extra work and added responsibility were cited most often as the disadvantages of hosting. The greatest personal changes reported by host families related to “feeling a part of opening Chile to the world” and increased appreciation of their own national identity (p. 22). Stephenson suggests that “Perhaps the greatest contributions that overseas programs can make to promoting world peace and understanding is to foster that crucial but difficult ability to maintain one’s own cultural affiliation while at the same time appreciating the richness of other cultures” (p. 36).

### ***Youth Exchange and Peacebuilding***

Most youth exchange programs are intended to promote positive cross-cultural dialogue and interaction, as well as build bonds of understanding between individuals and cultures. There has been a consistent expectation that international educational exchange

will lead to a “more informed, intelligent, cooperative, and peaceful world order” (Bachner & Zeutschel, 1994, p. 1). Although exchange programs have been developed and implemented for decades based on this commonly-held assumption, few researchers have explored the connection between international exchange and conflict reduction or peacebuilding (Bachner, 1991b). Does international exchange (and youth exchange in particular) lead to a more peaceful world? If so, what do we know about the process and how can we actively facilitate peacebuilding?

In his article, “A Very Practical Approach to Peace: The Case for International Exchange,” David Bachner (1991a) presents a framework for understanding how international exchange can lead to a more peaceful world. Based on an extensive review of the literature related to exchange and study abroad programs, Bachner (1991a, 1991b) puts forth five propositions for the role of exchange in conflict reduction:

1. General Proposition with Respect to Contact: Exchange Results in Constructive Intergroup Interaction. Exchange can be, and often is, structured to meet several key conditions of the contact hypothesis. Exchange programs have strong institutional and societal support and high friendship potential. Most exchangees have favorable impressions of the host culture at the outset, and the duration of exchange gives students the opportunity to develop relationships and engage in cooperative activities.

2. General Proposition with Respect to Attitudes: Exchange Serves to Reduce Intergroup Prejudice and Modify Inaccurate Stereotypes. Exchange students get to know others as individuals, rather than stereotypical representatives of their group, thereby helping to dispel inaccurate stereotypes and improve attitudes towards the host country.

3. General Proposition with Respect to Affect and Disposition: Exchange Increases Liking and Respect for Outgroups. Exchange participants report enhanced self-esteem and self-confidence, both of which have been shown to be linked to benevolence and reduced hostility towards others. Exchange students learn about the host culture as insiders, rather than from the outside looking in. This experience may increase tolerance, understanding, and respect for other cultures.

4. General Proposition with Respect to Skills and Behaviors: Exchange Enhances Intercultural Competence and Fosters Mediating Behaviors. Exchange often enhances language skills, which provides a basis for a deeper understanding of the culture and facilitates the formation of meaningful cross-cultural relationships. Exchange also fosters an understanding and appreciation of both host and home cultures, which enhances cultural mediation skills – the ability to serve as a bridge between two cultures.<sup>59</sup>

5. General Proposition with Respect to Multiplier Effects: Exchange Develops International Networks, Leaders, and Politico-Economic Systems. After their return home, exchange students often stay in touch with people from their host countries, thereby forming international networks based on common experiences and mutual understanding. To the extent that exchangees become leaders in their home countries, they may also influence others in the direction of cooperation, tolerance, and nonviolence.

Bachner (1991a, 1991b) concludes that international exchange has considerable potential for reducing conflict and promoting peace. Bachner urges greater efforts at

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<sup>59</sup> Stephen Bachner (1981) defines a mediating person as “an individual who serves as a link between two or more cultures and social systems. The essence of the mediating function is to shape the exchanges between the participating societies so that the contact will benefit both cultures, on terms that are consistent with their respective value systems” (p.3).

constructing theory and carrying out research to better understand the connection between exchange and peacebuilding. He also advises proactive programming, such as building into programs appropriate skills development and expectations regarding conflict reduction and peacebuilding. Significantly, he recommends that exchange programs be more purposeful in their programming and exchangees be “channeled more directly towards the vision of a more peaceful world” (Bachner, 1991a, p 4).

### **Chapter 3: The Youth Exchange and Study Program (YES)**

This chapter provides an overview of the YES program, including program goals, structure, and evaluation results. I also discuss the results of two preliminary studies that I conducted with YES students and host parents.

#### ***YES Program Overview***

The Youth Exchange and Study Program (YES) is designed to build bridges of understanding between the U.S. and the Muslim world. The program provides scholarships to high school students from countries with large Muslim populations to spend a school year in the U.S. The tragic events of September 11, 2001 provided the impetus for the program:

The YES Program evolved out of a generalized recognition that public diplomacy efforts had been neglected in many countries around the world for many years and that the effects of this came into stark focus in the aftermath of the events of September 11, 2001. (AFS YES Consortium website, 2008)

The U.S. Department of State website (2008a) explains that “The YES program is vital to expanding communication between the people of the United States and partner countries in the interest of promoting mutual understanding and respect.” The YES program has five main goals:

1. Promote better understanding by youth from selected countries about American society, people, institutions, values, and culture;
2. Foster lasting personal ties;
3. Enhance Americans’ understanding of the foreign students’ countries and cultures;
4. Promote awareness of and involvement in civic and democratic processes among participants and their peers;
5. Increase the capacity of organizations in participating countries to engage youth in activities that advance mutual understanding and civil society through alumni activities. (U.S. Department of State, 2005)

The YES program targets high school students between the ages of 15 and 18 from countries with “significant” Muslim populations. As defined by the U.S. Department of State, “significant doesn’t necessarily mean majority population, it means politically significant population” (Persiko, 2007). Countries with significant Muslim populations are invited to participate in the YES program on the basis of U.S. foreign policy objectives, the availability of an in-country partner organization to administer the exchange, and a sufficient number of students with the skills (primarily skills in speaking English) to be successful in the program (Persiko, 2007).

In the first four years of the program, approximately three-fourths of the YES students were Muslim (InterMedia, 2009). The program grants scholarships to young people from a variety of faiths, particularly in countries where Islam is not the majority religion (for example, India and the Philippines).<sup>60</sup> In its first year, the YES program brought 160 high school students to the U.S. In the 2009-2010 school year, approximately 880 YES students from thirty countries, the West Bank, and Gaza were awarded scholarships to participate in the exchange program. More than 3,000 students participated in the YES program since its inception in 2003 (U.S. Department of State website, 2009). Most of the YES students come to the U.S. for the ten-month school year, although some students (including those from Malaysia), spend only one semester in the U.S. From 2003 to 2008, the YES program was a one-way “exchange” – students came to the U.S. from many countries, but no U.S. students traveled abroad under this program. In 2009, a small group of U.S. teenagers was selected to participate in the

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<sup>60</sup> An interesting aspect of the program (and to my knowledge, one that has not been studied) is that young people from religious or ethnic groups in conflict within their own countries often get to know each other and form bonds of friendship during the exchange year. While this aspect of exchange is beyond the scope of this study, it is a promising direction for future research.

“YES Abroad” program in the following countries: Egypt, Ghana, Indonesia, India, Oman, Malaysia, Mali, Morocco, Thailand, and Turkey (U.S. Department of State website, 2009).

### ***Policy that Frames the Program***

The Educational and Cultural Affairs Bureau of the U.S. Department of State administers the YES program under the authority of the Fulbright-Hays Act. The YES program has its roots in the Cultural Bridges Act of 2002 (S. 2505), which states in the first paragraph of the *Findings* section that “Educating international students is an important way to impart cross-cultural understanding and create goodwill for the United States throughout the world” (p. 2). The document also states the following:

*The purpose of this act is to promote the national security of the United States through international educational and cultural exchange programs between the United States and the Islamic world that would –*

- (1) afford additional opportunities for eligible participants from the Islamic world to study in the U.S.*
- (2) foster mutual respect for American and Islamic values and culture through people-to-people contacts, and*
- (3) build bridges to a more peaceful world through programs aimed at enhancing mutual understanding. (Cultural Bridges Act, 2002, Sec. 4, p. 4)*

In a speech in July of 2003, days before the first YES students arrived in the U.S., Senator Kennedy (D-MA) explained the importance of the program: “Many Muslims believe our country is at war with Islam, not terrorism. With nearly 1.5 billion people living in the Islamic world today, we ignore these pervasive anti-American sentiments at our peril.” He went on to say that the YES program will help to “dispel the disturbing trend of anti-American rhetoric and beliefs.” Later in the speech, Senator Kennedy pointed out that “What make the Cultural Bridges Program unique is that it enables high school students from other lands to obtain firsthand knowledge of our country, our way

of life, and our people” (Kennedy, 2003, p. S10258). The program purpose is also demonstrated in the title of a legislative alert about the YES program issued by the Alliance for International Education and Cultural Exchange (n.d.), “An Education Initiative for the Islamic World: Enhancing National Security through People-to-People Ties.” In sum, the primary goals of the YES program are to promote mutual understanding and respect, with particular emphasis on the creation of goodwill towards the United States. The legislative history of the program also frames it under national security goals.

### ***Program Implementation***

The YES program is administered by a number of established high school exchange organizations. Particular countries are assigned to each exchange organization or group of organizations. The AFS YES Consortium (2008) works with students from Brunei, Egypt, Ghana, India, Indonesia, Kenya, Malaysia, Philippines, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Thailand. The consortium comprises the following four organizations that work together to place and support students in communities throughout the U.S.: AFS-USA (formerly the American Field Service), AIFS Foundation (American Institute for Foreign Study Foundation), PAX (Program of Academic Exchange) and ACES (American Cultural Exchange Service). A number of other established exchange organizations administer the program for students from other countries. This research is focused only on exchange students and host families associated with the AFS YES Consortium (hereafter referred to as the AFS Consortium).

The YES students selected for the program have been identified as outstanding young "ambassadors" with leadership potential (PAX, 2008). The YES program then

seeks to further develop these skills. This is based on the belief that these young ambassadors are among the best “bridge builders” between nations (AFS YES Consortium website, 2008). The YES scholarship is merit-based scholarship. In addition to potential for leadership, applicants must also be in good academic standing and have a good command of the English language. The AFS Consortium also recruits some participants with disabilities, including visual, hearing, and mobility impaired students. The fact that this is a scholarship program sets it apart from many exchange programs in which participants or their families must pay most or all of their own expenses for the year (usually thousands of dollars). The scholarship covers travel expenses, health insurance, a monthly stipend, and funds for incidental and emergency expenses. YES students also benefit from orientation and pre-departure conferences, as well as special “enhancement” or educational activities.

In principle, the YES program is open to high school students regardless of socio-economic levels. In fact, recruitment is somewhat limited by the other requirements, most notably the requirement to have a good command of English. In some countries, particularly the Philippines and India, students of all economic classes are likely to be exposed to English in the public school system or in the community. In other countries, only students from more privileged families have the opportunity to attend schools with multi-year English programs, making the program less accessible to poor or disadvantaged students. Within the AFS Consortium, this issue has been addressed in some countries by recruiting from lower income areas and providing resources for additional language training both in the home country and in the U.S.

Recruitment of participants is also influenced by the cultural, political, and organizational context in each country. For example, the government of each participating country has a say in how the recruitment efforts are conducted, and in which geographic areas. Recruitment efforts are also impacted by cultural issues, such as the appropriateness of girls' participation in the program. Although the YES program is ostensibly a merit-based program, due to the above issues and considerations, the majority of the students in the first four cohorts of the program (2003-2007) were from well-educated and fairly well-to-do families (InterMedia, 2009). The majority of the participants were also from urban areas (the capital or other major cities) in their home countries (InterMedia, 2009).

During their stay in the U.S., the YES students live with host families. Host families of YES students are recruited by the local coordinators of each sponsoring organization. The application process includes a written application, a home visit and interview by the coordinator, reference checks, and a criminal background check. Under the YES program as administered by the AFS Consortium, host families receive no payment for hosting (although they are eligible for a small federal tax deduction). Host families are expected to provide room and board, as well as a warm, family atmosphere. Host families tend to be largely middle class.<sup>61</sup> The expenses associated with having an extra family member probably discourage the participation of lower income families. Host families reflect the diverse make-up of American families – including one and two parent households and extended family living in the home. Moreover, host families come

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<sup>61</sup> Personal communication with PAX staff member, October 2008.

from a variety of cultural, ethnic, racial, and religious backgrounds.<sup>62</sup> It is not required that host families have children of their own in the home. Many hosts have grown children or no children at all.

As a requirement of the scholarship, all YES students attend high school while in the U.S. The exchange organizations are responsible for securing high school placements for the students, a task which generally falls to the local coordinators. Most of the YES students attend public high schools, although a few attend private schools. The YES program provides no funds for school enrollment, relying instead on schools to waive tuition fees. Public schools (which may charge tuition for non-residents) are not required to accept exchange students. Occasionally, local school administrators decline to enroll exchange students or place limits on enrollment.<sup>63</sup> However, most local school systems recognize the benefits of enrolling exchange students (mainly, exposing their students to other cultures and languages), and readily welcome them into the schools.

Through programs and activities, many planned with the assistance of local coordinators, the YES program seeks to develop the students' leadership skills and promote tolerance and respect (Persiko, 2007). The YES students also have access to an Imam that works with the program and participates in the orientation programs. Selected

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<sup>62</sup> My description of host families is based largely on my own experiences and talking with PAX staff and other coordinators. I do not have access to demographic information about YES host families (if, indeed, anyone collects this information). The PAX host family application form does not include questions about race, ethnic and cultural identity. The form does include questions about religious affiliation and whether or not the exchange student would be expected to attend services with the family.

<sup>63</sup> This statement is based on my own experiences, as well as my discussions with other coordinators and PAX staff. Sometimes schools see the exchange students as an extra expense, particularly if they require any special services (such as language or transportation services). Overcrowding is another reason that schools may decline to accept exchange students. Issues of expense and overcrowding may outweigh the potential benefit of cultural diversity, particularly if the student body is already quite diverse.

YES students participate in a national conference aimed at fostering cross-cultural and religious tolerance.<sup>64</sup>

Culture sharing is an ongoing component of the YES program. It is expected that exchange students will learn about American society and values while helping to educate Americans about the customs and culture of their homelands. In addition to the informal sharing that goes on every day, YES students are required to make at least two cultural presentations during the school year to U.S. school or community groups. Through sharing ideas and promoting cross-cultural understanding and tolerance, the YES program is designed to act as a “buffer, a deterrent to young people being taken in by radical factions” (Persiko, 2007).

The community service requirement (a minimum of 20 hours per school year) is intended to introduce the YES students to volunteerism, social responsibility, and community building as they work side-by-side with American volunteers. Through community service activities students learn about democracy and the difference that one individual can make, with the hopes that they will go home with a desire to work for the betterment of their own societies (Persiko, 2007). The YES program also supports the formation of an alumni network so that students may better utilize what they learned during their exchange experience. Alumni are encouraged to develop and participate in educational and service projects in their home countries.

### ***Local Coordinators***

Geographically, YES students are placed in “clusters” of three to five students throughout the U.S. While program implementation differs somewhat among

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<sup>64</sup> Imam Mohamad Bashir Arafat, Founder of the Civilizations Exchange and Cooperation Foundation

organizations, all rely on a cadre of local coordinators (sometimes known by other titles, such as community coordinator, liaison, counselor, or cluster director) to recruit host families, register the students for school, and provide support for students and host families throughout the school year.<sup>65</sup> I was a local coordinator from 2004, the second year of the YES program, to 2008. Local coordinators work with the YES students, individually and in groups, on the three YES program requirements: leadership development, culture sharing, and community service. Community service activities, such as helping at a soup kitchen or on a project like Habitat for Humanity, are often carried out as a group. Coordinators have access to funds to support other educational and enrichment activities, such as visits to museums, state capitals, or historic sites. Many coordinators also plan social activities, from potluck parties to ski trips, with their students and host families.

Within the AFS Consortium, the role of the coordinator differs from one organization to another. With PAX, one individual is responsible for recruiting host families, providing support for students and families throughout the year and helping students fulfill the YES program requirements. With AFS (a much larger organization), these responsibilities are often shared by several individuals. Coordinators are not paid staff, but PAX coordinators receive a stipend based on the number of students placed and supported each school year. Coordinators may, and often do, host students in their own homes.<sup>66</sup> In this case, another coordinator or liaison takes on the coordinator role so that

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works with YES program participants and organizes the national conference (see [www.cecf-net.org](http://www.cecf-net.org))

<sup>65</sup> All secondary school student exchange programs in the U.S. are required to place exchange students within a 120 miles of a local organization representative (U.S. State Department, 2006).

<sup>66</sup> From 2005 to 2008, approximately 26% of PAX coordinators working with State Department sponsored students (including the YES program) hosted a student in their homes. Personal Communication with PAX staff, October 2008.

each student has someone outside of the host family to talk with about their experiences and help them work out problems.

### ***YES Program Evaluations***

Robert Persiko (2007), former chief of the Youth Programs Division at the U.S. Department of State, remarked that “Most people throughout the exchange world assume that it’s a given, you can think this intuitively – that an exchange is a good thing. It promotes the common good, it brings people together, and it promotes world peace.” The challenge comes in trying to set goals and objectives for the program that can be tested. “It’s great to say that these exchanges promote world peace, but you can’t test that” (Persiko, 2007). What can be measured, however, is how students change during and after the program. InterMedia, an independent research firm under contract with the U.S. Department of State, conducted evaluations of the first four YES cohorts, beginning in 2003. InterMedia collected data on the students’ experiences prior to their arrival, at the end of their stay in the U.S., and one year after their return home (InterMedia, 2009). The first cohort report (InterMedia, 2004) found that students were very satisfied with their experience, well-integrated into their communities, gained a better understanding of the U.S. and Americans, enjoyed promoting mutual understanding, and experienced personal growth and development of leadership skills. The summary of the focus groups from the second and fourth years (InterMedia, 2005a, 2007) reported similar findings and pointed to the “students’ enormous personal growth, more critical thinking, deeper understanding of the U.S. and their own societies, and for many a strong sense of empowerment” (InterMedia, 2005a, p. 1). There was general consensus that the students had helped their families, peers, and communities better understand their home countries,

while at the same time the students gained an increased appreciation and pride in their own countries. Students also reported that they had made “tremendous personal gains” as a result of their experience (p. 8).

InterMedia (2007) found that the students “were impressed by the cultural, racial, and religious diversity that characterizes the U.S.” (p. 5). The report states that “while none of them experienced prejudice targeted at Muslims, some encountered racist attitudes on occasion” (2007, p. 5). The student quote given to support the statement about racist attitudes refers to observations of prejudice towards African-Americans (to which the student was not subject). However, the students’ comments in the next section of the report devoted to Americans’ general lack of knowledge about other countries and cultures reveal that students were quite aware of anti-Muslim attitudes in the U.S. For example, “They said the problem with terrorists is all because of Islam. I cried. (female, Indonesia)” and “Americans hate Muslims a lot . . . if this is supposed to be a melting pot, why isn’t everyone educated about other people’s religion? (male, India)” (InterMedia, 2007, p. 5).

For the most part, YES students’ attitudes about Americans improved over the exchange year. However, there were some negative findings. For instance, at the end of one exchange year more students agreed with the statement “Americans are arrogant” than had at the beginning of the year (Persiko, 2007). Another negative finding concerns Islam. “They come with the notion that Americans don’t understand Muslim societies, and they leave with the notion that Americans understand them less than they originally thought they did” (Persiko, 2007). According to Robert Persiko (2007), this finding provides more evidence of the need for this type of program.

Most of the students in the focus groups (2005a, 2007) spoke very positively about their relationships with their host families, although some students expressed difficulties with their families, such as lack of affection and lifestyles that made them uncomfortable. Some students “appreciated their host families’ eagerness to know about Islam and to participate in their religious practices and activities” (InterMedia, 2005a, p. 4). InterMedia (2006) concluded that “the YES students generally returned home with a more balanced, nuanced view of the United States, as well as increased tolerance and openness overall” (p. 8). In the follow-up surveys a year after their return home, between 97% and 98% of the students said they had shared information about the U.S. and their exchange year with others in their home country, either formally (through presentations) or informally (through everyday conversations) (InterMedia, 2009).

The final evaluation report from InterMedia covering all four cohorts concluded that YES program participants gained the following:

1. A deepened and more nuanced understanding of the U.S., their own countries, as well as the roles and rights of individual in society;
2. Greater tolerance for other people and cultures’
3. Much improved leadership and communications skills, and
4. A sense of empowerment that they can affect change in their communities and beyond. (InterMedia, 2009, p. 4)

The survey findings at the end of each exchange year were similar to findings one year after the exchange, pointing to the possibility of a long-lasting impact. In general, InterMedia (2009) concluded that the YES program is meeting its stated objectives.

### *Experiences of YES Students*

In April 2006, I conducted a short survey and a group discussion in order to understand how the five YES students in my cluster constructed their exchange experience (Radomski, 2006). I will review the highlights of this preliminary study as background for the current research. The students expressed a variety of motivations for participating in the exchange program including language development, understanding American culture, and personal growth. As in other studies of exchange students, career aspirations and educational goals did not appear to be prime motivators for the YES students. Only two of the five students mentioned cross-cultural understanding as a motivator for the exchange, but all five of the students articulated this as one of the goals of the YES program. While their own motivations for participation may have been more personal, they recognized the overall program goal of promoting understanding. Four of the five students also mentioned the word “peace” in their description of the program goals. Moreover, four of the five students felt strongly that the program was meeting its goals.

All of the students encountered stereotypes at school, particularly related to religion and ethnicity, and all agreed that Muslims are often viewed as terrorists. For the most part, the students were able to deal with negative or discriminatory incidents in a positive manner, often by trying to educate their peers about Islam or their home countries. What’s more, they seemed to recognize that dispelling stereotypes was part of their “job” as exchange students. All five students felt the pressure of representing their countries to Americans. "Because they see you and they think that all people from Indonesia are like you, so it is a big responsibility," said one student. It was clear that

one of the most meaningful aspects of the exchange experience involved the relationship with the U.S. family. “Sometimes it is hard,” shared one student, “but overall it is really a good thing to come here. It’s the best thing I ever did. I will remember my family forever and I want to come back again someday.”

### *Experiences of American Host Families of YES Students*

In late 2007 and early 2008, I conducted in-depth interviews with seven American host parents, each of whom had hosted a Muslim exchange student through the YES program (Radomski, 2008). The purpose of the research was to illuminate some of the ways that American host families make meaning of hosting a Muslim exchange student post-September 11. The following seven themes emerged from the interview data: sharing cultures; knowing the other; sibling relationships; parenting across cultures; teens will be teens; learning about religion; and politics, identity, and 9/11.

One of the strongest themes for the host parents revolved around sharing cultures – both learning about a new culture and teaching about U.S. culture. The cross-cultural experience was seen as both a motivation for hosting and a reward reaped from hosting. The “teens will be teens” theme revealed that the host parents generally viewed the students as teenagers first, and exchange students second. They interpreted (or excused) some of the students’ behavior as being typical of teens everywhere. This recognition and acceptance of the exchange students as typical teens helped to “de-otherize” the students, and allowed the host parents to see the students as young people with many of the same needs and characteristics as teenagers in the U.S.

The participants’ comments revealed that in many ways, parenting an exchange student was much the same as parenting their own children. The host parents took

seriously their parental responsibilities to care for the exchange students. And yet, all the parents attempted to balance their usual parenting methods with sensitivity to the students' cultural values and traditions. Essentially, they developed skills in mediating across cultures within their own homes. In addition, despite language barriers, the host parents also felt a bond with the natural parents, and were certain that they would be warmly welcomed if they were ever to visit. These bonds between families would also seem to contribute to enhanced understanding between cultures.

Sharing religious traditions was another key theme in the exchange experience. While religion was not a motivating factor for many of the families, it was a positive, and generally enjoyable, part of the experience for all families. The host families increased their understanding of Islam and its traditions, and at the same time shared Christian and Jewish traditions with the students. The host parents respected the students' manner of practicing their own religion and tried to facilitate that practice by driving them to the mosque, helping them find space to pray, and celebrating Islamic holidays. It is significant that the sharing of the religious ideas and traditions seemed to have been a very positive component of the exchange experience. None of the families reported any difficulties or misunderstandings around religion. Indeed, one host parent reassured me that "religion was not a challenge."

One of the unexpected outcomes of the study was the host parents' lack of perceived discrimination or prejudice against the students. Only one parent reported that the student had encountered any discriminatory behavior in school, and interestingly she interpreted the behavior of the other teen as "something that teens do," rather than racism or prejudice. Situated in the current political environment, in which Islam is often

equated with terrorism, this was a curious finding. It may be explained in part by the fact that the students attended school in diverse communities in which they did not necessarily stand out as very different from their peers. Another explanation is that the students simply chose not to share any such incidents with their host parents, particularly if they were able to handle the situations effectively without adult intervention.

Generally, the participants interpreted the students' perception of September 11, 2001 as "a few crazy people, not related to Islam." The host parents seemed to agree with that assessment, separating the terrorists from mainstream Islam, but it was clear from the interviews that the events of 9/11 were not in the forefront of the exchange experience. At the forefront of the experience was welcoming a teenager into the home, including them in the family, sharing cultures, and building a personal relationship. And, although the experience of hosting was very personal, some host parents hoped for a much broader impact. In the words of one participant, "You kind of look back and think, hey, we did something for world peace there!" (Radomski, 2008, p. 42)

## Chapter 4: Research Methodology

### *Purpose and Research Questions*

The purpose of this research is to better understand the meaning that Muslim exchange students give to the exchange experience, and through their stories to explore the connections between youth exchange and peacebuilding in our post 9/11 world. This study focuses on the following research questions:

- How do Muslim high school exchange students make meaning of their exchange experience in the U.S.?
- In what ways does youth exchange contribute to peacebuilding post 9/11?

I addressed these research questions through a qualitative, interview-based study, utilizing in-depth interviews with Muslim high school exchange students participating in the Youth Exchange and Study (YES) program. In this chapter, I discuss my choices in methodology and methods, as well as the design of the study, participant selection, data collection and analysis, research quality, researcher biases, and limitations of the study.

### *A Qualitative Approach*

Though we often talk about building understanding between the countries of the world, countries do not “understand.” To understand is a human trait. Countries cannot think or sense; they cannot feel happy or sad, or experience love and hate. To increase understanding between the people of one country and another (or between two groups), it is necessary to look at the meaning of experience on an individual level – or more accurately, on *many* individual levels, as each person has a unique worldview and understanding of how the world works. Although policies and programs may be aimed at

changing attitudes and behavior in the aggregate, it is essential to examine the human experiences underlying those policies and programs. This idea has guided my choice of a qualitative interpretive research paradigm, as well as the selection of in-depth interviews as the primary research method.

Zito (1975) maintains that “there are many differing approaches to the study of society, and we must employ all of them if we are ever to penetrate the layers upon layers of meaning and actions that bind individuals together” (p. 165). While recognizing the utility of many research methods, for a given research project it is necessary to identify the method that is appropriate to both the research question and the worldview of the researcher. Mertens (2005) argues that a researcher’s “theoretical orientation has implications for every decision made in the research process” (p. 7). It is, therefore, important to understand one’s own theoretical orientation and the underlying philosophical assumptions. Researchers refer to the theoretical and philosophical assumptions about the nature of reality and how we know about the world as “paradigms” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Mertens, 2005). Paradigms can be both enabling and constraining; they help us to make sense of a complex world, but at the same time they can limit how we learn about and understand the world (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Mertens (2005) presents four major research paradigms: positivism/post-positivism, constructivist (interpretive), transformative (critical), and pragmatic. Each paradigm differs on questions of ontology, epistemology, and methodology. The positivist/post-positivist paradigm purports that there is one, knowable reality, which can be objectively studied, usually through quantitative methods. The constructivist

paradigm recognizes multiple realities that are socially constructed. Researchers following this paradigm subscribe to a subjective, interactive connection between participants and researcher, and primarily employ qualitative methods. The critical or transformative paradigm is based on a belief of multiple realities shaped by context, history, and values. Critical researchers often use qualitative methods to understand and change oppressive systems.<sup>67</sup> Mertens (2005) describes a fourth paradigm, the pragmatic paradigm, in which “what is useful determines what is true,” and mixed methods are often used. Mertens points out that in practice there are not clear cut lines between these paradigms, and other scholars define the major research paradigms slightly differently (e.g., Denzin & Lincoln, 2003).

Overall, my research fits best within the constructivist (interpretive) paradigm. The experiences of the exchange students reflect their own socially-constructed views of reality. I “attempt to understand the complex world of lived experience from the point of view of those who live it” (Mertens, 2005, p. 13). Exchange has different meanings to different individuals. While I try to identify themes and commonalities of experience, I also recognize the validity of each individual’s understanding of the experience. In general, the research methods associated with the constructivist paradigm are qualitative (Mertens, 2005).

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<sup>67</sup> I acknowledge that there are issues of discrimination, oppression, and hegemony associated with student exchange programs (see discussion of “International Student Flows” in Chapter 2) that might lead some researchers to use a critical/transformative paradigm. I tried to be sensitive to these issues in the research process, particularly in my relationship with the participants and in the analysis of data (Rubin & Rubin, 2005), but I felt that the constructivist/interpretive paradigm was a better fit with my study. I borrowed from the critical/transformative paradigm to help me understand how youth exchange can contribute to a more peaceful world, as genuine peace is not simply the absence of violence, but also the presence of social justice (Galtung, 1996a). In my analysis, therefore, I examined the extent to which the program helps students understand social justice and social responsibility. Other issues associated with power and hegemony at the country level are beyond the scope of this paper, which focuses on the students’ understanding of their exchange experiences.

Denzin and Lincoln (2003) offer the following definition of qualitative research:

Qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible. These practices transform the world...At this level, qualitative research involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings that people bring to them. (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003, pp. 4-5)

Qualitative research is also called “naturalistic” since it is generally conducted in a setting that is “natural” for the participants. Naturalistic research is dependent on context, and assumes a complex web of interrelationships between participants, researcher, and environment. (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Erlandson et al., 1993).

Creswell (1998) maintains that researchers need to have a strong rationale for choosing a qualitative approach. Qualitative methods should be suggested by the nature of the research questions. “Qualitative researchers are interested in understanding the meaning people have constructed” (Merriam, 1998, p. 6). The purpose of this research is to understand how Muslim exchange students make meaning of the exchange experience. Therefore, qualitative methods, which attend to context and seek to understand how participants make sense of the world around them, were the most appropriate way to address the research questions.

### ***Search for Methods***

While the decisions to situate my research within a constructivist paradigm and use qualitative research methods, seemed fairly straight-forward, the choice of methods was not. As Creswell (1998) notes, “Those undertaking qualitative studies have a baffling number of choices of traditions” (p. 4). Early on, I determined that in-depth

interviews would be an appropriate method of data collection because my research questions are aimed at how people make meaning of their experiences:

The purpose of in-depth interviewing is not to get answers to question, nor to test hypothesis and not to “evaluate” as the term is normally used. At the root of in-depth interviewing is an interest in understanding the experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience. (Seidman, 1998, p. 3)

However, since interviews are a means of data collection used in a number of different research traditions, I also considered other designs. I will briefly discuss my thought processes on this matter as it explains, in part, how I arrived at the decision to conduct an interview-based study, as well how I am influenced by other traditions of qualitative research. (Moreover, what we decide to do is often largely a product of what we decide *not* to do.)

A case study is focused on a “bounded” system and involves data collection from multiple sources over an extended period of time (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1995, Yin, 2003). In my research, the YES program could be viewed as a bounded system, distinct from other youth exchange programs. My intention, however, was to focus my research on the participants’ meanings of their exchange experience, not on the YES program or the exchange “system.” Moreover, case studies generally involve a number of data sources, and often triangulation between them (Yin, 2003). I had access to some evaluations and other program documents and my experience as a local coordinator constituted a type of participant observation. Yet, in addressing my research questions, the interviews provided the most critical data, and the other sources of data were of secondary importance. For these reasons, I decided that case study was not the best framework for this study.

Qualitative research is grounded in hermeneutics, or interpretive understanding (Mertens, 2005). According to Merriam (1998), “Phenomenology is a school of philosophical thought that underpins all of qualitative research – and herein lies much of the confusion surrounding the writing in this area” (p. 15). As a research methodology, however, phenomenology presents a specific way of doing qualitative research that is tied very strongly to its philosophical roots (Van Manen, 1990).<sup>68</sup> I am drawn to phenomenology and its focus on the essence of the lived experience. Phenomenology challenges us to explore our daily lives to understand and learn from our experiences at a deeply human level. In an effort to understand pre-reflective experience, researchers in this tradition ask the question “what is it like?” (Van Manen, 1990). In phenomenology, writing is an important part of the research – not just a formality after the research is finished. Indeed, much of the meaning-making happens in the writing process (Van Manen, 2002). One of the reasons that I chose not to undertake a phenomenological study, however, is because I was interested in the reflective experiences of the exchange students. As an individual reflects on their everyday experiences, the reflections become part of the experience and frame how the individual understands that experience. For this research, what I borrowed from phenomenology was the value of understanding the lived experience and the focus on writing as a way of creating meaning.

Grounded theory is an established qualitative research method which adheres to very specific procedures and techniques to develop theory (Creswell, 1998; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). In designing this study, I was reluctant to set out with a primary goal of constructing theory. I was influenced by Wolcott (2001) in this decision:

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<sup>68</sup> Many phenomenologists interpret their research using the works of philosophers, such as Husserl, Heidegger, and Gadamer (Van Manen, 1990). Philosophy is integral to this research tradition.

Drawing theoretical implications is an important facet of the research process, and the advancement of theoretical knowledge is a reasonable expectation for the effort. But it should not be regarded as a *condition*. Advancing theoretical knowledge is not a step that every researcher is prepared or has been prepared to make. Take your work as far as you are able. (p. 77)

While not creating new theory, my research contributes to our knowledge base about peacebuilding and youth exchange, and provides some insight and evidence regarding existing theories, particularly Bachner's (1991b) framework. I also draw on some grounded theory techniques, such as open coding, in analyzing data and identifying patterns and themes (Strauss and Corbin, 1990).

Ethnography, which has its roots in anthropological studies of other cultures, involves the "description and interpretation of a cultural or social group or system" (Creswell, 1998, p. 58). Ethnographers observe and interact with people in their natural settings in order to gain an insider's perspective into how they understand the world (Mertens, 2005). Creswell (1998) describes ethnography in the following manner:

As a process, ethnography involves *prolonged observation of the group*, typically through *participant observation* to which the researcher is *immersed in the day-to-day lives* of the people or through one-on-one interviews with members of the group. The researcher studies the meaning of behavior, language, and interaction of the *culture-sharing group*. (p. 58, italics added)

While my research portrays some characteristics of ethnography, it does not fit well with this tradition. "Culture" in the broad sense is an important part of the context of the study (Muslim-American relations post 9/11), as well as the experience of the participants (sharing/learning about each other's cultures). However, the focus of the study was not on a "culture-sharing group." Although all of the exchange students were Muslim, they came from many different countries and cultures, in which religious beliefs and practices are diverse. They shared the "culture" of exchange students, but my research included

only a small subset of high school exchange students with a particular program. Furthermore, the students were not in their “natural” cultural setting. Indeed, one of the purposes of this study is to understand how exchange students give meaning to *not* being in their cultural home.

In light of the above considerations, I chose to conduct a “basic” or “generic” qualitative study:

For lack of a better label, the term basic or generic qualitative study refers to studies that exemplify the characteristic of qualitative research discussed earlier. Many qualitative studies in education do not focus on culture or build a grounded theory; nor are they intensive case studies of a single unit or bounded system. Rather, researchers who conduct these studies, which are probably the most common form of qualitative research in education, simply seek to discover and understand a phenomenon, a process, or the perspectives and worldviews of the people involved (Merriam, 1998, p. 11)

### ***Research Design***

I used a qualitative, interview-based research design. I conducted in-depth, responsive interviews (Rubin & Rubin, 2005) with twenty-one Muslim exchange students involved with the YES program. In Chapters 6 through 10 of this report, I present the experiences of the exchange students. I use many quotes to allow the students to speak for themselves, and to give the reader a deeper understanding of their experiences. In Chapter 11, I examine the experiences of the exchange students for connections to peacebuilding and intercultural understanding. In this way, I tried to connect their experiences to other studies and theoretical constructs.

Seidman (1998) argues for interviewing as the method of qualitative inquiry when the purpose of the research is to “understand the meaning people involved in education make of their experience” (p. 4). Rubin and Rubin (2005) point out that qualitative

interviews allow the researcher to “understand experiences and reconstruct events in which you did not participate” (p. 3). Considering the research questions, interviewing was an appropriate method of data collection for this study because, as Patton (1990) notes, “We cannot observe how people have organized the world and the meanings they attach to what goes on in the world. We have to ask people questions about those things” (p. 278).

Wolcott (1994) describes three common ways of gathering qualitative data: experiencing (participant observation), enquiring (interviewing), and examining (studying materials). In this study, I focused primarily on interviewing as a means of data collection, but I also used participant observation and examination of materials. I relied on my experiences as a community coordinator (participant observation), to provide background and context for the study. Furthermore, my role as local coordinator provided me a level of access to and credibility with interview participants. It also introduced biases, which will be discussed below. In addition to the interviews and participant observation, I also examined relevant materials, including presentations, articles, and reports about the YES program.

This research was approved by the University of Maryland Institutional Review Board (IRB) on April 11, 2008. Because it was not practicable to obtain parental consent for the exchange students, I requested, and received, a waiver of parental consent for this research. In lieu of parental consent, the exchange students were asked to sign an assent form which described the purpose of the research, the possible risks, and the steps taken to ensure confidentiality.

### *Change in Research Design*

For this study I interviewed Muslim exchange students participating in the YES program. However, my initial research design also included plans for interviews with host families of YES students, as well as several local coordinators and exchange staff. My research proposal was approved as such, and so in addition to the interviews with twenty-one students, I also interviewed seventeen host parents (some of whom were also local coordinators) and one staff person. During the autumn of 2008, I transcribed all of the interviews in full. At that point, I was simply overwhelmed with the amount of data that I had collected – nearly 500 single-spaced pages of interview transcripts. I read and re-read the transcripts, thinking about how to approach writing about the exchange experience from these two very different perspectives (within which there were, of course, a wide range of experiences). With the approval of my advisor and the members of my dissertation committee, I decided to focus this study on the experiences of the exchange students, using their experiences as a basis for examining the connection between youth exchange and peacebuilding.

“Giving up” the host family component was somewhat difficult for me. It felt like a loss, not because of any wasted effort on my part, but because the host parents willingly and generously shared their stories with me – and they are stories that should be told. Given the dearth of research about host families, as well their key role in the youth exchange experience, their stories could be a valuable contribution to our understanding of youth exchange and peacebuilding. Consequently, while I am shelving (quite literally) the host family data at this time, it is my intention to retrieve it from the shelf for a future study.

In the following methodology sections I have included some information about the host family interviews because I conducted them during the same time period, and in the same geographic areas, as the exchange student interviews. Furthermore, there were seven “matched sets” of exchange students and host families (see Appendix 1). In other words, for seven of the twenty-one exchange students I interviewed one or both of their host parents. While I will not describe the host family experiences in this study, I cannot ignore the fact that I completed and transcribed the interviews. Their stories, as well as my own experiences as a local coordinator, undoubtedly help to shape the way that I understand and interpret the students’ experiences. I recognize that sometimes exchange students and host parents view situations quite differently. In some cases, particularly in instances of conflict between the students and the host families, I reminded myself to “turn off” the voice of the host parents. Although the host family interviews provide context, it is the voices of the students that I have tried to bring forward in this study.

### ***The Interview Process***

I utilized a responsive interviewing model as developed by Rubin and Rubin (2005). The purpose of responsive interviewing is to obtain the participants’ understanding and interpretation of their experiences, and is concerned with “depth of understanding, rather than breadth” (Rubin & Rubin, 2005, p. 30). Depth is achieved by asking open-ended questions, probing into the complexities of the participants’ experiences, and listening with full attention. “The model emphasizes that the interviewer and interviewee are both human beings, not recording machines” (p. 30).

Prior to conducting the interviews for this study, I developed interview guides for the exchange students (see Appendix 3), host parents, and local coordinators. My

literature review and the interview protocols that I used in a previous study of host parents (Radomski, 2008) informed the design of the interview guides for this research. In structuring the interview guides, I started out with general, non-threatening questions, and then proceeded to topics that might be more difficult or emotional for the participants, such as questions about religion and 9/11. I asked primarily open-ended “what” and “how” questions to elicit in-depth responses. I followed-up with more specific questions and probes as needed. In order to capture some of the stories that were most meaningful to the participants, towards the end of the interview I asked the participants about their most memorable experiences. I ended each interview with an invitation for the participants to add anything else they would like to tell me about their experiences. I contacted a number of the participants after the interviews to ask follow-up questions or to clarify points from the interview.

The interview guides were indeed “guides,” focusing on a series of topics and themes to be discussed, rather than providing a rigid structure for each interview. I used the guides to remind me of the main areas of interest and to ensure that I explored similar topics with each participant. As the interviews progressed, I made minor revisions in the guides, sometimes adding, combining, or changing the order of questions.

The student interviews were conducted between the end of May and the beginning of July, 2008. Situating the interviews at the end of the exchange experience allowed the participants to reflect on their experiences throughout the year. The interview time frame introduced bias into the study in that as participants “looked back” on the exchange year, they may have been more likely to want to portray their experiences in a positive light. However, the participants did not seem reluctant to talk with me about challenges and

difficulties they encountered during the exchange year. Furthermore, selection of any one time frame brings with it inherent biases that only a longitudinal study could minimize.

The interviews were conducted in English, which was a second or third language for all of the exchange students. The participants came from eight different countries, and sometimes those from the same country spoke different local languages. The interviews were conducted at the end of the exchange year, by which time the students had been operating in English on a daily basis for nine or ten months. All of the students seemed very comfortable communicating in English, although they were not all equally proficient in spoken English. My experience in working with exchange students from different countries, as well as teaching English as a second language, gave me some experience in understanding English as spoken by non-native speakers. Still, I recognize that the students may have had some difficulty expressing their views or describing their experiences adequately in English. I tried to be sensitive to language issues, including giving the participants adequate time to formulate their thoughts and offering suggestions when they asked for assistance in finding the right word or phrase.

The exchange students seemed genuinely pleased, and often excited, to talk with me about their experiences. At the beginning of each interview, I introduced myself, briefly explained the purpose of the research, and asked the participants to sign the consent form. I explained that I was a PAX coordinator, but that the interview was part of my work for graduate school and not related to the exchange organizations. I also assured the participants that the interviews were confidential and that their real names would not be used in the write-up. I recorded the interviews with a digital recorder.

Immediately following each interview, I made notes about the interview, the context, and my general impressions.

Most of the interviews lasted approximately one hour, although several were nearly two hours in length. Interviews were held at a time and place convenient to the participants. I conducted interviews in homes, coffee shops, restaurants, public parks, and hotel lobbies. To show my appreciation for the participants' time and cooperation, I presented each student with a small gift (such as a photo album, a journal, or chocolate) at the end of the interview.

### ***Selection of Participants and Data Collection***

The criteria and processes for participant selection can greatly impact the quality and credibility of the data (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Patton, 1990; Rubin & Rubin, 2005). Cresswell (1998) remarks that participant selection “represents a key decision point in a qualitative study” (p. 118). Many qualitative researchers utilize “purposive” or “purposeful sampling,” a technique “based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight, and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned” (Merriam, 1998, p. 61). According to Patton (1990), “the logic and power of purposeful sampling lies in selecting information-rich cases for study in depth” (p. 169). In this study, I used several purposive sampling strategies delineated by Miles and Huberman (1994) and Patton (1990), including snowball or chain sampling, typical case sampling, and variation sampling. Practical considerations such as time, money, and geography also influenced my sampling decisions.

My work as a local coordinator afforded me access to both staff and coordinators working with the YES program. I used these connections to identify the study

participants. My initial criteria for identifying participants included the following: a) exchange students participating in the YES program in the 2007-2008 school year, and b) students self-identified as Muslim. Through my work with PAX, I had access to YES students associated with the AFS Consortium.<sup>69</sup> Therefore, all of the study participants were from the countries in which the AFS Consortium managed the YES program.

Participant identification was an ongoing process. I wanted to learn about the experiences of “typical” Muslim high school exchange students. At the same time, I wanted to reflect some of the diversity within each group. I set out to identify young women and men from a variety of different countries. YES students are generally placed in geographic “clusters” of three to five students assigned to a local coordinator. For this research I interviewed exchange students in four clusters, as well as eight individual students from other clusters around the U.S.

I began the process by interviewing the three Muslim YES students in my cluster. Using a “snowball” strategy, I contacted a local coordinator from a different exchange organization (but in a nearby geographic area) who put me in touch with exchange students (and host parents) in her cluster. I prepared letters of introduction, which were sent via email to the potential participants in her cluster (see Appendix 2). I then made arrangements by phone and email to interview the students in this cluster during the month of June.

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<sup>69</sup> As noted in Chapter 3, the AFS Consortium comprises the following four organizations that work together to place and support students in communities throughout the U.S.: AFS-USA (formerly the American Field Service), AIFS Foundation (American Institute for Foreign Study Foundation), PAX (Program of Academic Exchange) and ACES (American Cultural Exchange Service). In 2008, the AFS Consortium worked with students from Brunei, Egypt, Ghana, India, Indonesia, Kenya, Malaysia, Philippines, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Thailand.

My cluster and the second cluster described above are both located in an urban/suburban area on the East Coast. The schools are large and diverse, and the communities include people from around the world. I wondered if Muslim exchange students in smaller cities or rural areas might have some different experiences that would be relevant to the research questions. With the assistance of PAX staff, I identified two clusters located in less urban areas of the East Coast, but within a day's drive of each other. I contacted the local coordinators in these two areas, and they made arrangements for me to conduct interviews with the exchange students and host parents in their clusters. The coordinators also shared the introduction letters with the students and host families in their clusters. These two clusters were located in towns with populations of approximately 12,000 and 30,000, respectively. However, a number of the participants that I interviewed lived outside of the towns, some in very rural surroundings (a student from Saudi Arabia told of his encounter with a bear in the backyard).

I conducted the interviews in these two clusters during a three-day period in early June, 2008. Because the coordinators had made all the arrangements, I was able to conduct eleven interviews involving eighteen individuals (students, host parents and coordinators) in three days. By the end of June, I had interviewed thirteen exchange students, only four of whom were boys. None of the girls that I had interviewed wore the Islamic head covering, the hijab. Both of these were factors related to the make-up of the particular clusters that I was able to interview.

At the end of each exchange year, the YES students come together for a pre-departure conference in Washington, D.C. As a local coordinator, I was able to take part in this conference, held at the beginning of July. There were no planned activities for the

first day of the conference, since students arrive from all over the country on that day. I assisted with the airport arrivals in the morning of the first day, and at lunch I approached a number of students and invited them to participate in the interviews. In the afternoon, I interviewed two boys (in one interview) and six girls who wore the hijab (in two interviews). For the most part, the students took turns answering the questions rather than engaging in discussion among themselves. For this reason, I considered these sessions to be group interviews rather than small focus groups. These eight students had been hosted in communities across the U.S., including the suburbs of large cities as well as some very small towns. All of the student participants that I had interviewed up until this time were associated with either PAX or AFS as their placement organization. Some of the students interviewed at the pre-departure conference, however, were associated with the other two placement organizations in the AFS Consortium.

The pre-departure conference was an extremely exciting and emotional time for the students. They had just completed their exchange year and said goodbye to their friends and host families. Most had been traveling on airplanes and/or on buses for many hours to reach the conference site. In addition, they were reunited with the other exchange students from their home countries for the first time in ten months and were looking forward to seeing their natural families in only a few days. Nevertheless, each of the students seemed genuinely pleased to be interviewed.

Although I interviewed the host parents of seven of the exchange students, the interviews were conducted separately. Host parents were not present during interviews with exchange students and exchange students were not present during interviews with host parents. In two cases the host parents were present in another part of the house (but

well out of earshot) during the interview with the student. In one of these situations, the student declined to talk about challenges involving her host parents, and we made an appointment to discuss this topic at another time. In the other case, the student did not seem inhibited by the fact that her host parents were in the basement; she spoke with great emotion about the difficulties that she had experienced with her host family during the year.

### *Description of Participants*

I interviewed twenty-one exchange students in fourteen interviews (See Appendix 1). Ten of the interviews were individual interviews and four were group interviews. The exchange student participants were between 16 and 19 years of age and came from the following countries: Egypt (2), Ghana (1), India (1), Indonesia (8), the Philippines (1), Saudi Arabia (4), Turkey (2), and Thailand (2). Fifteen of the participants were female and six were male. Of the twenty-one students that I interviewed, I was acquainted with only the three in my cluster prior to the interviews. There were more girls than boys in the study because of the specific make-up of the four clusters that I interviewed, and because I chose to interview an additional six girls who wore the hijab. The large number of students from Indonesia was again due to the make-up of the particular clusters that I interviewed, as well as the fact that four of the six girls that wore the hijab were from Indonesia. Moreover, in the 2007-08 school year, there were more YES students from Indonesia than from any of the other participating countries.

Although I intended to interview only Muslim YES students for this study, one of the students that I interviewed (Amar from Ghana) was Christian. He had been referred to me by the local coordinator, and I had sent him a letter of introduction stating the

purpose of the research. At the outset of the interview, I was surprised to discover that Amar had converted from Islam to Christianity only a few weeks before his arrival in the U.S. I decided to include his experiences in the study for a number of reasons. First, his natural family was Muslim and he was raised as a Muslim (although his mother had converted to Islam prior to her marriage). Second, he related that his name led many Americans to believe that he was Muslim, and therefore, he was often identified as a Muslim at school and in the community. As a result, he often found himself trying to educate Americans about Islam, as well as about the commonalities between Islam and Christianity. Although he was Christian, I included Amar in the study because I thought his experiences could help to answer the research questions.

Amar was also unique in a couple of other ways. First, he was the only participant from Africa, and the only black student in the study. I asked questions about race and what it was like to live with a white family, but for Amar, race was not a problem, nor was it an issue that he felt warranted much discussion; his identity seemed firmly rooted in being Ghanaian and being an exchange student. Therefore, in this study, I did not address the issue of being black in a predominately white society. Second, Amar was the only participant in the study with a physical disability. Amar had polio as a child and used crutches to get around. He was planning on staying in the U.S. for a few weeks beyond the usual summer departure date in order to get fitted for new leg braces. Although not related to the research questions in this study, the experiences of exchange students with physical disabilities would certainly be an interesting topic for future research.

## *Data Management*

Kvale (1996) remarks that “Rather than being a simple clerical task, transcription is itself an interpretive process” (p. 160), as the transcriber makes constant decisions about what and how to transform the spoken word into a written document. For this study, I transcribed each of the interviews in full. I tried to stay as close to the spoken word as possible, including notes about participant tone of voice, laughter, pauses in the conversation and so forth. During the transcription process I wrote “observer comments” and other reflexive memos to myself, to assist in the data analysis.

I transcribed several of the student interviews in June, which helped me to revise my interview strategy somewhat for the next interviews. This also enabled me to ask the students some follow-up questions when I saw them at the pre-departure conference in early July. I completed the bulk of the transcribing in August and September. Transcribing the interviews was a long, but extremely valuable process. Hearing the voices of the participants again helped me to understand their experiences in a way that reading an interview transcript could not have done.

To protect the confidentiality of the study participants, I assigned a pseudonym to each of the participants. I also used pseudonyms for other family members or friends that were mentioned in the interviews. File names for both the recordings and the transcripts included only pseudonyms and numbers. I kept a master list of names and contact information cross-referenced with the pseudonyms in a separate document. This document was stored in a separate electronic file folder on two password protected computers in the researcher’s home.

## ***Data Analysis***

Rubin and Rubin (2005) define data analysis as “the process of moving from raw interviews to evidence-based interpretations” (p. 201). Analysis involves close examination of the data to understand meanings and find patterns or common themes among participants. In this study, I used an inductive approach and to allow “the categories of analysis to emerge from the data as the study progresses” (Mertens, 2005, p. 230). Analysis was an ongoing, iterative process. As I transcribed each interview and read over the finished transcript, I made notes about main ideas and important concepts. I modified the questions for future interviews based on the findings from previous interviews.

I employed NVivo 8, a computer program designed to assist in the analysis of qualitative data (relying heavily on Bazeley’s (2007) guidebook). Rubin and Rubin (2005) note, “the decisions the researcher makes when coding largely shape what he or she will be able to conclude during analysis” (p. 208). I developed an initial list of codes based on my thoughts and memos about the interviews, concepts from the literature, and themes that I encountered in the host family study (Radomski, 2008). I then used open coding in a line by line examination of the transcripts (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). According to Charmaz (2000), “the researcher’s interpretations of the data shape his or her emergent codes. . .” (p. 515). In the process of analysis, I added new codes and combined or separated other codes as seemed to make sense from the data. Wolcott (2001) points out that “the critical task in qualitative research is not to accumulate all the data you can, but to “can” (i.e. get rid of) most of the data you accumulate . . . the trick is to discover the essences and then to reveal those essences with sufficient context” (p. 44).

I also recognize the importance of the writing process itself. In the phenomenological tradition, the process and practice of writing is an integral part of the research (Van Manen, 1990). The process of interpretation extends beyond analyzing data, finding themes, and connecting themes to theory. In writing, one continues to interact with both the data and the text, giving meaning to the phenomenon through language (Richardson, 2003; Van Manen, 1990). “Writing *is* thinking” (Wolcott, 2001, p. 22). I found this to be true as I wrote, and revised again, and again, and again. I had particular difficulty with the organization of the chapters describing the student experiences. Although I knew the key components that I wanted to include, the order in which I told the story seemed to make a significant difference in the story itself. I recognize that there is no “right” way to tell the story, but still I wanted to stay as true to the experiences of the students as possible. In the end, of course, I just had to make a decision, but it was the process of writing that helped me think through the meaning of the narrative.

In Chapters 6 through 10 of this report, I describe the experiences of the students. The purpose of these chapters is to bring forth the voices of the students and let them tell their stories – how they make meaning of being Muslim exchange students in the U.S. I use many direct quotes to give the reader a deeper understanding of the students’ experiences. I try to demonstrate the uniqueness of individual experiences, as well as highlight common experiences. These chapters are intended to be more descriptive than interpretive, although, as Ryan and Bernard (2003) state, “No matter how the researcher actually does inductive coding, by the time he or she has identified the themes and refined them to the point where they can be applied to an entire corpus of text, a lot of

interpretive analysis has already been done” (p. 276). Still, as suggested by Wolcott (2001), I made an effort to keep the description and interpretation processes separate. In Chapter 11, I examine the experiences of the exchange students through the lenses of theory and prior research related to peacebuilding. Through this analytic and interpretive process, I demonstrate how this research helps to extend and enrich theory about youth exchange and peacebuilding post 9/11.

### ***Researcher Bias***

Rubin and Rubin (2005) state, “Because the interviewer contributes actively to the conversation, he or she must be aware of his or her own opinions, experiences, cultural definitions, and even prejudices” (p. 36). I have been involved with the YES program for more than four years, over which time I formed close relationships with many exchange students and host parents, as well as other local coordinators. I recognized at the outset that I have a positive bias towards the YES program; otherwise, I would not have invested so much of my time with the program in recent years. To counter this bias, throughout the interviews and the data analysis, I was alert for ways in which the experiences of the participants might *not* lead to increased cross-cultural understanding and peacebuilding. As Bachner (1991b) notes, “Some degree of unpeacefulness, or conflict, would seem to be inherent in the exchange experience” (p. 140). I purposefully asked questions, therefore, not only about positive experiences, but also about challenges and problems the students had encountered during the year.

My role as a local coordinator for the YES program introduces significant bias into the study. I interviewed three exchange students with whom I had worked with over the previous year. Our prior relationship almost certainly had an impact on the

participants' responses. Moreover, I may have made some assumptions about their experiences based on prior knowledge. I tried to be sensitive to these issues during the interviews and in the data analysis. For instance, during one interview, when a student referred to an incident which had happened earlier in the year, I asked her to remind me exactly what happened from her point of view. The advantage to interviewing students that I knew was that I had already established good personal relationships and a level of trust that helped to facilitate open and honest responses.

Being a local coordinator was a considerable advantage in gaining access to and building rapport with exchange students that were not in my cluster. Rubin and Rubin (2005) remark that "Perhaps most helpful in encouraging people to provide depth and detail is to indicate your familiarity with interviewee's world so that the person knows that superficial answers won't teach you all that much" (p. 114). One of the responsibilities of a local coordinator is to help work out problems and to address concerns of the exchange students and host families. As such, the participants may have felt more comfortable talking with me about their problems and concerns.

A disadvantage of being a local coordinator was the chance that the students may have viewed me as a representative of the exchange organization operating in an official capacity. They may have been worried that I would relay information back to the exchange organization or to their host parents. To address this concern, at the beginning of each interview I introduced myself as a coordinator and as a student researcher, but stressed that the interviews were confidential and the research was not connected to the exchange organizations. Based on the richness of the data and the willingness of the participants to talk about their experiences, both positive and negative, it does not seem

that this was an inhibiting factor for the participants. For instance, one student talked to me about problems she had with her coordinator, even though she knew that I was acquainted with that individual. I think that the promise of confidentiality, as well as the students' desires to tell their stories led to their openness.

Rubin and Rubin (2005) point out that researchers often have to cross boundaries, such as race and gender, in order to carry out their research. There are both advantages and disadvantages to being an insider (or an outsider). Indeed, "the insider-outsider issue is still being debated" by many researchers (Rubin & Rubin, 2005, p. 87). Although my role as a local coordinator makes me an insider to the exchange world, my other identities place me as an outsider to the world of the exchange students. Race, ethnicity, culture, and religion are all important issues as I try to understand the experiences of exchange students. I am a white, middle-class woman who was raised in a Protestant home. I am clearly from the dominant culture. This may have led the students to be reluctant to share their experiences with me, or to share only positive experiences with me. They may have told me what they thought I wanted to hear, rather than their "true" feelings. While this is often a danger in interviewing across boundaries, the responses of the exchange students in this study seemed heartfelt and genuine. They shared stories of difficulties and challenges, as well as successes and joys. In other words, they did not seem to white-wash their experiences for my benefit.

Furthermore, in my data collection and analysis, I tried to be sensitive to issues associated with identity. I have tried to learn about other countries, cultures, and religions (particularly Islam) through reading and talking with other people. In the interview protocol for this study, I placed questions about religion in the middle of the

guide so that I would have time to establish some trust and rapport before addressing sensitive issues. Interestingly, many of the exchange students brought up religion (and sometimes 9/11) at the beginning of the interview when they were telling me about themselves and why they came on the exchange (long before I reached that section of the interview guide). Rubin and Rubin (2005) state that “cross-ethnic interviewing seems to work best when the interviewees are motivated to explain their ethnic experiences to others” (p. 88). Exchange is based on crossing cultural, ethnic, and in this case religious, boundaries. Perhaps for this reason, the participants seemed to feel comfortable sharing their experiences with me.

During some of the interviews, I found it more difficult than I had expected to step back from my coordinator role. More than once I found myself biting my tongue, wanting to share information or advice with an interviewee. Each time I reminded myself that my job was to ask questions and listen attentively. When I thought the participant would benefit from my experiences, however, I tried to allow some time at the end of the interview to address these issues. I tried to keep these discussions separate from the data collection process, but I felt that sharing my experiences or information about the exchange program was an important way of “giving back” to the participants.

### ***Quality of Research***

Wolcott (1994) argues that to talk about validity in qualitative research is, in essence, absurd. Rather than validity, he suggests focusing on “identifying critical elements and wringing plausible interpretations from them, something one can pursue without becoming obsessed with finding the right or ultimate answer, the correct version, the Truth” (pp. 366-367). In short, it is “understanding” that matters (Wolcott, 1994). If

one accepts the constructivist/interpretive paradigm assumption that there are multiple realities, then validity becomes less concerned with “being right” and more concerned with quality and integrity in the data collection, analysis, and writing processes.

Internal validity in quantitative research is paralleled by credibility or trustworthiness in qualitative research (Mertens, 2005). Credibility refers to the “correspondence between the way the respondent actually perceive social constructs and the way the research portrays their viewpoints” (Mertens, 2005, p. 254). Kvale (1996) argues that validation is a process that must be integrated throughout the research process, from the conception of the project through designing, interviewing, transcribing, analyzing and reporting.

In assessing the credibility of interview-based research studies, Rubin and Rubin (2005) discuss four central criteria: choosing interviewees; thoroughness and accuracy; believability; and transparency. Rubin and Rubin (2005) advise choosing participants who are experienced and knowledgeable about the topic. They also maintain that participants should represent a variety of perspectives. In this study, the exchange students are the most knowledgeable sources of information regarding how they make meaning of the exchange experience. I conducted the interviews near the end of the ten-month exchange program, at a point where the participants could reflect on their experiences throughout the year. Through purposive sampling, I attempted to gather a variety of perspectives and reflect some of the diversity of the exchange students.

Thoroughness is demonstrated in a variety of ways, including asking follow-up and probing questions, pursuing new paths of questioning as needed, and backing up statements in the report with evidence from the interviews (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). As

recommended by Wolcott (1994), I tried to “talk little” and “listen a lot” during the interviews (p. 348). I used open-ended questions and asked follow-up questions in the interviews, often paraphrasing the participants’ responses and using phrases such as, “What I hear you saying...” In a number of cases, I contacted participants after the interview via email, phone, or in person with additional questions or clarifications. In the write-up of the research, I use direct quotes as evidence to support themes and conclusions, letting the participants speak for themselves. Accuracy involves attention to recording and reporting the interviews. As stated above, I recorded and carefully transcribed each interview. I also made extensive observer comments and notes about the interview, the context, and the process.

Transparency requires that researchers document the research process carefully and stay close to the data during analysis (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). “The qualitative researcher has an obligation to be methodical in reporting sufficient details of data collection and the processes of analysis to permit others to judge the quality of the resulting product” (Patton, 1990, p. 462). Other researchers refer to this element as “confirmability” (Mertens, 2005). I kept interview transcripts, as well as records of the interview times, dates, and places. I also kept copies of observer comments, research memos, and records of the coding process. I believe that another researcher could follow my thought processes and see how I arrived at my conclusions.

According to Rubin and Rubin (2005), believability means that “what you have been told is on the mark and that you have not been deceived by your interviewees” (p. 71). At the beginning of each interview I emphasized that participation was voluntary and confidential. In addition, the introductions that I received from other coordinators

helped to put participants at ease. Interviewees were informed that they did not have to answer any questions with which they felt uncomfortable. Only twice participants declined to answer questions, and both times I respected their requests and moved on to other questions. I think this encouraged honesty and openness on the part of the participants. I found that most of the experiences of the exchange students in this study were located within the wide range of experiences that I am familiar with as a local coordinator. In other words, they were believable to me.

However, because the students were looking back on their exchange year and the whole experience was coming to an end, it is possible, perhaps even likely, that they may have cast a more positive glow on their experiences than they actually felt at earlier points during the year. As noted above, this study is a snap-shot of one particular time in the students' exchange year. People do change their attitudes and feelings about experiences, even on a daily basis. It is beyond the scope of this study to conduct a longitudinal analysis (although that is certainly an important direction for future research). Therefore, I accept what the students told me at this particular time as believable, although it may have differed from how they felt earlier in the exchange year, or how they will feel months or years down the road.

Triangulation, another common method of demonstrating credibility in qualitative studies, involves using various sources or methods to check the consistency of the data (Cresswell, 1998; Mertens, 2005; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Patton, 1990; Yin, 2003). Although this study is primarily interview based, I utilized my experiences and understandings as a local coordinator, as well as materials such as reports, articles and presentations about the YES program. To some extent, the interviews with the students

could be seen to triangulate each other, as the students were going through similar cross-cultural experiences. And, while I did not describe the host family experiences in this study, I could use some of that data to triangulate particular events or situations with the students' experiences. However, I struggle with the idea that "meaning" can be triangulated. Is there one "true" meaning that we are seeking? One of the key assumptions underpinning interpretive qualitative research is that any phenomenon can be "seen" or understood from many different perspectives. In this study, I attempt to describe what it is like to be a Muslim exchange student in the U.S. I could cite instances in which the students and their host parents attribute very different meanings to the same situation. For the most part, I steer clear of these comparisons; this is the story of the students, not the host parents. Still, if their perspectives differ, would not each be valid – just different? While there are commonalities of experiences that allow us to make statements about "some" or "many" of the students, does that invalidate the meaning of the "one" or "few" who had different experiences?

Guba and Lincoln (1989) reject the idea of triangulation "because it implies that it is possible (or desirable) to find consistency across sources, which contradicts the notion of multiple realities" (cited in Mertens, 2005, p. 255). Richardson (2003), too, challenges the notion that there is a "fixed point" or "object" that can be triangulated (p. 517). Instead, she offers the metaphor of a crystal with its many angles, reflections, and refractions. "What we see depends on our angle of repose" (Richardson, 2003, p. 517). In this study, I utilized different sources and methods of data collection to help me understand the experiences of Muslim high school exchange students in the U.S. At the

same time, I recognize that meaning-making is both an individual and shared process, and both are valid.

Member checks provide another means of enhancing credibility (Cresswell, 1998; Mertens, 2005). Member checking involves having participants review drafts of interview transcripts and/or the conclusions drawn from the study. Feedback from participants can correct errors or bring new perspectives to the findings. Returning the interview transcripts to the participants for review did not seem practical in this study. The transcripts were long (most were more than thirty pages) and by the time I finished transcribing all of the interviews, the students were in their home countries and getting on with their lives. As noted earlier, I asked many clarifying questions during the interviews and followed up after the interviews with specific questions via email to some of the participants. I am fairly confident that I am not misrepresenting what the participants said during their interviews. Moreover, as discussed above, over time people do change how they think and feel about experiences. So if, for instance, upon reading the full interview transcript a few months later, a participant would remark that he or she did not really mean what they said about a particular topic, does that make their original comment any less valid? I think not. More likely, their perspective changed with the passing of time. The students' later reflections might provide evidence about the impact of exchange over time, but it would not invalidate how they gave meaning to their experiences at the point in time of the interviews. As this was not a longitudinal study, I chose not to return the interview transcripts or manuscript to the students for review.

Qualitative researchers are also concerned with the transferability of their findings – the degree to which one can “transfer” the learnings from one case to another.

Researchers utilize detailed or “thick” description to enhance transferability (Mertens, 2005). “The burden of transferability is on the reader to determine the degree of similarity between the study site and the receiving context. The researcher’s responsibility is to provide sufficient detail to enable the reader to make such a judgment” (Mertens, 2005, p. 256). Thick description makes it possible for the reader to decide to what extent the research is relevant to another situation. In this study, I provide descriptions of background and context where appropriate, but the main source of “thick description” is the voices of the participants. I included direct quotes throughout the findings chapters, which provides readers with access to some of the primary data from which they may determine the appropriateness of transferability to other cases.

### ***Limitations***

This qualitative study brings richness and depth to research in the fields of youth exchange and peacebuilding. However, the main feature of the study that permits this depth – the small number of participants – also limits transferability. The study participants are all associated with the YES program, which in design is different from many other high school exchange programs. Exchange students are selected for this merit-based scholarship through a competitive process. Students receive a good deal of training and orientation, and are expected to fulfill a number of program requirements during and after the exchange year. Caution should be taken, therefore, in applying the conclusions to other exchange participants or programs with different structures.

Aside from participating in the YES program, the students in this study are unique in some other ways. All of the participants in this study were Muslim (although not all YES students are Muslim), and the participants represent only eight of the more than

thirty-five countries participating in the YES program. Therefore, they are not representative of all YES students, let alone all high school exchange students.

Finally, as noted above, all of the interviews for this study were conducted at the end of the exchange year. A research design that included interviews at various points before, during and after the exchange year would better capture how participants' understanding of the exchange experience develops or changes over time.

## **Chapter 5: The Muslim World and the U.S.: Intersections and Tensions**

*“No one is born blistering with hate and outrage,  
and often what appears to be hate is in reality thinly concealed fear.  
The only ethically acceptable choice is to seek to understand.”  
– Khaled Abou El Fadl (2005, p. 3)*

In this chapter, I examine the context within which the YES program operates. I look briefly at the events of September 11, 2001, and how they were interpreted by Americans, American Muslims, and Muslims around the world. I discuss the views of the American public about Islam and the views of Muslims about the U.S. in the post 9/11 context. I also examine Islam as it is presented in the American media. Finally, I look at what research tells about the lives and challenges of Muslim youth in the U.S. today.

### ***September 11, 2001***

Thousands of pages have been written about the attacks of September 11, the U.S. response, and the changes it has wrought upon the world. It is beyond the scope of this paper to delve deeply into the causes or the outcomes of that fateful day. And yet, the YES program would not exist had this tragedy not occurred. My intention here is to paint with a broad brush some of the issues surrounding the attacks and their aftermath in an effort to better understand the experiences of the Muslim YES students. Situating their experiences in this context will help us understand the likelihood of the exchange program contributing to peace. In this section, I explore some of the issues facing the American Muslim community, as well attitudes of Americans and the Muslim world towards each other post September 11.

In the days and weeks following the attacks, expressions of sympathy and solidarity poured into the U.S. from around the world, including from many countries in the Middle East.<sup>70</sup> American Muslims expressed outrage that extremists would commit such a crime in the name of Islam. “So-called Muslims hijacked my religion, killing...innocent people” (Hasan, 2002, p. ix).<sup>71</sup> Yet, while most of the world mourned with the U.S., the evening news flashed images of people celebrating in the streets in the West Bank and Gaza. Americans, Muslim and non-Muslim alike, struggled to understand what was happening and what it could possible mean for the future.<sup>72</sup> Shortly after it became clear that the nineteen hijackers were Muslim, President George W. Bush made a public statement declaring that America was waging a war against terrorism, not Islam. And yet, as the “war on terror” (a war without a well-defined enemy) developed, it appeared to many that the line in the sand had been drawn between the U.S. and Islam. Hate crimes against Muslims and Arabs, including violent assaults, vandalism, and harassment, increased dramatically after 9/11 (Culcer, 2003; Human Rights Watch, 2008). According to the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR), anti-Muslim incidents of violence and discrimination continued to rise in following years (Boorstein, 2006). Anti-Muslim violence and discrimination has prompted the use of the term “Islamophobia” to describe the unfounded fear of and hostility towards Islam (Esposito, 2006)<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> For example, the leaders of Iran, Libya, Syria, and Egypt, as well as Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat condemned the attacks.

<sup>71</sup> Much has been written since 9/11 about the “hijacking” of Islam by extremists groups, as well as the appropriate response of the Muslim community (e.g., El Fadl, 2005).

<sup>72</sup> For interesting discussions of “Why do they hate us?” see Telhami (2002) and Kohut & Stokes (2006).

<sup>73</sup> Esposito (2006) encourages the use of the term “Islamophobia” in order to raise general awareness and sensitivity to the prejudice and discrimination faced by Muslims, in much the same way that the term “anti-Semitism” has helped raise awareness about discrimination against Jews.

Many American Muslims felt the harsh and lingering backlash of September 11.<sup>74</sup>

The Carnegie Corporation released a report shortly after the attacks that highlighted the challenges faced by the nation's Muslim population (Afridi, 2001). The report found that "Muslims are prone to negative stereotypes, ethnic profiling, and attacks equating Islam with terrorism and radicalism" (Afridi, 2001, p. 1). Rizvi (2004) contends that Muslims in the U.S. are subject to conflicting messages from the U.S. government:

On the one hand, the government has claimed repeatedly that its "war against terrorism" is not against the Muslim religion, and that it needs the support of Muslims everywhere to help it root out terrorism. At the same time, however, many within the government have hardly disguised their support of the popular discourse that casts Muslim and Arab communities in the USA as enemies in nativist terms, which suggests that they threaten not only the American way of life, but also the institutions of liberty and democracy (Rizvi, 2004, p. 167).

The Patriot Act, passed quickly in the wake of 9/11 and designed to protect the U.S. from further terrorist attacks, has been the source of problems for many Muslims. There are widespread claims that the Patriot Act adversely affects the civil rights of Muslims and Arabs more than other Americans, and creates what feels like "open season on Muslims" (Safi, 2005, p. 17).<sup>75</sup> A recent nationwide public opinion poll found that most American Muslims believe life has gotten more difficult since 9/11, and a quarter of those polled report being victims of anti-Muslim discrimination (Pew, 2007). Interestingly, one study of international college students found that the Muslim men

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<sup>74</sup> There is some discussion in the literature about the proper term to describe Americans of the Muslim faith. I use the term "American Muslims," although others prefer "Muslim Americans" or "Muslims in America." I chose this term because it is parallel to how I would describe those of other faiths, for example, "American Christians."

<sup>75</sup> The full name of the USA PATRIOT Act is the "Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism Act of 2001." It was enacted to "deter and punish terrorist acts in the United States and around the world, to enhance law enforcement investigatory tools, and for other purposes." (H.R. 3162, 107<sup>th</sup> Congress, 1<sup>st</sup> Session) Ba-Yunis and Kone (2006) document many stories of Muslims' treatment under the Patriot Act.

encountered little prejudice in the campus environment, but all had experienced a backlash against Muslims in more casual contact outside of the campus (Culcer, 2003).

### ***Views of the American Public on Muslims and Islam***

The results of public opinion polls present a challenging environment for Muslims in the U.S. A 2006 Washington Post/ABC News Poll reported that “nearly half of Americans (46%) have a negative view of Islam, seven percentage points higher than in the tense months after September 11, 2001 attacks” (Deane & Fears, 2006, p. A01). The same poll found that the number of Americans who think Muslims are prone to violence has doubled since 2001, and one-third of those polled said that they had recently heard prejudiced comments about Muslims. A USA Today/Gallup Poll (Saad, 2006) found that 44% of Americans thought that Muslims were too extreme in their religious beliefs, nearly one quarter of those polled said they would not want a Muslim as a neighbor, and 31% said they would feel nervous if they noticed a Muslim man with them on an airplane. Thirty-nine percent of respondents in the same study were in favor of requiring Muslims, including U.S. citizens, to carry special identification cards.

The continued prevalence of negative attitudes towards Islam was evident in the run-up to the 2008 presidential election, as opponents of presidential candidate Barack Obama tried to link him to Islam and terrorism based largely on his middle name and his childhood years in Indonesia (Hosseini, 2008; Rich, 2008). Upon endorsing Obama for president, former Secretary of State Colin Powell noted the attempts to associate Obama with Islam and asked, “Is there something wrong with being a Muslim in this country? . . . Is there something wrong with some seven-year-old Muslim American kid believing that he or she could become president?” (DiYoung, 2008, p. A6).

Steven Kull, Director of the Program on International Policy Attitudes (PIPA) at the University of Maryland, cautions that American attitudes towards the Muslim world are complex (Kull, 2007). In general, American attitudes towards Muslim countries are fairly neutral, but more negative towards particular countries, such as Iran and Saudi Arabia. Significantly, knowing someone who is Muslim corresponds with more favorable attitudes. For instance, respondents in one study who were personally acquainted with a Muslim were less likely to object to having a Muslim as a neighbor and less likely to favor extra airport security measures (Saad, 2006). This finding was confirmed in a recent study by the Pew Research Center (August 2009), in which respondents with more familiarity with Islam, particularly knowing someone who is Muslim, viewed Islam more favorably than those without such familiarity. In particular, familiarity with Islam was associated with being less likely to see Islam as a violent religion.

The same Pew Research Center study (August 2009) found that 65% of non-Muslim Americans thought that Islam was somewhat or very different than their own religion, a higher percentage than those that thought Buddhism or Hinduism was different than their own religion. Given that the majority of Americans are Christian and the common history of the Abrahamic faiths, this is a curious finding. The study also found that respondents who viewed another religion as more similar to their own also held more favorable views of members of those groups. Both familiarity with Islam (including knowing a Muslim) and seeing similarities between Islam and one's own faith were associated with more positive views of Islam and Muslims.

Americans are not unaware of discrimination towards Muslims in the U.S. The Pew Research Center (August 2009) found that nearly 60% of Americans think that Muslims in the U.S. face a lot of discrimination, more than other religious groups in the U.S. There is evidence, however, that Americans reject the inevitability of violent conflict between the U.S. and the Muslim cultures (the “clash of civilizations”), and believe that it is possible to find common ground (Saad, 2006). Another public opinion poll found that a majority of Americans favored an increase in public diplomacy programs to promote international understanding between the U.S. and the Muslim world (Kull, 2006).

### ***The Muslim World and the U.S.***

How do Muslims in other countries view the U.S.? The “Muslim world” is extremely diverse, so it is nearly impossible to make generalizations. There are more than one billion Muslims in the world, and most of them do not live in the Middle East. Still, public opinion polls reveal some interesting findings. A 2002 survey of five Arab nations found that majorities in all five countries had favorable views of American freedom and democracy, American products, and (important to the exchange programs) American education (Telhami, 2002). On the other hand, there was widespread disapproval of U.S. foreign policy. Telhami (2002) suggests the root of the resentment towards the U.S. lies in American policies, not American values. These findings were reinforced by two more recent polls that found strong support for democracy among Muslims, as well as many shared values between Muslims and Americans (Kull, 2007; Pew, 2006).

Differences between the U.S. and Muslim world should not be glossed over, however. While Muslims around the world may believe in shared values, a recent

worldwide poll reports that many Muslims perceive a moral decay and breakdown of traditional values in Western countries (Gallup Press, 2008). The Pew Research Center study (2006) revealed that Muslim opinions about the West worsened by overwhelming margins from the previous year, and large percentages in nearly every country attributed negative traits, such as violence, immorality, and selfishness, to Westerners.

Furthermore, a public opinion poll conducted in seventeen countries, revealed that respondents in some Middle Eastern countries were more likely to attribute the 9/11 attacks to the United States or Israel, rather than to al-Qaeda. Only 23% of the respondents in Indonesia thought that al-Qaeda was responsible for the attacks (World Public Opinion, 2008). Another poll found, however, that Islamist extremism was a concern shared by both Muslims and Western publics (Pew, 2006). According to a recent Gallup poll, the most critical steps that Westerners can take towards improving relations with the Muslim world are to improve attitudes towards Muslims and to show respect for Islam (Gallup Press, 2008).

### *American Muslims*

Most experts agree that the Muslim population in the U.S. is growing – through immigration, conversion, and a relatively high birthrate (Bukhari, 2007). Surprisingly, though, what scholars and activists cannot agree on is the size of the American Muslim population. Organizations have estimated this number using very different methodologies and resulting in estimates ranging from slightly more than one million to nearly eight million (Afridi, 2001; Pew, 2007).<sup>76</sup> The Pew Research Center (October

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<sup>76</sup> Part of the reason that we know so little about the number of Muslims in the U.S. is that the U.S. Census Bureau does not collect data on religious affiliation, and the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services does not ask the religion of immigrants and naturalized citizens. Based on survey data, the Pew Research

2009) estimates the current number at about 2.5 million, comprising approximately .8% of the U.S. population.<sup>77</sup> What we do know is that the American Muslim community reflects the diversity of the Islamic world. Indeed, it has been suggested that the U.S. has the most ethnically diverse Muslim community in the world (Afridi, 2001). Muslims in the U.S. reflect substantial ethnic, national, and linguistic differences.

The largest segment of the American Muslim community (roughly two-thirds) is made up of recent immigrants, but there are also substantial numbers of third and fourth generation Muslims, as well as converts to the religion (Pew, 2007). Among Muslims born in the U.S., slightly more than half are African American (Pew, 2007). The majority of American Muslims are of the Sunni tradition, but Shia and Sufi are also represented (Afridi, 2001).

Despite the fact that many Muslims are relatively recent immigrants, the Pew (2007) study showed that they are highly assimilated into American society. Most are middle class and about half have college educations. A strong majority say they “do not see a conflict between being a devout Muslim and living in a modern society” (Pew, 2007, p. 2). According to a report by the U.S. Institute of Peace (Huda, 2006) American Muslims do not feel marginalized (as do many Muslims in Europe). American Muslims have established a wide variety of political, social, educational, professional and human

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Center estimated the U.S. Muslim population at 2.3 million in 2007, similar to estimates gleaned from other surveys such as the General Social Survey (Pew, 2007). Ba-Yunis and Kone (2006) set the number much higher, at more than 5.7 million. They arrived at this estimate through an extensive survey of mosques, Islamic centers, and schools. Many Islamic groups use estimates ranging from 5-8 million. Safi (2005) states that there are now as many Muslims as Jews in the U.S., a number he puts at 6 million. The Pew Research Center (2007) provides an interesting discussion of this ongoing debate about size of the American Muslim population. Bukhari (2007) calls on leaders from all religious groups to urge the Census Bureau to include a question about religious affiliation in the 2010 census.

<sup>77</sup> This 2009 estimate by the Pew Research Center is based on their 2007 survey and estimates of population growth over time. The October 2009 study estimates the global Muslim population at 1.57 billion, 62% of which live in Asia.

rights organizations that are interconnected with the larger fabric of American society. In general, American Muslims have a positive view of American life and “wish to be part of the mainstream” (Zogby, 2004, p. 7). They are also a politically active group and believe that their Muslim identity is important to their voting decisions. Asked about the war on terror, a large majority of American Muslims (76%) recommended a strategy of changing U.S. policy in the Middle East (Zogby, 2004).

While engaging in mainstream American life, Muslims often feel that they are viewed as “others” and subject to negative attitudes and stereotypes. A study released by the American Psychological Association concluded that post 9/11 harassment and discrimination were correlated with increased mental health problems of Muslims and Arab-Americans” (Elias, 2006). Moreover, Muslim women who wear the hijab, or head covering, are more likely than those who don’t cover, to report name-calling and discrimination (Elias, 2006; Sirin & Fine, 2008). Although the majority of American Muslim respondents to a 2004 public opinion poll had not directly experienced anti-Muslim discrimination, most stated that they knew someone who had (Zogby, 2004). Respondents also reported that “American society overall is disrespectful and intolerant of their culture” (Zogby, 2004, p. 7).

Cateura (2005) argues that by and large Muslims have remained outside the mainstream American culture, “not part of the country’s accepted Judeo-Christian montage...Many of us do not really know them and have not stopped to pay attention” (p. 6). For instance, polls show that most Americans do not differentiate between Muslims and Arabs, although most Muslims are not of Arab descent, and many Arabs are not

Muslim (Deane & Fears, 2006).<sup>78</sup> One positive by-product of the horrific attacks of 9/11 is that many Americans have come to realize that they need to learn more about Islam. At the same time, the Muslim community has become more active in reaching out to educate others about their faith. A number of Muslim groups, including the Council on American Islamic Relations (CAIR)<sup>79</sup> and the Muslim Public Affairs Council (MPAC) are working to promote more positive images of Muslims and positive relations with other Americans. Recently, the Pew Research Center (August 2009) found that significantly more Americans (41%) could identify both the Muslim name for God and the name of the Islamic holy book than could do so in 2003 (31%). While this arguably demonstrates only surface understanding of Islam, it is a step in the right direction. In the post 9/11 world, “It is increasingly vital for Americans to develop a better understanding of Islam and for Muslims to become more fully a part of the structures of American democracy” (Afridi, 2001, p. 3).

### ***Islam in the U.S. Media***

The media has a powerful influence on how we interpret and understand the world around us – and the American media has rarely been kind to Islam (Haneef, 1996). Negative media images of Muslims and Arabs did not begin on 9/11, but prior to that time, Islam was probably under the radar for most Americans.

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<sup>78</sup> Due to lack of reliable data, it is difficult to gauge the overlap between the Arab and Muslim communities in the U.S., but it is clear that they are not one in the same.

<sup>79</sup> Some Muslim organizations, including CAIR, have come under suspicion for having ties to international terrorist organizations. CAIR officials say they are being targeted by right-wing anti-Islamic extremists. In 2007, Senator Barbara Boxer rescinded an award given to a CAIR official, citing troubling details about the organization (Khalil, 2007).

In an article written before September 11, Shaheen (2000) describes the overwhelmingly negative portrayal of Arabs in the American mass media. He says that images of Arabs as violent, scary, dirty, sneaky, and sometimes rich have filled the mass media from cartoons to movies for decades, fueling hatred, fear, and suspicion. The media also portrays women from Muslim countries as oppressed, and the Islamic veil or head covering is often seen as a symbol of that oppression. Al-Maryati and Issa (2002) charge that the Western media has reduced Muslim female identity to an article of clothing – the veil and the fixation on the veil makes it difficult for Westerners to see beyond the veil to the more important issues facing Muslim women – or to their individual identities. In a recent study of Muslim American youth, the majority of the participants felt that their culture and their religion were not respected in the media (Sirin & Fine, 2008). The participants also felt that the media portrayed Islam as a violent and frightening religion, a picture that did not reflect how they understood their own religion.

Qualitative and quantitative analysis of visuals in the media have confirmed the continued dominance of the stereotypes of violent Muslim men and oppressed Muslim women (Nacos & Torres-Reyna, 2007). Moreover, positive images of Muslims in the media, particularly on television, are few and far between. Safi (2005) remarks,

There is no shortage of Muslims on TV, but most occasions are in the context of either terrorism or political leaders of other countries. Both reinforce the stereotype of Muslims as quintessentially “other,” fundamentally different from “us” Americans. (p. 16)

The news media reports almost daily on violence carried out in the name of Islam, particularly by suicide bombers, reinforcing the impression that Islam is an inherently violent religion. In the words of one teenager,

Most of the stuff that you see on the news, on TV, in the papers, about Muslims, it's not me . . . and it's probably not any of the 99 percent of Muslims I've met. They are going to sensationalize stories and they are not going to talk about the average person living in our age . . . (Sirin & Fine, 2008, p. 75).

Since conflict is often deemed the most important criteria for determining what is newsworthy (Roach, 1993), it is little wonder, that efforts to portray Islam as a peaceful religion are rendered largely invisible.<sup>80</sup>

### ***American Muslim Youth***

In an effort to understand the YES students' experiences at school, I looked for information about Islam in the classroom. Ayish (2006) maintains that U.S. high school curricula often ignores or does not properly reflect the culture and religion of Arab American Muslim students. This may result in lower self-esteem and reduced academic performance for those students who do not see their identity reflected in the curricula (Ayish, 2006). Textbooks, too, may ignore or misrepresent Islam and Islamic cultures. The Council on Islamic Education (2008) provides Islamic experts to review textbook manuscripts, conduct teacher training, and prepare study guides. They attempt to correct misinformation and negative images of Islam in textbooks and other teaching materials. However, textbooks are highly contested terrain.

In 2003, the American Textbook Council charged that middle and high school world history texts contained many inaccuracies and distortions, particularly relating to *jihad*, *sharia*, and the status of women (Sewall, 2003). The report argued that in the last two decades textbooks have gone from a neglect of Islamic history to self-censorship,

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<sup>80</sup> Christian and Lapinski (2003) examined the connection between media use and high school students' attitudes towards Muslims post 9/11. The research did not reveal a strong relationship between media use and negative attitudes. However, discussing the international news with parents was negatively related to

with the result that Islam is presented in an unrealistically *positive* light. The Council on Islamic Education immediately issued a rebuttal questioning Sewall's methodology and pointing out his bias towards Western civilization (Douglass, 2003). The issue of how Islam and Islamic civilizations are treated in textbooks and curricula remains controversial.

Discussing Islam in the classroom can also be problematic. According to one Muslim college professor, educators are "no longer sure which subjects are okay. We wonder which discussions of Islam or of Muslim communities might be read as an apology for violence or a justification for terrorist acts" (Keshavarz, 2006, p. 28). While the preceding comments concern the college classroom, it is not difficult to imagine that high school teachers might face the same issues. As for non-Muslim teachers, Ayish (2006) points out that teachers, "while not necessarily prejudiced against Arabs and Muslims are nevertheless aware of and affected by the kinds of stereotypes that exist about the group" (p. 83). He goes on to say that surprisingly little research has been conducted on the effects of negative stereotyping by individual teachers, and therefore we know little about the impact of such stereotyping on Muslim and Arab students. However, research on other groups (primarily, girls and African Americans) has demonstrated that when students are aware of negative stereotypes about a group with which they identify, their academic performance often suffers (Ayish, 2006).

It is no secret that Muslim students in U.S. high schools are often subject to the same prejudices and negative stereotypes from their peers at school as in the community at large (Sarroub, 2005). In the words of one high school student in Maryland, "Since

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endorsement of negative stereotypes, which points to an important role for parents in tempering the effects of mediated messages.

9/11 things seemed to change. I get the impression from everywhere that people think all Muslims are bad. But we haven't changed" (Choudhury, 2005 p. 107). After repeatedly being called a terrorist at school, one of the YES students in my cluster a few years ago tried to educate fellow students about Islam through an article he wrote for his school newspaper entitled, "Islam Does Not Mean Terrorism" (Heiba, 2005). Ayish (2006) found that in response to negative stereotypes and prejudice encountered at school, Arab American Muslims often attempted to educate their peers. Another common response (or coping mechanism) was joking. Ayish speculates that students chose to joke about stereotypes as a way of minimizing the negative impact on friendships and peer relationships.

Sirin and Fine (2008) conducted a study of Muslim American youth and how they negotiate their "hyphenated" identities as Muslims and Americans, both "joined and separated by history, politics, geography, biography, longings and losses" (p. 3). When asked what they would like to tell others about being Muslim American, the participants shared four main messages:

1. *Who Muslims are.* Messages to educate others about Islam, religion, culture, being Muslim, defining *jihad*, and Islam's principles of peace and justice.
2. *"It's tough to be Muslim in America"* Messages about the negative impact of racism, prejudice, ignorance, and stereotypes.
3. *"We are normal!"* Messages to remind other youth that "we are normal; we are American; we are just like you!"
4. *It's a balance and a struggle.* Messages about identity, balance, and the struggle of living between cultures. (Sirin & Fine, 2008, p. 51)

The majority of the participants wanted to educate others about Islam and their cultures. However, the researchers found that the young women were more likely to talk about education in response to negative encounters, while the young men focused more on "taking action and engaging with the American society politically and civically" (Sirin

& Fine, 2008, p. 183). Clearly, American Muslim youth are challenged every day as they struggle to maintain their cultural and religious identities, and at the same time try to “fit in” with their peers at school and in the community.

### ***Practicing Islam – A Brief Overview***

As noted above, Muslims in the U.S. and around the world are an extremely diverse group; it is their faith that binds them together. At this point, I will briefly discuss some of the tenets and traditions of Islam that are important as background to understanding the experiences of Muslim exchange students in the U.S. Historically, Muslims believe that in the year 610, the archangel Gabriel appeared to the Prophet Muhammad and over a number of years revealed the words of God or *Allah*, which became known as the *Qur’an*. The Qur’an, the holy book of Islam, is written in Arabic and is considered to be the actual words of *Allah*. Islam means “submission” in Arabic and refers to the followers’ submission to the will of God. It is also closely related to the Arabic word for “peace.” (Haneef, 1996). Islam is one of the three “Abrahamic” faiths, and shares a history and many of the traditions of Judaism and Christianity. As the newest of the three Abrahamic faiths, Islam recognizes and respects the Jewish and Christian faiths.

Islam requires that followers adhere to the Five Pillars of Islam (Haneef, 1996; Lippman, 1995):

1. Profession of Faith – The first pillar requires Muslims to profess that “There is no god except God, and Muhammad is the messenger of God.” Muslims worship only one God, the same God worshipped by Jews and Christians.

2. Ritual Prayer – Muslims are called upon to pray five times a day. In Islamic countries, the call to prayer (*adhan*) is usually broadcast from the mosque at the appointed times (which change each day). Prior to prayer, Muslims perform a ritual washing, or ablution. Women often put on special clothing to cover their bodies except for their hands and faces. Prayers may be conducted individually or in groups in almost location that is considered clean. Muslims face towards Mecca when praying, so a compass is useful if one is away from home. If an individual cannot pray at the appropriate time, some of the prayers may be combined or performed at a later time.
3. Almsgiving – *Zakat* refers to giving to those less fortunate. Based on an individual's income and possessions as well as a complex set of religious guidelines, *Zakat* is generally paid once a year. However, Muslims are expected to be charitable and help those in need throughout the year.
4. Fasting – During the month of *Ramadan*, Muslims are expected to refrain from eating or drinking, even water, from the first light of day until sundown. Ramadan is a time of self-discipline and reflection on the hardships of those less fortunate. Since Islam follows a lunar calendar, Ramadan begins approximately ten days earlier each year. The festival at the end of Ramadan, *Eid-al-Fitr*, is a joyous event involving feasting and the giving of gifts.
5. Pilgrimage – All Muslims are expected to make the pilgrimage, or *Hajj*, to Mecca at least once during their lifetime. The celebration at the end of the Hajj, *Eid-al-Adha*, marks the prophet Abraham's sacrifice, and is one of the most important Islamic festivals.

As Haneef (1996) points out, “Islam is not a mere belief system . . . Rather it is a total way of life, a complete system of governing all aspects of man’s existence, both individual and collective” (p, vii). Religion cannot be separated from daily life. For those who embrace Islam, the Qur’an, together with the *Hadith* and *sunnah* (which record the words and actions of the Prophet Mohammed), provide detailed guidance for everyday activities and interactions. In many respects, the moral teachings of Islam are similar to those of Judaism and Christianity (Lippman, 1995). Human life is sacred, and killing is a sin (unless in self-defense or in a war for Islam). Muslims are expected to help those less fortunate and live peacefully with their neighbors.

In the everyday realm of food, pork is considered to be unclean, and therefore should not be eaten. Muslims may eat other meat, but it should be prepared in accordance with Islamic law so that it is *halal*, or lawful to eat. However, some people hold that the since “the Qur’an is explicit in stating that food of Christians and Jews is lawful for Muslims, Muslims who live in Christian countries may eat commercial meat (apart from pork), pronouncing God’s name on it at the time of eating” (Haneef, 1996, p. 186). Muslims are also forbidden to drink alcohol.

Islam does not require any one style of dress, but rather requires Muslims to dress modestly. Many Muslim women choose to dress modestly in long sleeves and long pants or skirts, and wear a head covering. This tradition of covering is called *hijab*, a word which comes from the Arabic word “to cover.” The manner of covering varies widely from one country or culture to another, from a simple head scarf to a complete head-to-toe garment. Girls often begin to wear the hijab during their teenage years when they make a commitment to follow the teachings of Islam. It is also a way to deflect unwanted

sexual attention and preserve their bodies for their husbands. While viewed as a source of oppression by some (and often by those in the West), many women choose to wear the hijab as an outward manifestation of their faith, and find it more liberating than constraining (Haneef, 1996).<sup>81</sup>

Finally, it is important to note that Islam, like all religions, is deeply entwined with culture. While all Muslims subscribe to the same basic beliefs, religious practices vary widely from one country and culture to another. Islam around the world is overlaid by such diverse political, economic, and social factors that making generalizations about all Muslims, or the “Muslim world,” is quite difficult. For the purposes of this study, then, one must recognize that Muslim exchange students, who come from many different countries and cultures, carry with them the influences of their unique cultures and families, and do not necessarily possess a uniform understanding of what it means to be Muslim in their own countries, or in the U.S.

### ***Conclusion***

The YES students spend a school year in the U.S. at a time of heightened tension between Islam and the U.S. Since 9/11, public opinion polls in Islamic countries, including many of the home countries of the YES students, reveal decidedly negative views of U.S. policies, although significantly, not of American values. American Muslims have long been subject to negative stereotypes, created and reinforced by the media. After September 11, discrimination, harassment, and hostility against Muslims

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<sup>81</sup> In English usage, there does not seem to be much consistency in whether or not to use the article “the” before the word *hijab*. *Hijab* may refer to a single piece of clothing (requiring the article), or to multiple pieces of clothing or a manner of dress (not requiring the article). Since most Muslim women who cover their heads also dress modestly, it does not greatly impact the meaning. For this paper, I generally use the article.

and Arabs in the U.S. increased. Today, many Americans hold negative views of Islam, and few non-Muslims know much about the religion at all. Our schools teach little about Islamic history and culture, and many textbooks probably present an unbalanced view of the religion. Few would deny that this is challenging time for teenagers of the Muslim faith to spend a year in the U.S. On the other hand, there is some cause for optimism. The events of 9/11 and the resulting backlash against Muslims brought issues of diversity, democracy, and freedom to the forefront of public discourse. Many people and groups are actively promoting positive relations between Muslims and people of other faiths. The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as ongoing conflicts in the Middle East, make the task of building global peace all the more urgent. And many hold on to the hope that youth exchange can make a real contribution to that process.

## **Chapter 6: Becoming a YES Exchange Student**

In the next five chapters, I address my first research question: How do Muslim high school exchange students make meaning of their exchange experience in the U.S.? My aim is to capture, through rich description, the essence of what it is like to be a Muslim exchange student in the U.S. in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. I use many direct quotes to allow the students to speak for themselves as much as possible. I have also attempted to present the research findings in a way that brings forth similarities, and at the same time reflects the richness and variation of the students' individual experiences.

I begin this chapter with some background information about the students, including their international and interfaith connections. I then present some examples of the support and concerns of the students' natural parents, followed by a brief look at the types of schools the students attended in their home countries. Next, I examine how the students practiced Islam in their own countries, including prayers and Ramadan traditions. I then present the students' thoughts surrounding the events of September 11, 2001. Finally, I discuss the students' motivations for participating in the exchange and some of their initial expectations about life in the U.S.

### ***Backgrounds of the Students***

The exchange students participating in this study were between 16 and 19 years of age at the time of the interviews (some were only 15 when they arrived in the U.S.). The students lived with American host families and attended high school for the 2007-2008 school year. The participants came from the following eight countries: Egypt, Ghana,

India, Indonesia, the Philippines, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Thailand, with the majority being from Indonesia. They represented eight different countries, but sometimes different cultural and linguistic groups within their countries. There were more than twice as many young women as young men in the study. (Refer to Appendix 1 for a list of students.)

In the course of the interviews, the students revealed that quite a few had some international experience or connections. Of the twenty-one students in this study, four had traveled to the U.S. with their families prior to the exchange (Emad, Ismeena, Yara, and Yusef), and two others (Lila and Nisa) had traveled to other countries with their families. Four students (Emad, Firas, and Lila from Saudi Arabia, and Khalil from Turkey) had a parent or sibling who attended college in the U.S. Three students (Mifta, Lila, and Anggita) had a parent who taught English at a high school or college. Two of Ismeena's sisters from Egypt visited her during the exchange year, and Wafa's mother from Turkey visited for several weeks at the end of the year (she was visiting at the time of the interview).

In addition to the international connections, four of the students (from Ghana, Indonesia, Thailand, and the Philippines) had close family connections to Christianity. Amar, Aya, and Nura had mothers who were brought up as Christians, but converted to Islam before their marriages. Kalia's grandmother on her father's side is Christian. Amar's maternal grandfather is a Methodist minister. As discussed above, Amar was brought up as a Muslim, but converted to Christianity shortly before his arrival in the U.S. I point out these international and interfaith connections because they probably set this group of students apart from the general public in their home countries. Participation

in the YES program requires parental permission, and it seems likely that parents who have more travel experience (including to the U.S.), as well as experience with other cultures and religious traditions, would look more favorably upon, or even encourage, their sons and daughters to participate in the exchange. Many of the parents did express hesitations and concerns about the exchange to their children, but those whose families had these international and interfaith experiences seemed to be more supportive (as reported by the students) than the others.

It is important to remember that the YES program scholarships are not awarded on the basis of financial need. Students come from a range of socioeconomic classes. I did not have access to information about the socioeconomic status of participants in this study (nor did I ask questions about it in the interview), but it was clear from the interviews that at least some of the students with international connections also came from fairly well-off families, which afforded them more opportunities for travel. The four students from Saudi Arabia, for instance, talked about having large homes and domestic help, such as maids and drivers, at home. These students all had travel experience and/or family members who had lived in the U.S. Students from other countries, however, talked about their backgrounds in a way that reflected a variety of socioeconomic situations.

### ***Natural Families – Support and Concerns***

By and large, the students reported that their parents were supportive of their participation in the exchange. This is not surprising since their parents had to give permission for their participation in the exchange (including signing consent forms and writing supportive statements). Several students said that their parents were very proud

of them for being selected for the program. Others commented that their parents saw the exchange program as an opportunity that would lead them to a better future. Several students mentioned that their parents were interested in the program goals of promoting better understanding between Muslims and the U.S. Ahmed's parents, like others, were supportive for a number of these reasons:

When I told them about the idea at first, they were like, "Go!" They wanted me to go because they thought it's a good thing to do, especially that I'm almost done with school and a year like this could add me a lot of things that I wouldn't get anywhere else . . . At the educational level, they thought I would study in a different country . . . so that would give me an experience that can help me in studying when I come back. And, when they knew that this program is all about what happened after 9/11 and the peace thing, they believed in that too.  
(Ahmed, Egypt)

Although the students' parents were generally supportive, many of them had concerns about their children spending a school year in the U.S. According to the students, many of their parents voiced concerns about their safety and welfare, as well as being separated for year. As Emad stated, "My mom, well, she's a mom and she doesn't want me to go – but she wants me to go. She has mixed-up feelings about that." Several students remarked that the representatives of the exchange program helped to ease their parents' worries. Rani's parents, for example, were not initially supportive, but in the end they allowed her to join the exchange:

Well, I have typical Muslim parents and I would say like they won't allow their daughter to go overseas and stay for an entire year because a year is a long time. I've never been far away from home before . . . and they [said] "You are not going to survive. You are still like a little child. How are you gonna survive?" So he [her father] thought . . . and he knew that I'm not going to get this opportunity again. He said, "Well, I know you and you will protect yourself, and I know AFS or PAX will give you a host family. So you will be in a family and a nice house, so there is no negative points that I'm seeing right now." (Rani, India)

In addition to concerns about the general safety and well-being, some of the students reported that their parents were worried about how they would be treated by Americans. Parents were keenly aware of the complex and difficult relations between the U.S. and the Muslim world, and were concerned that their sons and daughters might be the object of ridicule or discrimination:

At first they were kind of afraid because the stereotype of America is not good in my country. A lot of people hate Americans and a lot of people hate Bush . . . I'm sure that my parents were kind of afraid of letting me go here with all the perspectives of bad Americans in my country. (Nisa, Indonesia)

Mostly my family was worried about me. Especially after September 11, there was stereotyping about Muslims. And then I'm wearing hijab and I show to the people that I represent Muslims, [and] some people still think that Muslims are terrorists. (Israa, Indonesia)

Parents of girls who wore the Islamic covering or *hijab* expressed concerns that their daughters would be more visible as Muslims, and therefore be subject to increased negative reactions of Americans. In one case, the parents encouraged their daughter *not* to wear the hijab during the exchange year for this reason. In another, the student's mother worried that her daughter would face so much pressure that she would want to remove the hijab. (Both of these girls, however, wore the hijab for the entire exchange year.)

A few students said their parents were worried about how they would practice their religion in the U.S. Would they have access to a mosque? Would they pray five times a day? Other students said their parents had no concerns related to religion. Khalil related an extraordinary story that reflected his parents' openness to other religions:

When I become ten or something, my parents talked to me and they gave me a Torah and a Bible and a Qur'an. They want me to read these and they said, "You can choose what you want to believe, or what you don't want to believe."

Actually, I didn't read all of them, but like most of them. And they said, "You can like believe what you want to believe." (Khalil, Turkey)

Although many of the students said their parents had some concerns, overall the students felt that their parents were supportive of their decision to join the exchange program. Many students also related that in the initial weeks of the exchange they were able to communicate their experiences to their parents in a way that allayed most of their worries and concerns.

### ***Going to School***

Although it is beyond the scope of this study to describe the variety of school systems in each country, it is important to note that schools attended by the exchange students ranged from secular schools in Turkey, in which the outward manifestation of religion, such as wearing the hijab, was strictly forbidden, to single-sex religious boarding schools as described by Ermy from Indonesia:

In Indonesia, actually I don't live with my family because I am going to boarding school, and I live there like forever I think [laughing]. But we have to come back home like once per month. Actually, I go to school there because I can be like more mature and learn more about my religion. (Ermy, Indonesia)

Even within one country, such as Indonesia, the students attended different types of schools. While some of the students received religious instruction and practiced their religion daily in the company of fellow-students, others maintained a much stricter separation between their education and their religious lives. Several of students talked about being too busy with school to pray or go to the mosque regularly. Aya's comments point to a kind of trade-off between education and religion, in which at least temporarily (and presumably with parental approval), religious practices took a back-seat to schooling:

Back home I was never religious . . . I don't have much time because like 6:40 to 5:30 I have to go to school, so I believe I couldn't pray five times a day. I sometimes pray like every morning, but sometimes I don't really have the time because I wake up late and I'm like, "Oh my God, I have an hour and thirty minutes to travel to school and I only have thirty minutes left!" When I was a freshman, that's the time I became so busy, so I didn't really have time. I even stopped going to weekend religious school because I was so busy. I really didn't have time. (Aya, Philippines)

Most of the students described the curriculum in their schools as being fairly rigid, with little room for personal selection of courses. In addition, many commented that students in their schools remained in the same classroom during the day while the teachers moved from one classroom to another:

Like in Turkey, we are always in the same classroom. If we have 100 students for a class then we have four classrooms and there are 25 students in every classroom. They all have the same schedule. And we're always in the same classroom, but teachers move. (Wafa, Turkey)

### ***Practicing Religion at Home***

In order to appreciate what it is like to be a Muslim exchange student in the U.S., it is helpful to understand how the students practiced Islam in their home countries. As one might expect given the many countries and cultures represented, the students reported significant variation in their religious practices. Some students prayed five times each day (one of the five pillars of Islam), but others admitted, often in an apologetic tone, that they did not pray regularly. Some, especially the young men, said they went to mosque every day, or at least every Friday. Other students, however, reported that they rarely went to the mosque.

Often the students' responses seemed to reflect religious practices common in their home countries. The three boys from Saudi Arabia, for instance, described praying

five times each day, as well as going to mosque regularly. Their families both expected and reminded them to participate in these religious practices each day:

Back home, my mom always remind me. “Firas, time to pray or go to mosque.” I say, “Yes, ma’am!” I go to mosque every day. It’s right near my house.  
(Firas, Saudi Arabia)

However, Wafa and Khalil both from Turkey, said they did not pray five times a day, and Wafa talked about not being permitted to pray or wear the hijab in school:

I don’t pray for five times a day. I don’t pray when I’m in Turkey too. I mean, I’m supposed to do it as being a Muslim, but I don’t do it because I don’t really have any time. Like, we don’t have any time to do that because in our schools we are not allowed to practice this for five times a day. We are not even allowed to have a scarf in our heads and go to school. Even if we had one, we have to take them out, but I’ve never had one. (Wafa, Turkey)

Many of the students described how the Islamic call to prayer, the *adhan*, is part of their daily life in their home countries. They are accustomed to hearing and responding to the call to prayer at the appropriate times each day:

It’s so different in my country. When it’s prayer time there’s like speakers. There’s a mosque in every neighborhood and you can hear from the speaker the *adhan*. (Lila, Saudi Arabia)

Lila reported that she prayed at home five times a day, but did not go to the mosque regularly in Saudi Arabia. The young women from other countries also said that they were not expected to go to the mosque as often as the men. Most of them talked about praying at home, and sometimes at school depending on what type of school they attended. The exception seemed to be during Ramadan, when women would go to the mosque more regularly, sometimes daily, to break the fast. Aya also pointed out that women do not attend the mosque during their monthly menstrual cycle:

What really stops them [women] from going is their monthly period. It’s really unsanitary to go . . . You’re not going to be able to touch anything related to your religion. You couldn’t touch the Qur’an. (Aya, Philippines)

## Ramadan

Ramadan, the month of fasting, is one of the five pillars of Islam. All of the Muslim students in this study said they had fasted during Ramadan at home, although Khalil from Turkey said they he had fasted “just a couple times.” In their home countries, the students had the support of their families and communities during the month-long fast. The fasting, as Emad pointed out, “sort of reminds you of the poor and hungry.” The students also described Ramadan, particularly breaking the fast with family and friends, as a special time. During Ramadan it is not permitted to eat or drink during the daylight hours, so families prepare and eat meals together before sunrise and after sunset each day. The morning meal, according to Rani, is generally “like a dinner – a good, heavy meal so you can survive the whole day.” Nisa described a typical morning routine during Ramadan:

Our whole family, we wake up in the middle of the night, well not really the middle, about 3:00 in the morning or 4:00. And we eat together, even though when my mom, she didn’t fast, but she still get up and prepare meals and everything. (Nisa, Indonesia)

The evening meal was also special. Rani related how her family would break the fast in the evening:

And they would pray, and they would listen, and the moment that it’s time, because we have the mosque and it’s really close, and they would announce so you would hear it in the house. So, yeah, we would start eating and everybody is eating and going crazy! And this is just so much fun during Ramadan. (Rani, India)

She went on to describe a typical evening meal:

We would usually have like two or three dishes and two or three desserts and salads and drinks. It’s kind of a big meal for us. Ramadan is like a treat for us. Even though you don’t eat [during the day], evening food is awesome! (Rani, India)

Students who attended largely Muslim schools in their home countries did not describe difficulties with fasting during school hours because most of their peers were fasting and school schedules were often adjusted to accommodate the fast. A few students who attended school with many non-Muslims remarked that it was more difficult to adhere to the fast when their friends were not fasting.

### Wearing the Hijab

The Islamic head covering is known in Arabic as *hijab*, although it is referred to by different names in other languages. Six of the young women in this study, four from Indonesia and two from Thailand, wore the hijab both in their home countries and during their year in the U.S. (covering their hair and necks, but not their faces). Aya, from the Philippines, wore the hijab for a short time in the Philippines and occasionally during her stay in the U.S. Collectively, I will sometimes refer to the girls who wear the hijab as *hijabis* – a recently adopted, but widely-used term (Sarroub, 2005) that avoids the longer phrase “girls who wear the hijab.”<sup>82</sup>

The girls described the decision to wear the hijab as an important demonstration of their personal commitment to Islam. In some cases, wearing the hijab was encouraged or expected by their parents:

I start to wear the hijab when I was 12 or 10 or so, at that time. My family is pretty strict. I mean, pretty strict, but not strict, strict. We're always serious about like praying and reading Qur'an and like wearing hijab. (Yara, Thailand)

In other cases, the girls remarked that friends, rather than family, were more influential in their decision to wear the hijab:

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<sup>82</sup> “The Hijabi Monologues,” a take-off on the well-known production, “The Vagina Monologues,” shares the stories of American Muslim women who wear the hijab. The show has been touring the U.S. for more than a year, including performances in 2009 at the Kennedy Center.

Back home really my family is not a religious family. Then I decide to wear hijab when I was 15, just because one of my friends inspired me to wear this. So I can say that this hijab is based on my heart and finally now my parents back home adopt like the Islamic culture and we think that wearing the hijab is like part of the culture. Mostly people in my family are wearing hijab. (Israa, Indonesia)

And actually, my Grandma from my father's side back in Indonesia is Christian. So, that's right, my family is not really religious in Islam. So the first time I decided to wear my hijab and I asked to my father at that time, he was concerned. I mean, my father is Muslim, but he said, "Just be national, Kalia. You don't have to show to everybody that you are Muslim. What do you have to do? Pray five times a day and fasting in certain time and everything, but you don't have to show that." But the thing was, I feel comfortable about this. I feel safe. And then my friend inspired me, yes, but it was just like it comes from my heart. So I decided to wear hijab, and finally my dad [said], "Well, if that is something that you really want to do, then do it." (Kalia, Indonesia)

For all of the girls, wearing the hijab was seen as an outward sign of their commitment to Islam. As Dana explains below, the hijab is a public statement about their religion, one which was important to the girls in their home countries, long before they came to the U.S.:

I start to wear my hijab since I was 15 . . . There is my friend inspired me to do that. She said, "You know, you wear a hijab you will still look nice, and then it's easier to identify who you are," which is I'm a Muslim. And then every single people that see me will know that I'm a Muslim . . . I think that I can be totally focused to my religion which is that Islam for me is no joke. It's my life. It's not . . . you know, I'm a Muslim and it's not only my identity, but it's your choice. And you become a Muslim and you have to deal with everything. To wear scarf is actually mentioned in our Holy book, in Qur'an, that every woman have to cover their body except their face and their hands, right? . . . And when you're being a Muslim it's really like, you know, you feel like I want to totally be a Muslim and then cover all these. (Dana, Indonesia)

Aya described how she wore the hijab for a short time in the Philippines, but quit wearing it because she didn't feel that she was ready to make this serious commitment to her religion:

I'm usually wearing my veil when I was in sixth grade. But I just realized that I'm not too ready to do it during that time because I said, "Oh my God, if I'm just going to wear this and not be like . . . not behave like a Muslim, then I add up a

pile of my sins.” So I said, “Well, I’m not just going to wear it.” Never mind, because I was behaving like . . . [laughing] like laughing audibly! . . . So you couldn’t really laugh audibly when you wear your veil. Like that’s our practice. I don’t know about other countries, but like in our practice, when you wear a veil you should behave like a Muslim. (Aya, Philippines)

The girls emphasized that they felt attractive and fashionable wearing the hijab – like “normal” teenagers:

I wear hijab, but I like to have some fashion for me, so . . . I wear hijab because it’s part of my religion but I don’t think I have to wear it so I have to make myself look ugly or something . . . I just wear it and I just have my fashion, like normal, like regular girls, teenagers. (Yara, Thailand)

. . . and then when I wear my hijab, it doesn’t feel like, you know, like I’m not sexy [laughing] or I’m not pretty or something . . . I still feel like a woman and pretty and stuff like that. (Dana, Indonesia)

The hijabi all agreed that wearing the hijab and dressing modestly provides protection against unwanted sexual attention. Dana talked about how the hijab makes her feel safe:

I wear hijab especially because every single curve in our body and then our body, except for our face and our hands, are just for our husband and our family. And I don’t need to show all of this part of my body to like another people – it’s not for them. I just feel safe when I wear my scarf, which is they won’t see my boobs [laughing] and I won’t worry about thinking they are . . . I just feel safe, I feel confident. (Dana, Indonesia)

Dana went on to describe how the hijab is also a reminder of her commitment to Islam and the behavior required by her religion:

I have really curly hair and I think I look prettier with the hijab. And it’s not just because you want to look good, but when you wear hijab you have deal with it. It’s like not a freedom. I want to explain. You cannot be like so close with a man and with the boys, like you will not hug and kiss them like that because you are wearing hijab. It’s something that you are proud and shows you are a Muslim and you have to keep your good attitude and behave . . . it is not just the heart, it is everything. (Dana, Indonesia)

The hijabis also talked about how in the Islamic tradition, women are valued and held in high regard. Ermy remarked, “Women in Islam is kind of like diamond, so they have to cover their selves for their husband.”

### *September 11, 2001*

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 provided the impetus for the YES program. However, in 2001 the exchange students in this study were quite young, between the ages of nine and eleven. Although they were young, many of the students had memories of that day. For Lila, the attacks were very frightening:

[September 11<sup>th</sup>] was scary, really scary, especially that my brother was in New York, and he came one week before it happened. And he was going to stay that week and he was in the same building, or he went to the building a lot or something. So we were like, “Thank God you came back,” and everyone was so scared. I remember I was studying and suddenly the news was like everywhere. Then my mom called me and we were like watching the news the whole day and it was really scary. (Lila, Saudi Arabia)

None of the other students said that their families were personally affected, but they shared how their feelings about, and understanding of, the terrorist attacks evolved over time (and as they matured). For example, Ahmed was not concerned at first, but later came to understand the attacks as a terrible thing:

When the 9/11 attacks happened, I was . . . a little kid . . . And, as influenced by my family and stuff because I was still a kid, I wasn't that sad that this happened. I was like, “Okay, so?” But then I realize when I grew up and started reading about it, that that was a horrible thing, especially that these people claim that they are Muslims and they are doing this for Islam, which is actually not true because it's forbidden in Islam to do something like that. And then I realized how horrible that a lot of people died . . . and a lot of people's lives have changed after that, and we're just sitting down here doing nothing about it. (Ahmed, Egypt)

Nisa described a similar thought pattern:

I watch on the TV, 9/11 when the WTC [World Trade Center] was crashed, I watched that. I remember I was 11 years old . . . I thought that was really not

good. It was awful! I didn't really think about it at the time when I watch it. I just think, "Okay, it crashed, so?" I didn't know what to do – it's not my country. But like the post-effect that I got was when I read a newspaper and magazine, when I read the Internet or whatever, I felt like it's such a great effect that was caused by 9/11. (Nisa, Indonesia)

All of the students said they believed that the terrorist attacks of September 11 were the actions of a few extremists (some used the term "crazy people"), and did not represent Islam or the majority of Muslims. In the words of Lila, "They're not really Muslims, they're terrorists." Khalil shared his feelings, as well as his father's reaction to the attacks:

I think it was terrible. It wasn't about religion. It can't be because . . . I remember 9/11 when I was in Turkey. I came from school and I remember, my father, he said, "What kind of Muslim can do that? There is no reason for to do that. There is no religious reason to do that. And you can't do that." It was terrible and I feel bad about it. (Khalil, Turkey)

Ahmed explained why the terrorists could not claim to be acting in the name of Islam:

There's a verse in the Qur'an that says if you kills somebody, one person, it's as if you kill all people, and if you save one life it's as if you save all the people's lives. So come on now, you cannot do that and say this is called *jihad*. No, that's not what it says in the Qur'an. (Ahmed, Egypt)

Emad, from Saudi Arabia, asserted that although many of the terrorists were originally from Saudi Arabia, they were "brainwashed" elsewhere and were not acting on behalf of his country:

They said that seven out of thirteen of them [the terrorists] are Saudis. In my opinion, this is what happened: They weren't actually in Saudi Arabia. They were trained in Afghanistan or Pakistan. I don't know which one. They were trained and they brainwashed them, and that's how it happened. It's not Saudi Arabia's fault, but it's true that they are Saudi Arabians, but that doesn't mean that they love their country and they are willing to do anything for it, you know? So that's my opinion. (Emad, Saudi Arabia)

Many of the students talked about negative stereotyping and rising tensions between the U.S. and Muslims in their countries. Amar explained how people in Ghana

were at first sympathetic towards the U.S., but their attitudes changed after the American invasion of Afghanistan and then Iraq:

[After 9/11] everybody was very shocked and sad and very sympathetic with America . . . it wasn't something everybody liked. But, the approach to the solution, like people *hate* how Americans reacted to it. I don't know more about it, but all I know is the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, and people didn't like it. Even though America was offended in the first place, but it isn't something everybody likes. We all like peace, and not wars. (Amar, Ghana)

Nisa also described how she saw the situation unfolding in Indonesia:

And, you know [there were] some stories about Americans being, not rude, but America being not nice to Islam and everything. But I felt like from the stories that they didn't really know about Islam very much. After 9/11, they [Americans] know Muslims as terrorists . . . There are some things like really big split from Islam and America . . . I open my eyes and like there are some people in my country that really hate America because of that, for accusing Islam as a terrorism. They really hate America – they *hate* all of Americans! Like some of my neighbors, not some, but like one of my neighbors, she had a baby but she doesn't want to do the vaccine for their baby because they bought that vaccine from America. (Nisa, Indonesia)

A few of students talked about the difference between the American government and the American people. They disliked the policies and actions of the U.S. government, but were more positive about the people. Ermy remarked, “Before I came here . . . I hate the government, not the American people.” Similarly, Israa thought that the American government, not the American people were at fault for the problems in the Middle East. Part of her interest in coming to the U.S. was to discover how the American people felt about the war:

They were interviewing me about it. “What do you think about America? Because they are taking your brother and sister in Middle East. They are bombing your brother and sister.” It was a tricky question. I feel sorry for brother and sister in the Middle East and the children are suffering. And then I told him, “You know what? It's not American citizens' fault. This is the government's fault you see. Then this is what I'm gonna do there, you know. That's what I want to see in America – what they think about the war.” (Israa, Indonesia)

Although the students were quite young during the attacks of September 11, 2001, they were very aware of the magnitude of the events and the subsequent impact on relations between the U.S. and the Muslim world. This tense environment, however, did not deter the students from participating in the exchange program, but rather, as I will discuss in the next section, provided many of the students with a motivation and a mission for their journey.

### ***Motivations for Participating in the Exchange***

Why would a Muslim teenager want to leave his or her home and travel halfway around the world to attend an American high school and live with an American host family for ten months? The answers to that question were many and varied. Joining the exchange program was obviously an important and complex decision for each of the participants, and most offered several reasons why they decided to apply to the program. Motivations cited by the students included the following: to fulfill a dream; to take advantage of the scholarship opportunity; to bring honor to the family; to develop skills and knowledge (including speaking English), to gain a cross-cultural experience; to facilitate personal growth and independence; to have an adventure; to correct stereotypes about Islam; and to promote better relations between the U.S. and Muslims.

A number of the students described coming to the U.S. as their “dream.” Nura, a young woman from Indonesia, said, “I was like, scholarship to the United States – it’s almost like a dream . . . Why do I want to come to the United States? It’s like, who don’t want to go to the United States?” This sentiment was echoed by students from Turkey and Egypt, as well as Rani from India, “. . . girls like me have this biggest dream to come

to America because we see America in the television, in movies and all that. And even America is just so famous a country all over the world.”

While the “dream” of some may have been to come to the U.S., the scholarship offered by the YES program made that dream a possibility.

I want to go to America particularly because there is like the scholarship. The first thing is, like, I want to get the scholarship! (Nisa, Indonesia).

The YES scholarship is a merit-based scholarship and although the selection process varies somewhat from country to country, it is generally a highly competitive process. Many of the students saw the application process as a challenge, and their success in being awarded a scholarship brought a sense of achievement and pride:

I thought that it’s really cool to be an exchange student to the United States . . . And then, I thought that I can’t make it because it’s a scholarship and it’s *really* hard to get a scholarship, I mean from like 10,000 participants! Thank God I got it! (Anggita, Indonesia)

I had not considered that in my life as something I would have done, but in my junior year in high school, I saw the advertisement for students to be exchange students and I tried it just to see what I could win. You have to go through so many processes, take tests, and interviews and other things in order to qualify to come. So I tried it just to show my ability and not thinking I would pass, and definitely I did! (Amar, Ghana)

Rani noted that the scholarship provided an opportunity for Muslim students in particular:

For Muslims it’s kind of hard after the bin Laden attack. After that happened we are kind of – America doesn’t allow Muslims to come to America, so it’s kind of impossible for us to get here [without the scholarship]. (Rani, India)

Although many of the students’ parents had concerns about sending their sons and daughters to the U.S. for a year, most of the students remarked that being awarded the scholarship was an honor and a source of pride for their families. According to Amar, “It was like an honor to the family and to myself to be one of the best students in the whole nation. So they were very happy!” Anggita remarked, “My parents were like, ‘Oooh,

you're gonna go to the United States!' That's pretty cool – to make your parents proud of you!" Rani recounted how the teachers at her high school were also proud and supportive when she won the scholarship:

So in my school, well, I was the only child who could at least speak English or at least understand a little bit. And when they [the teachers] heard that I was invited they said it is a really good thing for our school too . . . and we all want you to go, and we will support you, and we'll do this and that. (Rani, India)

Some students also saw the scholarship as a rare opportunity, and one that would provide them with experiences that would be difficult to gain otherwise. Aya, from the Philippines, explained how she thought the exchange would provide her with an "edge" over her peers as far as future education and careers:

I thought that, oh, if I was gonna go, the experiences are going to be worth it, and it's not easy to gain this opportunity. I was like, I'm gonna have an edge . . . like I was exposed in a different culture, which is very rare to happen at a young age. (Aya, Philippines)

Even faced with the prospect of missing the double wedding of her sisters, Rani chose to join the exchange:

My sisters actually got married on this 4th November and I wasn't there, and I missed the whole wedding. Actually, before I came here I knew it and I had two options . . . And I was like, weddings I can see, but this opportunity I will never, ever have again. So I said, "How about we just give one sacrifice?" (Rani, India)

As teenagers, many of the YES students were hoping that the exchange program would provide them with special opportunities for personal growth and development. For instance, Lila, from Saudi Arabia, thought that the exchange would help her to be more responsible. Others, such as Nisa, talked about becoming more independent and self-reliant: "I really want to go abroad . . . and I just want to feel like how it was being away from parents and everything, and doing my own stuff with my authority, without parents being fussy about what you're doing." Most, if not all, of the students had met

YES program alumni at the orientation programs in their countries. From the alumni they heard stories of an exciting and fun year in the U.S. Promises of an exciting experience in the U.S., combined with the opportunity for increased independence, were important motivating factors for many of the students.

Another motivation described by the student was a desire to experience American life and culture first-hand. “I just wanted to know a lot about America” (Lila, Saudi Arabia). “I wanted to know how you guys live and all that” (Ismeena, Egypt). Several of the students said that they knew the portrayal of Americans in the mass media was probably not correct. Ahmed, for example, said that he wanted to see beyond the image of Americans in movies. The exchange experience would allow him to experience life in the U.S. as an insider:

I only read novels and watched movies, but of course those are not the real image of the U.S. and the American people. So that year I thought would actually put me in the society with people – how do they live, how do they wake up and eat and go to school and go to work, and go have fun and watch movies, and go places . . . and all these things. That was one of the reasons that I wanted this year to be in the society itself, not just be outside watching movies. (Ahmed, Egypt)

Many students remarked on wanting to improve their English skills during the exchange year, as well as the importance of learning a second language for future education and career opportunities. “It’s important to have a second language in your life . . . all my jobs depend about a second language,” explained Firas from Saudi Arabia. Nura went one step further and connected learning a second language to better communication and her desire for a more peaceful world:

Every person in the world got to learn English, so why don’t we come and just see with our eyes and experience it? Because like, what we’ll learn is more than grammar, you know. When you speak it is like different. It makes me challenge myself and then I have a better understanding. Because I read this poem about in Vietnam, I think. The person translated the language wrong, so for the result they

get war, you know what I mean? (Nura, Indonesia)

In addition these motivations, many of the students talked passionately about their desire to improve Americans' understanding of Islam, Muslims, and their home countries – and to work for peace. As described above, the students were well-aware of the events of 9/11 and the negative image of Islam held by many Americans. Part of their interest in coming to the U.S. was to see first-hand what Americans think about Islam and their countries. In addition, many of the students talked about their desire to change negative attitudes and promote better understanding between the U.S. and the Muslim world. The statements below reflect their personal commitments to changing the world:

First, I watch and heard a lot of news that a lot of people in the world think that Muslims are terrorists. I'm pretty sad about it because I'm a Muslim, but I'm not a terrorist. So I wanted to do something to make it better. So I heard about this program, and then I tried it and I passed it. (Mifta, Indonesia)

I felt like a lot of Americans, they have the bad opinion . . . they feel a way about Saudis, or the Middle East as a whole, you know. So I'm trying to make it a better opinion about the Middle East. So that's why I came here. (Emad, Saudi Arabia)

And after 9/11, I thought the U.S. was at war, or in conflict with, all Muslims. But, I was very excited coming as an exchange student – probably to educate people about Islam and how different we are not, and to make some peace between Muslims and Americans. (Amar, Ghana)

I always wanted to do something about peace, but I never had a chance to do this . . . but when I learn that there is a program with a chance to go to the United States, I thought this is a perfect chance. (Khalil, Turkey)

To be honest, I thought it was really cool to go to the United States – and for free! That's actually my first reason. Then I realized that our purpose is really big. It's not a game . . . It really inspired me to change people's minds in here, you know, about the terrorist thing. (Anggita, Indonesia)

### ***Expectations about the Exchange***

Prior to the exchange United States, the students' impressions of the U.S. were greatly influenced by Americans that they saw in movies, on television, and on the Internet. They watched shows such as Oprah, Dr. Phil, and old reruns of Dallas. The students talked about the America they had seen in movies, and how this influenced their understanding of the U.S. Some of the students said they thought Americans would be too liberal in their behavior and too revealing in their dress (like those they had seen in the media). Some of the students (including Ahmed, as quoted above) mentioned that they knew the portrayal of Americans in the mass media was probably not correct and they hoped that the exchange experience would provide them with a more realistic picture. In other words, they expected that the U.S. would be different from what they saw in the media, but they were unsure of how it would be different.

The most common concern of the exchange students was that they would not be able to make friends. They expected that it would be difficult to find friends in their new schools and communities. Three of the girls mentioned that they were afraid that American high school girls would be “mean” like those in the popular teen movie, *Mean Girls*. Most of the students worried about being an outsider – how would they make friends and fit in at school? Some students worried that not speaking English fluently would make it difficult to find friends. Rani said, “What am I going to do? How am I going to even catch the accent? Because you know Americans speak differently than Indians.” Lila, from Saudi Arabia, was concerned that other teenagers might not want to be her friend because she was Muslim. Khalil, too, worried about not being accepted at school:

I was kind of nervous because I didn't really have an idea how to become an exchange student because I never met before an exchange student in my school . . . I was real nervous about school, about people. How will they look at me? If I'm Turkish will they mind? I'm Muslim, will they mind? (Khalil, Turkey)

A few of the students echoed their parents concerns about not being able to practice their religion, including prayer and fasting for Ramadan, as they had at home:

At first I'm afraid that I couldn't pray, I couldn't fast and everything. But when I got here, it's all pretty much okay. (Nisa, Indonesia)

While it might seem natural for students to worry about how they would get along with their host families, when I asked about their expectations and concerns for the exchange year surprisingly few (only three) mentioned anything about their host families. The general lack of comments about host families most likely reflects the fact that students receive information about their host families, and sometimes even communicate with them, prior to their arrival. As a result, there are many more "unknowns" about friends than there are about host families. This finding may also be a reflection of the importance of friends in most teenagers' lives.

The YES program orientations conducted in the students' home countries helped to prepare the students for the exchange, and several students, including Amar, mentioned how the orientation activities led to more realistic expectations and a better understanding of Americans:

AFS in Ghana organized so many workshops for us to learn about American culture before we came. Also, we had a task to make a research about the American culture and compare it to our own cultures and see the differences and things like that. So that was the way of learning the American culture before I came. (Amar, Ghana)

### *Summary and Discussion*

In this chapter I presented a snapshot of the students and some aspects of their lives before the exchange program. The twenty-one students in this program came from a variety of backgrounds, but the interviews revealed that a significant number of the students' families had international and interfaith connections. While international connections are probably not uncommon in the background of exchange students in general, this undoubtedly sets this group of students apart from the general population of teens in their home countries.

On the whole, the students' parents were supportive of their decision to participate in the exchange program. Some of the parents had concerns about how their children would be accepted into American society, and if their children would be able to practice Islam while living in an American community. According to the students, their parents came to see the exchange program as an opportunity for educational and personal growth, and in some cases to contribute to international understanding. Although most of the students did not mention it, it is also likely that all of the natural parents were aware the program goals of promoting mutual understanding between the U.S. and the Muslim world. In my own experience as a parent, and given the tensions after 9/11, I can also imagine that it took a great deal of trust in the exchange organizations for the parents to send their children to the U.S. for a school year.

As I described above, the exchange students in this study came from a variety of backgrounds. They attended many different kinds of schools in their home countries, including public schools and religious boarding schools. Although all of the students were Muslim (except Amar), the manner in which they practiced their religion in their

home countries was quite varied. Some prayed five times each day and went to mosque on a regular basis. Others prayed less often and rarely attended the mosque. All of the students observed Ramadan in their home countries; they enjoyed the traditions around Ramadan, particularly breaking the fast each evening with family and friends.

Six young women who wore the hijab took part in this study. They explained that they chose to wear the hijab as a demonstration of their deep commitment to Islam. While some of their parents expressed concern about wearing the hijab in the U.S., the girls themselves seemed less worried and more determined to wear the hijab. (However, I recognize that as the students looked back on their successful exchange year, they may have under-reported their own anxieties with respect to wearing the hijab in the U.S.)

Although they were quite young in 2001, the exchange students in this study demonstrated an awareness and understanding of the events September 11, as well as the ensuing tense relations and negative stereotypes between the U.S. and the Muslim world. They viewed the terrorist attacks as tragic, but placed the blame for the attacks on the heads of a few “crazy people” who definitely did not represent Islam.

Many of the motivations cited by the YES students are similar to those found in other studies of exchange students (as cited in Chapter 2): to be independent, to gain new experience, to develop skills and knowledge (including speaking English), and to have an adventure. Many of the students wanted to learn more about Americans and American culture; they wanted to find out about “real” Americans. Not surprisingly, they were also motivated by the scholarship opportunity. What stands out, however, is the YES students’ desire to help Americans better understand Islam and to promote more peaceful relations between countries and cultures.

This ambassadorial role is explicit in the goals of the program and is certainly reinforced during the orientation and training activities. The process of becoming a YES exchange student varies somewhat from country to country, but it generally lasts many months and involves applications, interviews, group work, and orientation programs. At some point along the way (probably in the very earliest stages) the students become aware of the goals of the YES program. As the students in this study reflect on their experiences before coming to the U.S., one must factor in that personal motivations and expectations were undoubtedly influenced by the stated goals of the program, as well as program orientation activities. It is also quite probable that students who voiced motivations in line with the program goals may have been looked on more favorably in the selection process. However, even if the students' motivations were influenced to a greater or lesser extent by the program itself, that does not negate these motivations as significant and meaningful factors in their decisions to embark upon the exchange. Their statements about promoting understanding about Islam and contributing to global peace seemed heart-felt and genuine. The fact that nearly all of the students mentioned promoting cross-cultural and religious understanding as one of their motivations for the exchange demonstrates that the students either chose to apply to the program because of its goals, and/or they internalized the ambassadorial role early on in the program.

## **Chapter 7: Living with an American Host Family**

What is it like for a Muslim exchange student to live with an American host family? I explore the answers to that question in this chapter. As context, I first present a brief introduction to the host families of the students in this study. I then discuss the students' experiences with their host families. I begin by looking at the extent to which the students felt that they were "part of" the host family. I also discuss their feelings towards their host siblings, and briefly look at the relationships between host parents and the students' natural families. Next, I present some of the stories that the students related about challenges connected to family life. Following the challenges of family life, I look at how the students practiced Islam in the home, and how they learned about Christianity. In the last section, I focus on the students' comments about sharing religious beliefs and traditions with their host families.

### ***Host Family Introduction***

My observations in this section are based on what the students told me about their host families during the interviews, as well as my interactions and interviews with some of the host families. Although exchange students are placed with typical American families, "typical" is difficult to define, and certainly encompasses a wide range of individual, social, and cultural differences. In this study, the students' host families included both single mothers and two-parent families. Approximately half of the families had young children or teenagers living at home. The other families had either no children or grown children who were no longer living in the home.

The majority of the students lived with the same host family for the entire school year. A few students were placed with “welcome families” when they first arrived in the U.S., and then moved to their permanent host families within a short time. Emad was the only student who experienced more than two host families:

I moved three times. The first one was a welcome family. I lived there for one month. They were very nice but they had a lot of strict rules. The second family, well, they had financial issues and they couldn't host – like their dad had a brain tumor and they just couldn't host. So, I moved to this family which I live with now and they're very amazing. (Emad, Saudi Arabia)

Many of the host families had some sort of international experiences, either with travel or work, and about half had hosted exchange students or international visitors at some time in the past. A few of the host parents were born in other countries. Nura's host parents were originally from El Salvador and Italy, and spoke mainly Spanish in the home. Ismeena's host parents were Pakistani-American; they were also Muslim. Sitti's host mother was a recent immigrant from China and spoke very little English; her host parents were married only a few months before she arrived. Ahmed and Khalil were placed together with a host family that was originally from Jamaica. The adult daughter of the family lived at home and was, according to Khalil, “the one who is in charge . . . she is the one who cares [for] me and the other exchange student.”

All but one of the host families (Ismeena's family) had at least one parent who was Christian or brought up in the Christian tradition. Sitti's host mother was Buddhist. Both of Ismeena's host parents, from Pakistan, were Muslim. As it happens, none of the students in this study lived with Jewish host families, although in my experience it is not uncommon for Jewish families to host international exchange students. There was only one black host family among the students participating in this study, the host family of

Khalil and Ahmed described above. Again, in my experience as a community coordinator I have worked with a number of African-American host families, so the lack of racial diversity among host parents in this study should not be taken as representative of host families at large.

### ***Being Part of the Family***

What is it like for a Muslim exchange student to live with an American host family? Overall, the students reported feeling very welcomed into their host families:

Living with an American family is awesome! It's awesome because I just felt so blessed this year that I was hosted in this family. I just felt so welcomed and not only welcomed in their home and their hearts, but also welcomed in their family. (Aya, Philippines)

Many of the students said they felt like they were accepted into the family as a son or a daughter. "Like, I got a good family in here. Like, they don't try me to change everything about me. They say that 'I love you Sitti – I love you the way you are.'" (Sitti, Thailand) Lila from Saudi Arabia also said that she "really liked" her host family and "they made me feel like I am part of their family." Emad felt like he had a "second home in the United States. It was like I was living at my home . . ." He remarked happily that his host family (the third one) was very similar to his family at home:

I mean, the [host] family, how it functions is the same as mine! My mom is the one who is the strict person and the dad is the laid back person, you know. And that's what it seemed like. They're fun. They're – everything is fun about that family. I just loved it! (Emad, Saudi Arabia)

When they talked about their host parents, many of the students referred to their host parents as "mom" and "dad," not using the word "host" unless I prompted them for clarification. Most of the students also said that they called their host parents "mom" and "dad" when addressing them directly. Among the few exceptions were Khalil and

Ahmed who lived with a host family in which the adult host sister was the person they most relied on for guidance and support.

I asked the students for examples of what their host parents did to make them feel like part of the family. They offered many examples of everyday kindness and concern shown by their host parents, as illustrated by Wafa's comments:

From the very first day they were always nice. They showed me like about electronic things and how I could use them. They like took me to the store the first days if I needed something. And they got presents for me before I came here – and I got presents for them from Turkey . . . I really love my host family. They are like a real family for me . . . Like, she is like a mom for me. Everyday she would kiss me and hug me when I was going to bed and when I was going to school. So we have a close relationship. That's nice. I know that I'll always have a family here too. (Wafa, Turkey)

Mifta's host mother was a single mom, and although Mifta missed having a father figure, she felt close to her host mother:

I live with my host mom and host brother. I lost the dad figure this year, but that's fine. My mom is pretty much understand me. She's like my mother here. It's not hard at all. (Mifta, Indonesia)

Students relied on their host parents as “cultural guides.” Their host parents introduced them to life in America from an insider's perspective. They took them shopping for school supplies, introduced them to neighborhood teenagers, and included them on family vacations and outings. When I asked the students to tell me some of their most memorable experiences, most of their stories involved their host families, including trips that they had taken together – to the beach, to New York City, to an amusement park, or to visit relatives in another state. Holidays and birthdays also figured high in the “memorable” category, as evidenced by Amar's description of his birthday:

It was a big surprise! I had no idea they were going to do it, I just walked in on that very day and all gifts were wrapped. I didn't even know what was in them

until I opened it! It was very interesting. And, I had a *very* big cake!  
(Amar, Ghana)

As Sitti illustrates in the following quote, from the first days, host parents often expressed their concern and offered parental guidance on navigating life in America:

He [her host dad] said, “You have to understand Americans in here.” . . . and I go out and meet more people, and I understand what he meant. Some of them bad, some of them good, and you try to go with the good person, not . . . the bad person. (Sitti, Thailand)

Many of the students said they felt they were part of the family because they were not treated as guests; they were expected to help out with chores and follow the family rules. For the students who had host brothers and sisters, the perception of being treated as equals with their host siblings was a key component in feeling like “one of the family.”

I think it is pretty equal. Like they’re not treating me like, oh, I’m the exchange student so I’m not supposed to be doing the dishes, cleaning the table. They treat us like equally . . . even when they make a party for my other sisters, they have to make one for me. When they go to somewhere to find a gift for her, they have to find one for me. It’s just nice to be like part of the family. (Nura, Indonesia)

Emad described what happened in his host family when he did not follow the family rules, such as doing his homework:

It’s like, when I did something, she [his host mom] took my laptop away! You know, she sometimes takes the TV out of my room. Yeah, I felt like a son, like a member of the family. (Emad, Saudi Arabia)

Amar also related how he felt like he was treated the same as his host sisters. In addition, he shared how his host parents made him feel loved by little gestures such as asking him to sit next to them at dinner:

Amar: They actually, like, took me as part of their family, as their own son. So like whenever I did something wrong, I felt like I did something wrong. Either I wait for them to tell me, or I approach them first, or in both ways it went. And I listen to whatever they say. They tell me what to do. They were always pointing out faults and trying to correct me. They weren’t quiet or silent about whatever I did, as a guest. So they treated me like one of their children

*Carol: Can you give me an example of something they pointed out to you?*

Amar: Like, whenever I go out, I stay too late, like later than the time I told [them, and the time] they were expecting me, without calling them. . . But I don't really remember any example, but that was one of the main ones I was at fault with.

*Carol: So, because they had the same rules for you as for their other kids, you felt like you were part of the family?*

Amar: Yeah. That's it. Also, our meals at home. The other kids in the family have to at least eat some vegetables and I was also like forced to eat it too. So it made me feel like I was part of it. If they treated me as a guest, they would allow me to eat whatever I want, but we all ate the same meal and I had to eat my vegetables too.

*Carol: Can you tell me some other kinds of things that your family did to make you feel at home or to feel part of the family?*

Amar: Like whenever we go out for supper, whatever I wanted they would let me get it and [they would] pay for it. And, also, they make sure I wasn't feeling sad. Like I know sometimes the parents want some members of the family to sit close to them at dinner or something, so sometimes they would make you sit close to them, so you know that they have opened their heart to you. And I would always ride in the front seat of the car because I was the oldest. (Amar, Ghana)

Amar went on to explain that the concern and care of his host parents made him feel at home. Amar's use of the pronoun "we" suggests that he believes he is not alone in feeling at home with his host family:

People are nice in Ghana, but it is very different to see somebody, a foreigner altogether, treating you like their own children, making sure you had this and that – during the winter providing winter clothes and everything. It was so great . . . like, although we were out of home, we really felt like this was our home. (Amar, Ghana)

Not all of the students felt like a son or daughter in the family. Some of the students described relationships with their host parents more as friends than as parents.

"I can tell everything to her. I mean there is something that I can't talk [about] with my own parents, but I can talk about anything with my host mom."  
(Anggita, Indonesia)

Nisa described how her host mom shared her love of music and dance, something that would have been unusual in her home country:

I am really surprised that my mom is really young-spirited. Like the kinds of music are like . . . my mom and my sisters they have the same taste of music, so it's really fun because back home parents and children they have a really big wall about social things. But here, we love dance . . . so we can dance together. And we play music and we sing a lot . . . I just feel like she's not really a host mother – she's a friend. (Nisa, Indonesia)

Firas described his relationship with his host mom as “best friends” who help each other out in times of need. “So when she used to be sick, I help her out . . . and when I get sick, she help me out. So it was like best friends . . . I talk to her like my best friend.”

While some students said they felt as if they were indeed “part of the family,” others described a more complex relationship. In this passage, Rani reveals mixed feelings about being part of the family:

Sometimes I feel like, whenever we play card games or we sit down together and watch movies together or whatever, I feel like I am part of the family. But, then, sometimes at certain points I feel like I'm different, even though I'm their host daughter, I cannot be their daughter. There are always differences between them and me. (Rani, India)

When we talked about spending time with friends, Rani's remarks demonstrated her ambivalence about being part of the family. She was not comfortable inviting her friends to come home with her (she preferred to go to their homes), but she said she enjoyed spending time with her host sister's friends at the house. When her host sister's friends came for a sleepover, however, Rani opted to sleep in her own room rather than with the other teenagers, reflecting her feeling of being an “outsider”:

I really didn't feel that free to invite somebody, because it's my house, but it's not like my house. You know what I mean? I cannot just invite and say, “Hey, you come to my house for a night over.” So, but my host sister's friends came for sleepovers, and they are like my friends too, and I spend time with them . . . I didn't sleep the night with them but . . . I hang out with them. (Rani, India)

As noted above, students reported that they felt like they were part of the family when they received equal treatment with their host siblings. However, when they perceived unequal treatment they sometimes felt hurt and left out, as Nisa described in this passage:

For like small things, when it was my birthday, I didn't get cake, but for both of my sisters' birthdays there is cake. So, it's kind of like – I want a cake too! . . . And like when it comes to my concert, my mom didn't give me flowers, but during my sister's concert my mom was busy buying flowers. (Nisa, Indonesia)

When I asked Nisa what she did on her birthday, she responded, “We hang out and so that didn't really make me sad. And we had a little party with some friends.” Clearly, though, Nisa was disappointed that she did not have a birthday cake. Yet, equal treatment with host siblings did not always guarantee feelings of “real family.” Rani, for instance, had some very difficult times during the year. She told a long and emotional story about falling down in gym class, injuring her knees, and the reactions of her host parents. She discovered that her host parents were treating her just like their own children, but that treatment was in stark contrast to Rani's expectations of how parents *should* react:

Rani: My both knees were filled with blood. I was sitting there crying and not even looking and going, “What do I do?” Well, I went to the nurse's office and she treated me . . . Then when I came to the house I thought that, you know, if I had this kind of injury in India and I then headed to home, and my mother would come to me and ask me what happened. She would be really concerned. I can imagine that and even my father would do that too. And she would take me to the doctor or she would treat it again, or just see it, you know. But when I came home there was no response, because here they are really strong and tough. They want the children to learn by their own, you know – to fight through it and get rid of it. But this was a great culture shock for me when I came here. I told them that I fall down and my knees were still bloody.

Carol: *Did you show them your knees?*

Rani: Yes, I mean, I was wearing capris, so my knees were open and even though it was wrapped with that white thing – what is it?

*Carol: You mean a bandage?*

Rani: Yes, that's it. It was wrapped in a bandage, but it was still bloody because the blood was coming out. So, they actually heard from the nurse, one of the nurses from school, so they knew I fall down, but they didn't say anything to me.

*Carol: So, how did you feel about that?*

Rani: That hurt me like a lot. I was broke. I was broken . . . It was the most hardest time of my life. . . I don't know, I didn't treat it that well or something because after two days I was sitting in the living room and watching TV and my knees were bleeding. The blood was coming out of them. And I said, "What do I do? I can't even look at it." My host mom came out from outside and she said, "Your knees are bleeding." And then she went upstairs. It hurt me a lot.

Even though the students did not always feel like a "real" member of the family, they often tried to understand their host parents' behavior in the context of American culture. Rani continued her narrative:

And then it hurt me so much that . . . one day I asked them that "I had this pain and I fall down and you guys didn't even pay any attention to it. Can I ask you why? Is that bad or something?" And they said that "One day my daughter . . . she fell in the bathtub and broke her head or something and it bleed, but we didn't do anything because we want our child to learn through it and to do by their own. So this is just how we work." And I had noticed a great difference between my own parents and my host parents. Then I said, "Okay, maybe it is just your way to work." (Rani, India)

Similarly, although Nisa was sad because her host mother did not make her a birthday cake or buy her flowers for her performance, she also struggled to understand her host mother's behavior. After telling me how hurt she had felt about these incidents, she said, "but I'm not her child, so I can understand that." She rationalized that by birth she was, and always would be, an outsider to the family, and perhaps she should not expect the same treatment as an insider.

As the students told their stories it was clear that through these everyday interactions – family dinners, minor injuries and illnesses, school activities, and special occasions – over the ten months of the exchange each student negotiated and renegotiated his or her own understanding of what it meant to be part of an American family.

### Brothers and Sisters

In many cases, host families included not just parents, but also other children and teenagers. About half of the students in this study had host siblings living in the home during the exchange year. Other families had children who were grown and lived away from the home, or they had no children at all. According to previous research (Lee, Jaen, 2007; Radomski, 2008), as well as the host family interviews in this study, one of the common motivations for hosting an exchange student is to facilitate an international friendship for their children. Exchange students, however, do not necessarily come with the expectation of becoming best friends with their host siblings. When discussing motivations and expectations, none of the exchange students talked about developing a close relationship with their host siblings.

According to the participants, their relationships with their host siblings were varied, and sometimes involved unexpected challenges. Some became good friends; others did not. Indeed, their relationships with host siblings often seemed to be more like that of real siblings – sometimes rocky and sometimes smooth – rather than that of friends.

Mifta, for example, recounted that getting along with her host brother was a challenge in the beginning, but by the end of the year, they were like “real siblings”:

My brother, he has problems. He has ADHD, so yeah, he can be angry at any little problem. My mom told me that they had an exchange student last year and they didn't get along at all. They fought a lot. And this year, I don't know how, but we just get along together and my mom is pretty much surprised at that . . . It was kind of a challenge for me at the beginning of the year, but I don't know. We're pretty much alike, we're like real siblings. I love him now. (Mifta, Indonesia)

Nisa said that she had a lot of fun with her two teenage host sisters. In particular, they enjoyed singing, dancing and clowning around together. Yet, as Nisa describes, there were challenges:

[My host sister] is really moody and living with her is kind of like living on a roller coaster because this five minutes you can laugh with her and do some crazy stuff, but the next five minutes she can cry and yell about something. She can be angry. It's hard, but overall it's really fun living with them. (Nisa, Indonesia)

In another passage, Nisa explains that there were times that she felt that there was a "wall" separating her from her host sisters and host mom. She describes feeling left out when her host sisters shared the details of their daily lives with their mom. "Both of my host sisters love to talk about everything. . . They talk about everything, but not to me." Nisa felt that she was not welcome to share in these everyday conversations between mother and daughters, a situation that contributed to her sense of being an outsider to the family.

Nura, who had younger host siblings, also struggled with the sibling relationship. As the oldest child at home, she was left in charge of her younger brothers and sisters when her host parents worked in the evenings. While being given the responsibility for looking after the younger children made Nura feel proud, as well as part of the family (her older host siblings also looked after the younger ones when they were home), she related that she often had difficulty getting the youngsters to listen to her. She said that

she did not mind being asked to watch the younger children, but it was often a challenging task.<sup>83</sup>

[The hardest thing was] how to react in front of my sisters, because I have one real [host] sister and one niece and they are like, one is 10 years old and one is 5 years old. So if they are fighting or something . . . because my family is all busy people – my sister work 12 hours a day; my other sister have dance at night time; my parents always in the pizza shop. They work every day until 11:00 at night time. So I'm in charge with the girls, and they're like, "No, we don't want to listen to you because you're not the boss of me." "Yes I am!" It's so hard. It makes me like learn a lot of things. (Nura, Indonesia)

Nura also remarked that she felt a certain amount of competition with her older host sisters, which resulted in her working harder to ensure a good grade report in school:

My older sister who graduated last year, she was honors student, and like she *is* the star! Then my sister in high school now, she *is* the star. So it kind of challenge me. It wants me to getting better and then I get on honor roll. I don't want to embarrass my sister at school: "Oh yeah, she's our exchange student but she's dumb and she doesn't know anything!" you know. [laughing] So it like push you. (Nura, Indonesia)

Others students remarked that they just had different interests and personalities than their host siblings. Sometimes a difference in gender or age of host siblings contributed to this sense of distance. For instance, Amar who had three younger host sisters, remarked that he loved them as siblings, but they did not feel like his "real" siblings:

We were not very close to each other, so always you have to find friends outside home to feel at peace. But I still found it okay, and I was always happy about being with them . . . And they hang out mostly with their friends, which were all girls, and I also hang out with all boy friends . . . I never felt like they were my real siblings, but I loved them as my siblings. (Amar, Ghana)

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<sup>83</sup> A number of program-related issues came up during the interviews. Such issues are beyond the scope of this paper, but I will note some of these issues in case others want to pursue them. In this case, was it appropriate for Nura to be placed with a host family in which she was expected to babysit the younger children nearly every evening? One might question the family's motivation for hosting.

By the end of the year, most of the students seemed to have developed comfortable, but not necessarily close relationships with their host siblings. Rani described how she spent time with her older host sister (who only lived in the home for part of the year), talking about India and teaching her words and phrases in her native language. Rani was surprised, but pleased, with one of the results of her language lessons:

I have actually taught my sister many things in my language, and she's kind of like fond of learning new languages and stuff like that. She actually has a tattoo that says "hello" in my language! She told me one day, "Write 'hello' in your language," so I wrote it. She said, "I'm going to have a tattoo." I said, "Are you really going to have a tattoo?" . . . It's on her back, and it says "hello" in Gujarati, one of my languages! (Rani, India)

### Two Sets of Parents

During the exchange year, the host parents fulfill many of the roles and functions of the students' natural parents, and yet the natural parents are still "there" in the background. I wondered how the students perceived the relationship between their host parents and their natural parents. How did their two sets of parents relate to one another and what impact did that have on the students? As their responses revealed, in many cases the language barrier meant that there was minimal communication between natural parents and host parents. When the natural parents and host parents did communicate, the students often mediated the conversation, either on the telephone or via email. Nisa's experience is typical of those students whose natural parents did not speak English:

Actually, my parents sends like emails to my host mother, but last time my parents sent email I think my host mother hasn't replied it back because every time my parents back home send email, it must be through me because they don't speak English. So I have to translate it. I forward it to my mom, so I know who has sent it, or who hasn't sent it back. (Nisa, Indonesia)

Not surprisingly, students whose natural parents spoke English reported more frequent and direct communication between their hosts and their parents. For instance, Firas said, “Every week or every two weeks he [his father] calls me and asks about me, and talk to my host mom.” Aya also described emails and occasional phone conversations between her host parents and her family in the Philippines:

Yeah, the other time when we talk to them . . . I think it was Mother’s Day when we called back home . . . but I think they’re in touch on email. My [host] mom says “Oh my God, what a great daughter you have! Thanks for sharing her to us.”  
(Aya, Philippines)

Whether mediated or not, conversations between natural parents and host parents, typically centered on the students. The natural parents often thanked the host parents for taking good care of their son or daughter. “My parents actually thank my host family a couple times when I talk with them on phone,” remarked Rani. Sometimes this involved sending small gifts from their country to the host parents. The natural parents also showed concern about their child’s behavior, as demonstrated in Nisa’s recounting of email communication:

It’s pretty much about how am I doing here. “Is she doing some household chores? Is she helping you with some things?” You know, that kind of stuff. And my parents like try to send souvenirs from home and everything.  
(Nisa, Indonesia)

In turn, the host parents thanked the natural parents for “sharing” their child for the year (as described by Aya in the above quotation), and assured them that their child was safe and well-behaved.

When hosts and natural parents were able to communicate directly with one another in English, they often developed an ongoing relationship that went beyond expressing gratitude and reassurances about the safety and well-being of the child.

Several students described situations in which their host parents consulted their natural parents when they had questions about behavior or discipline. In these cases, the natural parents provided guidance and lent their support to the actions of the host parents. Recall that Emad said he felt like “a son” because his host mother took away his laptop when he did not do his homework. Later in the interview, Emad revealed that this punishment came about as a direct collaboration between his natural mother and his host mother:

I just didn't do my homework . . . and she [his host mom] emailed my mom, asking her, “What should I do?” And my mom told her, “Take his laptop – take anything you want.” My mom gave her full responsibility for what she could do. (Emad, Saudi Arabia)

### ***Challenges in the Family***

Regardless of whether or not the exchange students felt “part of the family,” most experienced some conflicts or challenges during the school year. Living with a family from a very different culture was not always easy. By the time of the interviews at the end of the school year, the students had resolved most of their problems, or at least had learned to live fairly harmoniously with their host families. Challenges that involved host families seemed to fall into two broad, but overlapping, categories. The first category relates to the students' personal feelings about how things were going in their lives. In this case, the host family may not have been aware of a problem until the student pointed it out. If the student did not discuss it with the family, they may never have been made aware of a problem. I discuss these challenges under the topic, “Personal Challenges.” The second category involves tension, conflict, or misunderstandings that arose between the student and the host family. These are discussed under the heading, “Interpersonal Challenges.”

## Personal Challenges

A few of the situations described above would also qualify as personal challenges within the host family. Nura's experience watching her younger host sisters in the evenings was a challenge for her, but one which she worked out by herself. Rani's experience with falling down and injuring her knees was also a challenging time. She dealt with the challenge by trying to understand the cultural differences, as well as her host family's point of view.

Language presented another challenge for Nura. Although communicating in English on a daily basis was somewhat challenging for all of the students, Nura's host family spoke only Spanish at home, meaning that she needed to learn two languages while in the U.S.:

First, it was really hard because they do not speak English in the house. They speak Spanish all the time. I swear to God – every single word! And then, I was like, I didn't understand at all! My sister, all my sisters and my older brothers . . . I think only my sister can speak English fluently! (Nura, Indonesia)

Nura rose to the challenge, however, and signed up for a Spanish class at school. During the course of the school year, she learned to speak Spanish and continued to improve her English.<sup>84</sup> It is not clear that Nura even brought up the language issue with her host family. Instead, she just seemed to accept the situation and deal with it in her own way. Only one other participant had a similar language challenge at home. Sitti's host mother spoke Chinese and very little English, but her host father was American (with English as

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<sup>84</sup> Nura's situation raises another issue about student placement. Is a household that does not speak English on an everyday basis an appropriate placement for an exchange student in this program? The host family was undoubtedly interviewed in English by the local coordinator, but was the coordinator (or the exchange organization) aware that the family used little English in the home? Issues of appropriate placement are beyond the scope of this study. However, a student's home-stay experience could greatly impact student adjustment, satisfaction, and effectiveness as a link between cultures. Nura was able to rise to the challenge, but should she have been expected to do so?

his first language). Consequently, Sitti related mainly to her host father during her exchange year. Moreover, she did not describe the situation as problematic or uncomfortable.

Khalil and Ahmed, who lived with the same host family, attended a public school that was quite distant from their home. Their host sister usually gave them a ride to a central area where they could get public transportation to school, but Ahmed talked about the difficulties posed by living so far from school and their friends:

I live kind of far away from the city and I just can't take the train. So that's kind of a problem and has always been an issue every day. That was the hardest thing – living in the suburbs and going to school in the city. . . Sometimes I cancel plans because I got to be home by that time. . . So if normal people start leaving a place by 10 to be home, I'll leave at 8:30. Sometimes it's okay, and sometimes I find a way to sleepover at somebody's house, at my friend's or something.  
(Ahmed, Egypt)

Both Ahmed and Khalil said that the transportation situation made it difficult to participate in after school or evening activities. However, as Khalil commented, the host family was “very nice” and was willing to pick them up in the car as long as it was not too late at night. Although transportation presented a challenge, both boys appreciated their host family's efforts and made the best of the situation.

Winter was a difficult time for many of the students. By January, the rush and excitement of the holidays gave way to cold winter days and long, dark evenings. The students who had no host siblings and lived in more remote areas without access to public transportation found the winter particularly difficult. Often they were sad, homesick, and bored. In the following passage, Firas shares his feelings about the loneliness and frustration he experienced during the winter months:

I got in a discussion with my host mom a little bit because she was always away. And I said, “I'm here not be alone in the house and watch TV all the time! [raised

voice] I'm here to do something!" . . . It was winter here – a *long* winter! I was all of it alone. Well, I said, "Listen, this weekend I have to go somewhere!" . . . So one day we go and eat dinner together; one day we go to the mall and watch a movie. But you got to be patient with it because it's not gonna come like this [snaps his fingers]. Step by step, here comes the summer and here comes happiness again! (Firas, Saudi Arabia)

Wafa, too, described a long, frustrating winter. Like Firas, she talked about the problem with her host mom and together they made a special effort to try to spend more time together in the evenings and on weekends. Wafa also recognized that her host parents had little choice about the long hours that they had to work. As a result, Wafa did not put the entire burden of solving the problem on her host parents, but instead tried to arrange more activities with her friends:

I was like really bored during January and February, these were the months she [the host mom] worked a lot and she had some other problems. So these months were like real hard for us . . . But then we talked together and she said she was sorry that she couldn't spend some time with me, and that she had to work. And I said, "It's okay. I will try to do more things with my friends because I know you have to work." Then she tried and tried to spend more time with me . . . We both tried to do things. Like when she was cooking, I always sat with her and talked with her. And I think it worked. I really love them. (Wafa, Turkey)

The experiences of Wafa and Firas demonstrate not only that they were feeling lonely or bored in the winter, but also that they wanted, and expected, to be part of the family, not just a friendly boarder. Other students also described lonely times or times when they felt they needed more help or attention from their host parents. In many households, particularly those without other children, the students were alone in the home after school. Host parents' busy work schedules kept many from spending as much time with their exchange students as the students expected or desired. These times presented challenges, but not usually conflict. Host parents rearranged their schedules to do special things with the students, or encouraged them to join school clubs or other youth activities.

The students generally found that when they talked with their host parents, they could solve the problem, or at least improve the situation.

Firas also commented that the exchange organization sent him timely information with suggestions on how to cope with homesickness and depression in the winter months:

Firas: Every letter I get from the PAX . . . Like the winter time, you feel bored: “You’re in the homesick stage my friend. You are in deep problem. You need help.” Seriously. I needed help and here comes a letter from PAX. You are so frustrated and you’re alone and there’s not a lot of people, and then here it comes. I said, “All right PAX, help me out.”

*Carol: What kind of things did they say? I mean, how did the letters help you out?*

Firas: They show me like a couple advices, like “Live like you are going to go home soon. Go talk to some people. Don’t be upset because you’re going home soon. Be happy and more fun.” That’s what I did in the winter. I tried to be happy. I made a snow man. I made my life busy a little bit, and here comes, it’s summer, and in a couple days I’m going home. (Firas, Saudi Arabia)

### Interpersonal Challenges

Other challenges faced by the exchange students involved conflict, tension, or misunderstandings between the students and their host parents. These challenges generally revolved around everyday activities such as eating, doing homework and following family rules. Many of the students talked about disagreements with their host families about following family rules, particularly those governing computer use or keeping their host parents informed of their whereabouts. Well before they set foot in the U.S., the students understood that they were supposed to live by the rules of their host families (unless, of course the rules were unduly strict, burdensome, or harmful). However, family rules are not always well articulated until the student is actually living in the home. Even then, different interpretations of rules can lead to misunderstandings.

For instance, Aya called her host parents at work to tell them that she was at a friend's house for dinner, rather than calling them to ask permission prior to going to the friend's house. She was keeping her host parents informed about her whereabouts (at their request), but they had expected she would tell them before she went, not after she arrived. Similarly, Nisa found that calling and leaving a voice mail for her host mom was not adequate. Her host mom required that she talk with her directly when she went out or changed plans.

Most of the problems that arose around following family rules seemed to have been rather minor misunderstandings that the students were able to work out with their host families. The students generally understood that some of the rules were guided by health and safety considerations; other rules the students just accepted because "it's their house." Anggita recognized that her host family's rules were "common sense," but still thought that they were not always easy to follow:

Just sometimes teenagers like us want to be like a little bit free like that, but my [host] parents like, "You can do whatever you want, you just have to ask us first and then tell us where you're gonna go" . . . And like, "If you want to use the computer, ask us first." And I think it's like common sense for me. It's like their property so I have to ask them first. But sometimes if you want to use this and they're not home you know, and I have to wait them, and I call them but they're not answering or they're at work or something . . . (Anggita, Indonesia)

Some of the misunderstandings and challenges that the students faced with their host families can be traced, at least in part, to differences in cultures and problems in communication. For instance, Rani, who did not like to eat meat even in India, did not openly communicate her dietary preferences to her host family. She did not write on her application form that she was a vegetarian, so her host parents were surprised when she declined to eat meat at family meals. While Rani could have eaten *halal* meat, she

preferred not to eat meat at all, but did not explain this to her host parents. Rani was trying to be polite and not be a burden on her host family, but she discovered that her host family had interpreted her actions as being dishonest:

Even at my house [in India], I never eat meat because I just don't like it that it was an animal, a living thing and you cut it and now you are eating that meat . . . I just decided that when I came here because I couldn't eat meat that was non-*halal* meat, and I just didn't want to eat meat at any rate . . . And I thought it wouldn't be a big deal because veggies are available everywhere, I would just eat fruit or vegetables or any kind of dish with veggies . . . And I thought it won't be a big deal, but it was, actually.

So when I came here I just told them that I am a vegetarian. I will not eat the meat that you eat. I didn't really want to go in deep and tell them about this meat stuff because then they will think that this young lady came to us and now she is asking for stuff to do. Like, if I would have said that I need this [*halal*] meat to eat, then they would go that she is asking us to buy or provide a different kind of meat – like she has started ordering or something. So I felt that I should not go in that direction. I just said that whatever you will have veggie, I will eat it. . . .

Because here . . . well, in India if you don't like anything, you still say it's really good. That's actually part of the culture. But here if you don't say it's not good, they will just keep making and making it and you will have it all the time! And that's kind of difficult. So, if you don't be frank they think, "You are lying to us." (Rani, India)

Rani explained how the misunderstanding about food deepened after her host parents learned about *halal* meat.<sup>85</sup> This time they thought she had been lying to them about not eating meat:

And one day my host mother got invited to go to this mosque party. It was a festival or something. So we both went there and she saw the meat . . . I told her that there is a certain kind of meat that Muslims eat. [She] said, "They are all

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<sup>85</sup> From a program perspective, this situation raises a number of issues. If Rani's parents had known about *halal* meat (from the host family orientation, for instance), they could have avoided part of this distressing situation. As far as Rani's application, if the staff did not know that she had made an assumption that she could "just eat veggies," there would be no reason to discuss this with her. However, if this is a common situation with students from India, it could be addressed during the in-country orientation, and host families could be contacted with the updated dietary information. In this case, a further complication was that Rani felt that her local coordinator was "rude" and unsupportive: "She yelled at me, and she said 'The girl I'm hosting is Muslim too and she eats non-*halal* meat, so why are you not eating this? And why do you have these extra needs?'" These are program issues and beyond the scope of this paper, but they point to the importance of training, orientation, and supervision for students, host families, and local coordinators.

eating meat, why you are not eating it?” I said, “Well, I can eat, but I’m not sure it’s *halal* because it’s my second time.” . . . And then she thought that “you lied to us that you don’t eat meat.” Then I told them what I felt in the beginning, that I just didn’t want you to be thinking that I’m ordering you to buy some kind of meat. I wasn’t even fond of meat, so I said that.

And they said, “If you can eat the *halal* meat, we’ll find it for you.” I was like, “You’ll find it for me? That’s so kind of you, but I had never, ever thought that you guys would find this kind of meat for me. And you will eat that meat too, and will provide me too.” And I said, “That’s really kind of you, but I feel so bad for you that you have to look for this meat and buy it.” And I thought that it’s kind of expensive too than the normal meat. So they said that “whatever, but then there is nothing to feed you. There is only junk food in the cupboard and you cannot survive on that. Either that or we will have to get apart then.” . . . And okay, then I will sacrifice that and I will eat meat, but I really don’t like to eat it. So I said that if that is the only way, then okay, I can eat meat. (Rani, India)

Rani’s host family, who obviously felt a responsibility for providing her with proper nourishment, preferred to buy *halal* meat, which they could all eat, rather than prepare separate vegetarian meals. Perhaps because of the extra time and effort involved in preparing nutritionally sound vegetarian meals, the host family essentially gave Rani an ultimatum – either eat *halal* meat dishes with the family, or change host families. In the end, both Rani and her host family made compromises to stay together. The family bought *halal* chicken and Rani ate the chicken dishes with the rest of the family. However, since Rani really disliked beef, the family bought regular beef and Rani ate vegetarian food on the days that her family served beef. While the situation with the *halal* meat could be interpreted as a misunderstanding about religious practices, in this case it was really more a problem of communication about dietary needs and preferences. The host family was more than willing to serve *halal* meat – what they were not comfortable with was having a vegetarian in the house. Interestingly, pork was never an issue, probably because the host family was aware (from some source) that Muslims do not eat pork.

Another instance of tension and misunderstanding arising around everyday situations was presented by Aya. She recounted a story of conflict with her host parents while she was doing her homework. Aya was in my cluster of students that year, and I remember this incident vividly. I spent several hours at their home one evening trying to sort out what happened and repair hurt feelings. In the end, we learned that the way we give and receive help on something like homework is both individual and culture-bound. The manner in which Aya expected her host mom to help and the way her host mom thought best to help, were influenced by their own upbringings and their respective cultures:

Aya: Well, do you remember when you came and we were not talking to each other? That was when she was helping me do my homework and there was some sort of misunderstanding. And I know it's both of our faults because I didn't tell her, and she told me that she was too straight-forward.

*Carol: Could you remind me of that time – tell me what happened again?*

Aya: She was helping me with my homework, but instead of – but I felt that instead of helping me she was trying to go around and catch me if I really knew it or not. I felt that she was trying to test me, like to see if I really knew it . . . And so there was the argument, the misunderstanding. (Aya, Philippines)

A few students described misunderstandings caused by different interpretations of English words or different cultural customs. Rani, who had a fairly rocky relationship with her host parents (as is evident in the discussion above), described a misunderstanding over the word “beans.” Her host mother, already wondering how she could feed a vegetarian for a year, was dismayed to learn that Rani would not eat beans:

So she [the host mom] said “You don't eat beans?” And I said, “I don't eat that.” I was just thinking about that kidney beans that I hate. But I like lentils, yellow lentils. I like chick peas and so many grams, which is peas and beans, which are like seven or eight kinds, and I eat all of them pretty much . . . You know, like my host mother asked me, “You eat vegetables, then do you eat beans because beans have protein in them, and the only thing you would have as a protein?” I said I

don't eat beans because I thought about the kidney beans. I refer to beans as "grams" – you know, like the lentils and the other beans, chick peas. I thought they all are grams, they are not beans. This is what I thought. This is what my English was . . . She said, "Oh my word, you are a vegetarian and you don't eat beans. Now what am I going to do with this young lady here?" . . . but it's all done. We worked it out.<sup>86</sup> (Rani, India)

There were also some misunderstandings with host families that probably arose from differences in expectations or roles. For instance, Lila was surprised that her host parents became upset that she didn't say "thank you" very often. She was not accustomed to thanking her parents in Saudi Arabia for everyday things, such as making dinner, helping her with homework, or taking her on outings. Lila attributed the misunderstanding to cultural differences:

I noticed that 'thank you' is really important here . . . It's hard when you think you are gonna understand the culture and it's easy, but you're gonna find out that there's a lot of differences in here too. And you're gonna find the right ways to communicate with other people. (Lila, Saudi Arabia)

Obviously, many American teenagers are not in the habit of thanking their parents for these gestures either, but Lila's host parents had no children of their own and therefore, no American teenager for comparison.<sup>87</sup> At any rate, Lila's host parents expected her to show appreciation for the special efforts that they were making on her behalf. Lila was in my cluster of YES students that year and I remember that this issue became a major source of tension between Lila and her host parents. Lila said that she tried to remember to say "thank you" more often, but it was hard for her because it was not in her habit pattern. This issue was never really resolved, and it remained a major source of tension, especially between Lila and her host father, through the end of the exchange year.

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<sup>86</sup> While the word "grams" is not commonly used in the U.S. to refer to chick peas and other legumes, it appears in English dictionaries as one meaning of the term.

<sup>87</sup> Lila's host family had hosted several Indonesian students for shorter periods of time, and may have made comparisons between Lila and the previous exchange students.

I will discuss religion in the next section. However, it is notable that when I asked about challenges in family life, none of the students mentioned differences in religion as a source of discord. The students related varying degrees of problems and challenges with their host families, but overall, they seem to have been able to work out their problems (together with their host families) and get to a point where they were ending the exchange year on a positive note. Indeed, had they not been able to work out their problems with their host families, the students would have had to change host families or end their exchange year early. Even Rani, who probably had more difficult times than the other students in this study, concentrated on the positive aspects of her relationship with her host family:

In the beginning I was really upset, but now it's all okay and I'm happy with them as a family. Now we kid around and pick on each other, and we have so much fun! . . . I don't even think about those bad experiences or painful experiences . . . We worked through it and now we are actually, at the end of the year we are together and happy and understand each other. (Rani, India)

### ***Practicing Islam in an American Home***

The students' comments above about being part of the family and challenges with host families were generally in response to my question, "What is it like to live with an American host family?" Few references to religion (other than to *halal* meat) came up during these general discussions. In contrast, the following discussion is in response to my inquiry, "What is it like *being Muslim* with an American host family?"

As mentioned above, none of the students cited major challenges or problems in the home relating to religious differences. For the most part, the students had very positive comments about their host families' understanding and acceptance of their religion. This finding is not surprising given that the host families voluntarily signed up

to host a Muslim exchange student. Still, it is important that the students felt that their religion was respected by their host parents. In the quotation below, Dana talks about the concerns of her family in Indonesia and the acceptance and support of her host family:

My experience with my host family and my school is pretty interesting because like I told you before, my family before I came here is very strict and religious. They get so worried that I stay with Christian family because it is different religion. And America, it is different culture from Indonesia. As time goes on and I told my family back to Indonesia, “Everything is fine. They appreciate when I pray. They give me time if I pray.” Because I have to pray five times a day as a Muslim. Because we also have fasting for thirty days . . . They appreciate me when I did it. They didn’t eat in front of me . . . They appreciate me being a Muslim, and I appreciate them being a Christian. We have a really nice relationship – Muslim and Christian. I never thought that it’s going to be that nice before. (Dana, Indonesia)

Other students also reported feeling comfortable and respected living with Christian families. Often they mentioned that the respect was mutual. “It has been so easy,” remarked Ahmed, “we’re kind of respecting each other’s religions.” Similarly, Firas commented, “I didn’t find anything offense to my religion at all. I respect them and they respect me.” And, according to Wafa, “It wasn’t hard because they [her host parents] have an open mind.”

Indeed, all of the students said they could pray at home if, and when, they wished to do so. Several of the host parents made signs that the students could hang on their bedroom doors when they prayed:

Well, every time I have to pray, I just have to put a little sign in front of my door, “Prayer Time.” They made that sign for me, so they’re not gonna knock my door when I pray. (Anggita, Indonesia)

### Going to the Mosque

While doing their prayers at home did not pose a problem for the students, going to a mosque sometimes did. In fact, none of the students reported going to the mosque on

a regular basis. (However, it is important to remember that many of the students did not attend mosque regularly in their home countries.) For those students interested in going to the mosque, distance and difficulty in finding transportation were often the deciding factors in whether or not they were able to attend. The exchange students were not permitted to drive while in the U.S., so it was necessary to ask their host parents to drive them, arrange a ride with someone else, or take public transportation to the mosque. Not surprisingly, mosques were often rather distant from the students' homes, and public transportation was not always available. Moreover, many students showed concern about the price of gas and the inconvenience for their host families:

I went to the mosque once on the holy day after Ramadan. It was nice, too. But it's far from here and you know that gas prices . . . That's really why [he did not attend more often]. (Firas, Saudi Arabia)

There is a mosque about a 20 minutes drive away. There were a lot of Saudi families there you know . . . I didn't go weekly because of gas prices and everything. I went monthly. I try to be considerate. They are hosting me and also they are paying for the gas and gas is going up so high. (Emad, Saudi Arabia)

Similarly, Anggita's host family offered to drive her to the nearest mosque, about a forty minute drive from their home. However, Anggita did not know the schedule of activities and services, and did not want to risk a repeat of the family's experience the previous year:

I want to [go to the mosque], but like last year my host mom told me they try to go to the mosque [with an exchange student the previous year] . . . it was during fasting time and at mosque during that time they usually have a lot of Muslims there. But when they went there, there were no people there. So, I don't want to, like you know, just ask my family, "Come on, I want to go to mosque," and then we go there a long journey, and then there's no people there. I feel like bad for them . . . So there's no use. As long as we pray here, and we still remember there is God, and we pray and we read Qur'an, I think it is no problem. (Anggita, Indonesia)

Some of the students whose homes were closer to a mosque or who could conceivably have taken public transportation to the mosque said they did not have the time to go, or they were not accustomed to going to the mosque at home anyway. In general, students reported going to the mosque more often during Ramadan than at other times during the school year. At that time they made a special effort to attend (as perhaps they had done at home), particularly for the feast at the end of Ramadan. Moreover, Ramadan was very early in the school year, and it is likely that host families, especially sensitive to the needs of their new “sons” and “daughters,” may have made more of an effort to transport them to a mosque. A number of students also commented that they did not “have” to go to the mosque in the U.S., particularly since it was difficult to get there. Ahmed remarked that “Islam makes an exception if you’re not – if you’re traveling somewhere, you don’t really have to go to the mosque.”

### Dietary Considerations

On the application for the exchange program, students are asked to list any dietary restrictions, including those related to the practice of their religion. Their host families, therefore, should have been aware of any special dietary needs well before the arrival of their exchange student. In the Muslim tradition, pork is considered unclean and should not be eaten. Although I did not ask, it is likely that all of the students noted this restriction on their application form. Across the board, the students reported that their host families were sensitive to this restriction and did not serve them pork. Some host families simply banned pork from the diet of the whole family for the duration, while others continued to have pork in the house, but carefully pointed it out to the students. Several students stated that their host families, particularly host siblings, sometimes joked

with them about eating pork. As Dana shares in the quotation below, the students seemed comfortable enough with their host families to be amused, rather than offended, by this kidding:

So, like they [her host parents] are really careful about pork. Sometimes they mix meat like in the hot dog. They mix it, and like my parents, they bought only beef hot dogs. And they warn me, “Dana, it’s pork!” And I’m like, “Okay, I won’t touch it!” [laughing]. They tease me. Like, I was so hungry and then I found meatballs in the fridge, and then I eat it. Then my host brother he says, “Dana, it’s pork!” And I was like, “Oh no!” And he said, “Just kidding!” And I said, “That’s really not funny!” [laughing]. But they were really careful.  
(Dana, Indonesia)

Many devout Muslims eat *halal* meat, meat that is prepared according to Islamic law. While there are sources of *halal* meat in the U.S., most of the students agreed that “it’s expensive, and it’s hard to find it” (Dana, Indonesia). With the exception of Rani, the students in this study expressed no concern about eating non-*halal* meat. Coming to a predominately Christian country, the students had not expected to be able to find *halal* meat, and therefore, were not upset when their families did not serve it. And, as Rani shared in her narrative above, the students were reluctant to ask their American host families to locate and purchase special, and often expensive, meat. According to Israa, “We say, ‘In the name of God’ before we eat, and that’s fine. As long as we pray before we eat.”

### Ramadan

The holy month of Ramadan, the month of fasting, began only a few weeks after the students arrived in the U.S., a time when they were still adjusting to life with their American host families. In mid-September and early October, the days are still fairly long and the weather is often very hot and uncomfortable in many parts of the U.S. With

the exception of Amar, who had converted to Christianity, all of the students fasted for at least a short time during Ramadan. Across the board, they described Ramadan as a difficult period. Emad seemed to speak for all of the students as he remarked that “here in America, the day is *so* long!” He said he just felt like sleeping all day, but that was really not an option.

Aside from attending school, the students were expected to join in family and community activities – and they *wanted* to engage with friends and family, and fully experience their new American life. Still, they found it difficult to do so while also maintaining their fast. Sometimes they felt torn between their commitment to fast for Ramadan and their desire to fully participate in the new culture and environment.

Anggita laughed as she recounted how hard it was to attend the town fair with her host mom during Ramadan:

Yeah, it was so hot and especially during the [town] fair! The fair was near my birthday, and during my birthday we were fasting, and then when we went to the fair I was fasting. I was hoping . . . I know it’s a sin, but I was hoping that I got my menstruation so I didn’t have to fast at that time! [laughing]  
(Anggita, Indonesia)

As I described in Chapter 6, during Ramadan in their home countries, most of the students were accustomed to eating with the families before sunrise and after sunset each day. Ismeena’s host family was Muslim and observed Ramadan in a manner that was similar to what she had been accustomed to in Egypt. For the most part, the students who lived with Christian families reported that their host families were understanding and supportive of their fast. Emad’s remark that his family was “nice and kind and everything” during Ramadan was representative of statements made by other students.

Sitti's host father fasted with her for the month, and at the encouragement of her host mother, Yara's host sister fasted with her for one week.

Most of the host families delayed the evening meal until after sundown so that the students could eat with the whole family. Ahmed's comments were typical: "My family was totally supportive, and they made sure that we eat at the right time when the sun goes down." Delaying the family dinner had an impact on host siblings too, and a number of the students talked about how their host brothers and sisters were "starving," but still tried to be sensitive to their fasting. For instance, Dana told this story about her host brother:

Sometimes I come back from school and he just eat the subs or something like that in the kitchen. And then, like, "Oh, I'm sorry, I eat in front of you and you're fasting!" [laughing] And I'm like, "No problem, go ahead and I will go to my room." (Dana, Indonesia)

In only two instances, students said that they did not break the fast in the evenings with their host families. Aya's host parents often worked late, so they were accustomed to a very late dinner hour. After having fasted all day, Aya ate a light meal at the appointed hour and then ate dinner with her host family later in the evening. Rani's host family, on the other hand, routinely ate dinner rather early and, much to Rani's disappointment, did not change their routine to accommodate her fast:

That was one of the conflict too because they really want me to eat with them . . . But during Ramadan my timing of breaking the fast was different. They eat a little early and I used to eat at like seven, after sundown. So, they were like, "You won't be eating with us." . . . They just didn't want to change their timing. (Rani, India)

While the evening meal was not an issue for most of the students, the morning meal posed considerably more problems. In their home countries the students were generally awakened by their parents and called to eat a hardy meal before sunrise.

However, their American host families (with the exception of Ismeena's family who was Muslim) were not accustomed to rising in the middle of the night to prepare food for the family. The students dealt with the situation in a variety of ways, depending on their own creativity and determination, as well as the reactions and support of their host families.

Two of the students, Ermy from Indonesia and Sitti from Thailand said that their host parents got up with them in the pre-dawn hours and prepared a meal for them (Sitti's host father also fasted with her for the month):

My dad, when in the morning when I have to wake up, he wake up with me. He want to cook for me . . . That's true. He woke up at like 4:00 every day in Ramadan month! (Sitti, Thailand)

Most of the students, however, were left on their own to decide how to handle the morning meal in the pre-dawn hours. A few of the students chose to sleep through the night rather get up to prepare and eat a meal. Emad said he set his alarm so he could drink some water and then go back to sleep. Yusef also decided to forego the morning meal:

I'm not going to do that [get up to eat before sunrise]. If I'm going to sleep 'til three in the morning, I'm not going to wake up and then sleep again. So, mostly I had like one meal a day because of fasting. (Yusef, Saudi Arabia)

Generally, though, the students set their alarm clocks and woke in the early morning to eat their meal alone while the rest of the family slept. Some chose to eat cold cereal or sandwiches, opting for ease of preparation. Others, noting that this food had to keep them going all day, took the time to prepare a more substantial meal the night before:

I pack my supper in a container and when it's time to eat in the morning I just put it in microwave, so I don't take too much time on that. (Yara, Thailand)

While most of the students talked about waking up and eating the morning meal by themselves in a somewhat matter of fact tone of voice, Rani gave a more emotional

description of her first morning of fasting. There is a sense that she is feeling lost and lonely during what had in previous years been a very special time for her:

So, I woke up with this alarm and I came downstairs in the kitchen and I thought, “What am I going to eat?” Because in my house, my mother used to make some healthy food, you know, not kind of breakfast but it was like a dinner – a good, heavy meal so you can survive the whole day because you can’t even drink water – you’re not allowed. So I said, “What’s in the fridge?” I opened the fridge and I said, “What do I eat?” I don’t even know how to do it. I just take out the cereal and I had the cereal bowl. And then I went upstairs and I slept, and I woke up again and I prayed. (Rani, India)

It is likely that the other students experienced some similar feelings of loneliness and homesickness in the wee hours of the morning, but Rani may have felt particularly sad because her host family did not eat the evening meal with her either. For most of the students, the morning meal presented some difficulties, but they seemed to take it in stride. In many instances they talked about being proud that they had managed it on their own. As Nisa said, “I got to be more independent because my mom is not fasting.” Indeed, if they wanted to eat in the mornings, the students had to take responsibility for waking up and eating before dawn. Their host families would not be concerned (or probably even notice) if they did not do this.

### Not Fasting

All of the Muslim students started out with the intention of fasting for the month of Ramadan, but only about half of them fasted for the entire month. Khalil found it too difficult to be around people who were eating and gave up fasting after only two days. Others skipped fasting some days because of the heat and participation in sports.

Aya was ill part of the time during Ramadan:

As much as I really wanted to complete all the days of fasting, I could not because I often have an upset stomach, so I don’t do it regularly. (Aya, Philippines)

Some of the students who quit fasting said they would make up the days of fasting when they returned to their home countries. They explained that this was allowed if you were ill or not able to fast for some other reason. Islam also allows an exception to the fast when one is not at home, something which Rani's host parents found out from a friend, but which Rani herself did not know. Her host parents then encouraged her to quit fasting, citing that it was too difficult for both her and the family. Rani is the only participant who said that her host parents wanted her to stop fasting:

And then my host parents talked to . . . this woman who works with my host dad. They talk with her and she said that if you are far away from home, from your own home and you have nobody to take care of the things that you really need, our religion, Islam, allows you to lay off that thirty days of fasting and you can piggyback, you can do it later – before the next Ramadan begins. You have to do it. So, it's like the seven days when you have your period, you don't fast, but you do it later. But I didn't know about it . . .

So they came to me and said this is the thing that you didn't tell us, that it would be okay if you don't fast because you are away from your own home. I said, I don't know it either. And they said that then you should talk to your parents, because it is very difficult for us to do and for you too during Ramadan – handling all the school and all the food and not eating. So, I talked to my father and he talked with some of the, like pastors, in the mosque and they said it's okay then, not to fast. So I fasted for like a week, and then I stopped fasting because it was such a hard time. Even, I was sorry . . . But, then if Allah forgives me there is nothing I need. When I go back then I'll fast before the next Ramadan begins. (Rani, India)

### ***Discovering Christianity – Going to Church***

All but one of the students lived with host families who had at least one parent that was Christian or brought up in the Christian tradition. Ismeena's experience was unusual in that her host parents were originally from Pakistan and were practicing Muslims. While Ismeena did not learn about another religion in her American home, she

remarked that she learned about differences between how Islam is practiced in Egypt and Pakistan.

Some of the students stayed with host families who were very devout Christians and attended church every week. The host families of four of the students (Nura, Rani, Wafa, and Yara) requested that the students also attend church services regularly. Other students attended services less regularly, or only occasionally. At least six of the students never attended church with their host families during the exchange year (usually because their families did not attend church).

Wafa, whose host family asked her to accompany them to church on Sundays, viewed going to church with her host family as an opportunity to learn about Christianity:

Sometimes in the first weeks especially, they always go to church and they ask me if I wanted to go, and I said, “Sure,” because I just want to learn about religions, and why all these people are living for, and like what do they believe in and things. (Wafa, Turkey)

Israa also went to church because she “just wanted to know their religion.” Wafa went on to describe the warm welcome she received when she first attended church with her host parents:

My host mom said that they all knew that I was coming so they were praying for me that like I could come safely [from Turkey]. Then, when I went there [to church] my host mom was like, “This is our exchange student!” And they all knew me because my host mom always talk to them about me, so they went, “Oh, hi! Welcome! Finally you are here!” And they were all so nice and they know me right now because I went there a lot, so whenever I go now they always welcome me and have a nice conversation with me. (Wafa, Turkey)

Firas who often went to a Catholic church with his host mother also found the congregation welcoming, and the experience enjoyable. Furthermore, he noted that Christians should expect to be similarly welcomed in a mosque:

Firas: I went a lot to church. I loved it there – singing, and it was sweet!

*Carol: How were the people there?*

Firas: They loved me. They said welcome and everything. And I liked it too. I said, even if a Christian guy came to the mosque, they would do the same thing.

For Nura, whose host parents were “like really into their religion,” going to church was a way of participating in family life. Her host parents worked long hours in the evenings at their restaurant, so Sunday was a time to spend together as a family. Nura particularly enjoyed the routine of going to church and then out to a restaurant for Sunday lunch:

My mom always go like, “Nura, you don’t have to go, but if you want, you go just to spend time with the family.” I like it because every Sunday after church we went somewhere to eat! [laughing] I *always* went to church every Sunday!  
(Nura, Indonesia)

Rani’s host family also requested that she go to church with them. Rani did not see this as an imposition or a threat to her religious beliefs. Rather, she seemed to think of going to church as a way to please her host parents – and it was also enjoyable:

I go to church every Sunday with them . . . It is something they requested me to do and I said, “Yeah, sure, I can do that.” I don’t mind. It’s okay. It’s not that I’m praying with them or following their religion, and I just go. And I sing their songs and it’s a fun thing to do. It’s not that I am expecting [accepting] that religion from my heart, with the bottom of my heart – no. (Rani, India)

While Rani felt secure in her own religious beliefs in the church environment, Firas related that the first time he attended church it was rather an unsettling experience:

But when I was inside and I was standing in the church and looking at the cross, I feel something weird. I feel like an emotion – like, why am I doing this? I’m not a Christian. But I went away . . . even my host mom she find something wrong with me. She said, “Are you okay?” I said, “Yeah, I’m fine, I’m just reading my Qur’an inside.” [laughing] (Firas, Saudi Arabia)

Dana whose family did not go to church regularly, attended a special service with her host family, but felt very much like an outsider. She recounts her discomfort at not participating in the rituals:

My host family is Catholic and they tried to show me like, what is it called . . . first communion? They said, “Do you want to see the first communion of my friend’s daughter?” And then I went there and you know, sometimes I ask her to get out from the church. I just wait for them when they do worship because I feel like I’m the only one that sits, [laughing] and they all put their knee down and they are doing this and they sing, and then I just feel not comfortable because they did the worship and I did not. (Dana, Indonesia)

Wafa, on the other hand, found that going to church, and especially to Sunday school, was both interesting and enjoyable. She pointed out differences in teaching religion in the U.S. and in Turkey:

So I went to church with them, and actually it was fun because here they teach religion in a different way. They have all these games for little children and all these songs and different things for teenagers. So I think they teach religion here in a kind of like lovely way – a positive way. Like for religion education, we don’t have that kind of stuff in Turkey. (Wafa, Turkey)

Because he changed host families during the year, Emad had the opportunity to go to both a Catholic church and a Methodist church. He was surprised to learn that there are so many different “kinds” of Christians:

I learned there is different, you know . . . at first I thought Christians are just Christians, but it turns out there are Methodists, Lutherans, Catholics, like different kinds, and every kind has a different way in the church. Catholics have a long, long service. Methodist is not so long. (Emad, Saudi Arabia)

This surprise at the diversity within the Christian faith was echoed by other students, even those who did not attend church services.

By attending church services, Emad also discovered that “Muslim religion and Christian religion, they agree on a lot of stuff.” Yara, too, saw going to church with her host family as an opportunity to learn about Christianity, as well as share her knowledge of Islam and find some commonalities:

My host family is Christian family and like they go to church every Sunday. And then I go to church with them . . . And then we learn a lot. I talk a lot with pastor and then we have a lot of stories from Bible and Qur’an that are the same. We talk

about Noah and stuff. Actually it's pretty much the same. And we discuss it. Oh maybe we believe in the same God, but it's just the way that we practice to God – it's just different ways. (Yara, Thailand)

As demonstrated above, there were many reasons why the exchange students chose to attend church services with their host families: to learn something about Christianity, to socialize with other young people, to feel part of the family, to please their host parents, to explore commonalities between Islam and Christianity, and to open dialogue about religious similarities and differences. None of the students said that they felt “forced” to attend services, but some may have felt subtle pressure from their host families to attend as “part of the family.” Moreover, it is clear that some students felt more comfortable in the church environment than others.

A few students expressed regret at not having attended a church service, perhaps feeling that they had missed out on a new experience. Ahmed, for instance, remarked, “I wanted to [go to church]. . . I was going to actually, but it was around Christmas and something happened and we didn't go for some reason.” Nisa also wished she had had the opportunity to go to church, but her host family did not go to church. The students who did not attend church services during the year said they learned about Christianity in other ways – through participation in religious holidays and through dialogue with their host families. Some students also said they learned about Christianity (and Judaism) at school through their friends or, in some cases, through the curriculum, which will be discussed in the next chapter.

### *Sharing Religions – Islam and Christianity*

In the home, learning about Christianity was balanced with sharing and teaching about Islam. Host families and exchange students explored commonalities and differences between the two religions. The students who went to church learned a tremendous amount about Christianity, and they used their experiences at church as a springboard for dialogue about the intersections between Christianity and Islam. Although some of the students did engage in discussions about religious similarities and differences at the church (and a few made presentations about Islam to church groups), for the most part they saved these discussions until they were home with their host families. Rani, for example, used her time at church to explore commonalities between Christianity and Islam, and then initiated discussions with her host family about religion:

I go to church with them and I attend Sunday classes with my host sister. This is how I came to know about Christianity a lot. So whatever I found interested or similar to my religion, I would go and say, “See this is what I heard today and this is what I have in my religion. Looks kind of similar, or looks kind of different,” like that. (Rani, India)

Learning and sharing about religion took place largely in everyday situations – in the living room, around the kitchen table, or in the car. Most of the students reported that their host families were very interested in learning about Islam. Indeed, only two of the students said that they did not really discuss religion with their host families. Yara said that she had discussions about religion with her host family “nearly every day.” Israa explained that for her going to church was kind of a social event and most of the discussions about religion took place at home:

I learned about Christianity at home a lot, when we talk about religions with my host family. I learn a lot at home, better than in the church. I just get to know

new people in the church. But if there is potluck or dinner or something, I come to the church! [laughing] (Israa, Indonesia)

Firas, who lived in a very rural area, recounted how he and his host mother would sit outside on quiet evenings and talk about their religious beliefs:

My host mom love to talk about religion stuff. And at night when we're sitting here [on the porch] seeing the stars and she ask me, "What do you believe?" I said, "In God, like you. I believe in Jesus, but I don't follow Jesus' rules, I follow Mohammed. And I know about Jesus." So, we've been like a whole discussion about religion. (Firas, Saudi Arabia)<sup>88</sup>

Some host families, such as Yara's, made a special effort to try to learn more about Islam:

Even my host mom, she just bought a book, like a Qur'an that have English meaning in it. So she just like tries to study and then ask me. And then we watch some video together. So that's good. (Yara, Thailand)

Several of the host families visited a mosque at least once during the school year. Aya's host family participated in several community dinners held at the mosque during Ramadan. Israa attended church with her host family, and then her host family visited a mosque. In this way, they were able to learn about each other's religions:

I just decided [to go to church] because I just want to know their religion. And then my host family are also visiting the mosque, so we shared together about religion. We have similarities and differences. (Israa, Indonesia)

Rani's family also went to the mosque with her, and discovered some similarities between Islam and Christianity:

Once they went [to the mosque]. It was very interesting to them. They never knew how do I pray because I pray in my room so they don't know. . . So they knew I prayed, or I do this weird thing in my room, but they don't know how do I do it. And there was a speaker and he was explaining one or two stories about my religion and all that. So they listened to that and found it a little similar to Christianity actually because Christianity and Islam is a little similar. There is some stories that are similar. It was good. (Rani, India)

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<sup>88</sup> In the interview with Firas' host mother, she described one of her most memorable experiences as sitting together at night, looking at the stars, and talking about their beliefs.

Generally, the students recounted their discussions with their host families about religion as interesting and very positive conversations. The host families seemed genuinely interested in learning about Islam and exploring similarities and differences with Christianity. I only heard one story of a student feeling uncomfortable or upset with their host family about something related to religion. Nisa, who enjoyed many discussions about politics and religion with her host family, described how she once became frustrated when her host mother questioned her willingness to wear a veil on a pilgrimage to Mecca:

Nisa: One time we went to this store and there is this woman that wears a veil, but it's like Arabic veil when you cover the face except for the eyes. And my mother is like, "Why do you want to go to such a place? You know, like an Arabic place like that" . . . And I'm like, "Oh I want to go there again. I went there one time and I really want to go back again."

*Carol: Where was that, where did you go?*

Nisa: To Mecca, to do the small pilgrimage, but it was when I was in eighth grade, with my parents. And like, I said I want to go back again, and I don't mind wearing veil because I have to wear it anyway later on, sooner or later. And my mom said, "Why does your religion ask women to wear veil, when actually God created you with good hair and good body and whatever?" And like, I said, "It's God's word, so what should I do?" And she kept arguing me about that. At the end I was just like, "Okay mama, it's whatever you believe in." I believe in it, so I have no problem with it. (Nisa, Indonesia)

Nisa's discomfort with the situation seemed to come not so much from the questions that her host mother asked (like the other students, Nisa willingly answered many questions about Islam), but from the fact that her host mother did not accept, "that is my belief" as an adequate answer. Nisa felt that her host mother was not really trying to understand her beliefs, but rather questioning what Muslims believe to be the word of God.

## Wearing the Hijab

The girls that wore the hijab had many discussions with their host families about why they covered. The hijabi tended to show their hair to their host mothers and sisters, but not to the men in the family. Ermy remarked that she would have felt “uncomfortable” showing her hair to her host father and grandfather. Still, their host families asked questions as they struggled to understand the meaning of wearing the hijab:

I show my hair to my host mom and sisters because they are women, but not to my host dad. But then, my mom was asking me a question because I said, “I only can show my hair to my family and to my future husband.” She said, “But your dad is part of your family.” Still, I don’t feel comfortable to show him. I didn’t do that for the entire year, and he appreciated it. They’re really nice.  
(Israa Indonesia)

As discussed in the previous chapter, the girls felt very strongly about their commitment to wearing the hijab. Ermy’s comments below are typical of how the girls tried to explain this commitment to their host families:

And then I told them that the first reason is because in our Holy Book, our God told us to wear this and after I learn it, it is like good for us to wear it. There is a lot of benefit for wearing the hijab. And then I feel comfortable for wearing it. For the logic reason – just think like you love somebody. If you love somebody, you will like do everything that they say. So it’s kind of like me and my God. I love my God, so everything that my God say, I gonna do it. (Ermy, Indonesia)

Yara was pleased that her host father made a special effort to help her younger host sister understand the meaning of wearing the hijab. At Christmas, he gave her host sister a book about a teenage girl who decides to wear the hijab:

During Christmas, my sister got the novel about hijab from my dad – the story about the Palestinian-Australian girl. She’s going to school in Australia. *Does My Head Look Big in This?* That’s the title. She’s going to the strict school with

the school uniform rules. One time she decided to wear hijab and her principal was surprised. And then finally she got through it. You have to read it!<sup>89</sup> (Yara, Thailand)

Israa remarked that when she left her host family at the end of the school year, she gave each of her host sisters a hijab as a gift. According to Israa, they were quite pleased with the gift.

### Holidays

Religious holidays presented a special time for sharing religious traditions. Some of the host families celebrated the end of Ramadan with their exchange student. All of the host families (except Ismeena's) celebrated Christmas, an exciting and enjoyable experience for the students. Ermy talked excitedly about the holidays:

They give me gift during *Eid al Fitr*. You know, after Ramadan we celebrate the end of Ramadan. They give me this stuff and then I give them stuff at Christmas. So, I got two gifts! [laughing] (Ermy, Indonesia)

While many host families did not dwell on the religious meaning of Christmas, the students experienced the cultural traditions surrounding Christmas and for the most part jumped right in with both feet. Firas recounted how he planned months ahead for Christmas by asking his father in Saudi Arabia to send beads that he could give away as holiday gifts:

I said, "Dad, I want a simple gift to my friends so they can remember me." So I made around fifty of these [strings of beads] and I wrapped them every one. He sent them from back home – a big bag and he gave my host mom a gift – a carpet. And she liked it. She was jumping and she was like, "Oh, Firas, that's so nice from your dad!" (Firas, Saudi Arabia)

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<sup>89</sup> At Yara's recommendation, I read *Does My Head Look Big in This?* by Randa Abdel-Fattah. The book tells the story of a teenage girl in Australia and her decision to wear the hijab. The book provides insights

Nisa commented that she was able to enjoy Christmas as a “cultural thing”:

I celebrate it as a cultural thing, not religion. So for me, yeah that’s good. I can feel Christmas. Like, my first Christmas, I like it so much! [laughing] It’s just better than I thought it! (Nisa, Indonesia)

### Beyond the Family

Some of the exchange students also said that they occasionally had discussions about religion with members of the extended host family, as well as family friends. One can make an assumption that since the host families volunteered to have a Muslim exchange student live in their homes (and were screened by the exchange organization), that the host families did not harbor extreme views against Islam. However, that was not necessarily true of their friends and extended family. Overall, the students described having very good relationships with their host families’ friends, and especially with extended family members. Firas enjoyed playing with his host mother’s young grandchildren, and Rani looked forward to visiting her host grandparents:

Nana and Papa, my host grandparents – I love them to death. They like me a lot, and I’m glad that before I go I will get to see them one more time and get pictures with them or something like that. I will have time to spend with them and I’m glad. (Rani, India)

In a few cases, however, the students described encountering stereotypes and negative attitudes towards Islam. As Israa describes below, her interactions with the friends of her host family helped to change their attitude about Islam:

They also have some friends that thought the bad things about Islam before. But when I came here they can see that Islam is not from what they saw before from TV, from the media. It was nice. (Israa, Indonesia)

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into the meaning of covering and the challenges faced by many girls who choose to wear the hijab. It is also an interesting and entertaining story about a delightfully “normal” teenager.

Generally, the students described situations in which getting to know someone on a personal level led to more positive attitudes Islam. In only once instance, described by Yusef, was this not the case:

Yusef: Just once we had a like a rough conversation. I had a rough conversation with a guy. It was actually my host mother's brother. We just went to Florida once and it was okay, but before I went, the last night before I went back to the hotel, we were at their house and I was talking to the brother. We were talking and everything. He made stupid comments and stuff like that. He argued for a bit, and like my host mother felt bad and said, "Let's just go. It's stupid." And we went. She kind of apologized, and she wasn't happy about that.

*Carol: Well, what kind of comments did he make?*

Yusef: One comment that I would never forget, we were talking about the Japanese war and World War II and stuff like that and the nuclear bomb and everything. He made a comment, he said that, "You know what? They should drop a nuclear bomb at the Middle East like they did at Japan." I said, "Okay, that's a stupid idea that you think because you are not knowledgeable about anything," and like, "You're an idiot and you don't know what you're talking about. So, just if you are saying that terrorists are the problem, you are the terrorist because you want to kill everybody. So, go ahead!"  
(Yusef, Saudi Arabia)

It was unclear from the story whether the host mother's brother intended to insult Yusef directly, although it is difficult to imagine that he did not associate Yusef (who had been visiting for several days already) with the Middle East. In this uncomfortable and potentially explosive situation, Yusef's mother (who presumably knew her brother's personality) did not try to change the brother's attitudes, but instead chose to diffuse the situation by taking Yusef and leaving the brother's home. Although it was an upsetting situation, Yusef felt that his host mother supported him, rather than her brother. Yusef's reaction in this situation (to immediately become angry and return the insults) was understandable, but not typical of the students' reactions to incidents of prejudice or intolerance (as I will discuss in Chapter 9).

## *Summary and Discussion*

For the most part, the students described living with an American host family as a positive experience. It was clear from the interviews, however, that the relationships between host families and exchange students were dynamic and often complex. Most of the students felt as if they were part of the family – at least some of the time. Some of the students said that their host parents were like their “real” parents, while others described their host parents more like special friends. Several of the students described feeling like part of the family in some situations, but not part of the family at other times. Specifically, the students felt like they were part of the family when the host parents made special efforts to make them feel welcome and include them in everyday activities. They also felt like part of the family when they perceived that they were being treated like other children in the family – having to follow family rules and participate in chores, as well receiving special treatment on birthdays and important occasions.

Only about half of the students in this study had host brothers or sisters living in the home. Relationships with siblings were mixed, some closer than others, but host siblings did not seem to present a major source of difficulty for the exchange students. To the contrary, most of students seemed to enjoy having American brothers and sisters.

The relationships between host families and natural families were also varied, but positive. Natural parents who spoke English had more contact, and more direct contact, with host parents than those who did not speak English.<sup>90</sup> In cases where the natural parents did not speak English, communication was often mediated by the exchange

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<sup>90</sup> Language differences were probably not the only factor in the amount of contact between the natural parents and host parents. For instance, the natural parents may have been reluctant to initiate much

students. Topics of conversation between host parents and natural parents revolved, not surprisingly, around the well-being of the students.

Challenges related to family life fell into two broad categories: personal and interpersonal. In the first category, students talked about language issues and difficulties adjusting to be alone after school on long winter days. They generally dealt with these problems by themselves, or by discussing it with their host parents and asking them for assistance. Other challenges described by the students involved conflict or disagreement between the students and host families. These interpersonal challenges often revolved around family rules, such as rules about doing homework, using the computer, or keeping host parents informed of their whereabouts. Rani described several difficult situations with her host family related to food choices. Aya talked about a conflict with her host mother that arose when she requested help with her homework. Lila found that not saying “thank you” regularly to her host family created a difficult and uncomfortable situation. In all of these cases, the students were able to talk with their host families and work out the issues to the point where they felt that they were ending the school year on a positive note.

None of the students reported having difficulty with practicing their religion in the home. Indeed, many of the students remarked that their host parents respected their religious beliefs and traditions. However, given that the host families volunteered to host a Muslim exchange student, one would not expect them to demonstrate prejudice or ill-will towards Muslims. Still, it was important to the students that the host families showed respect for Islam.

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interaction with the host parents (or the reverse) in deference to the teenager’s desire for independence. However, this topic did not come up in the student interviews.

Most of the students did not go to the mosque regularly, if at all, during the exchange year. Yet, none of the students seemed to feel that that this was a problem. Mosques were often distant from their homes, and the students showed concern about the time and expense that that would be required of their host families to transport them to the mosque. All of the Muslim students started the month of Ramadan with the intention of fasting for the entire month. Most of the host families waited the evening meal until after sun down, so that the family could eat together. With few exceptions, though, the students were on their own for the morning meal. Although about half of the students ended their fast early for various reasons, Rani's host family was the only family who encouraged their student to quit fasting. Overall, however, the students reported that their host families were supportive, and "appreciated" their religious traditions.

Many of the exchange students attended church with their host families, some only occasionally and others more regularly. Generally, the students enjoyed going to church, learning about Christianity, and meeting other people. They viewed church attendance as a learning experience, a social opportunity, and in some cases, as a way to please their host families. Students also used what they learned in church as a springboard for discussions about religion with their host families. Many of the students talked about exploring the similarities and differences between Christianity and Islam. As reported by the students, their host families seemed interested in learning about Islam, as well as sharing Christian beliefs and traditions. In addition to the many open discussions about religious beliefs, host families also learned about Islamic traditions and practices through watching and supporting the students in their practice of Islam. Within the host family context, religion – practicing Islam, sharing Islam, learning about

Christianity – seemed to be an enjoyable and positive experience for the exchange students.

Overall, the students talked about living with an American host family as a very positive and important part of the exchange experience. Even those who experienced conflict or tension with their host families seemed to have ended the year feeling that they had developed close and lasting personal relationships with their host families. However, it is important to note that this study did not include any exchange students who changed host families during the year due to conflict or tension with their host families. Students who could not resolve problems with their host families may very well have different feelings about the home-stay experience. At the end of the school year, the students in this study seemed quite positive about the experience of living with an American family. Bachner and Zeutschel (2009) described the host family-student relationship as a “singularly important” part of the high school exchange experience, and “the more positive one’s relationship was with the host family, the more one attributed positive impact to the exchange” (p. 59). While this study is not designed to make comparisons between relationships with host families and student satisfaction levels, the evidence does point to the key role of the host family experience in sharing cultural and religious traditions, as well as in forming close personal bonds. Furthermore, as I will discuss in Chapter 11, to the extent that the students felt they were “part of” their American family, the host family experience has important implications for discussions of ingroup-outgroup structures and contributions to peacebuilding.

## Chapter 8: Going to School and Making Friends

In this chapter, I look at the experiences of the exchange students at school. Since school is the venue in which most of the exchange students met and interacted with their friends, I include a discussion about making friends in this chapter. I begin the chapter with some observations by the students about the differences between schools in the U.S. and in their home countries. I then explore what it is like to be Muslim in an American school. How are they identified by others? How do their peers treat them? How do they practice their religion during the school day? Next, I look at the experiences of the exchange students in making friends at school. How did they make friends? Who are their friends? Finally, I discuss how the students learned about Judaism at school (recall that none of the students in this study lived with Jewish host families).

### *American Schools are Different*

As discussed in Chapter 6, the students attended many different types of schools in their home countries, including public and private schools, boarding schools, religious schools, and single-sex schools. Still, most of the students found their U.S. schools to be quite a change from the schools they were accustomed to at home. For instance, in the following passage Amar contrasts his school in Ghana with his U.S. school:

It was very, very different. I was in a boarding school in Ghana and most Ghanaian high schools are boarding schools . . . When I came here it was a day school, so you go to school and come home. And I was in an all-boys school, and I happen to be in a co-ed school here. And also, the classes, the way we choose classes are very different. Here you can choose whatever class you want. If you want all fun classes, you go for it! It was very different. (Amar, Ghana)

For some of the students, both boys and girls, attending co-educational schools was a totally new experience. As Firas explained, his American school provided an opportunity

to become friends with girls of his own age – an experience that he viewed as quite positive:

And being in a school with girls – that’s something else too because back home it’s separated. The schools are boys alone and girls alone. I came here and it was spectacular! I liked it, you know. I had the chance to talk with girls as a friend, you know, and see what they’re like. (Firas, Saudi Arabia)

Many of the students, particularly those attending schools in more urban or suburban areas, were surprised at the diversity of the student body. Khalil remarked, “Like in my school I met like forty people from out of the United States. I was really surprised when I first see this.” Aya also described her astonishment at the number of Hispanics in her community and at her school:

I felt very overwhelmed when I came here. I said, “Wow, this is United States! I can’t believe it. Am I dreaming?” . . . But when I saw the people around, I thought, “Is this really the United States?” I’m not being too racist, but I thought, “Why are there Hispanics in here in my school?” [My friend] was like, “Duh – Mexico, United States” [motions that they are close together]. Oh, okay! [laughing] (Aya, Philippines)

The exchange students noted other differences between their schools at home and in the U.S., including the behavior of the other students. A number of students, including Nisa, said they were surprised and a little uncomfortable with boys and girls showing intimacy in the hallways at school:

First I got here I was kind of surprised because American teenagers like showing intimacy in public, like kissing and hugging. I just didn’t . . . I didn’t get used to it, but now I do. (Nisa, Indonesia)

Another surprise for many of the exchange students was the seeming lack of respect that American students showed to their teachers. They watched in disbelief as students ignored their teachers’ instructions, disrupted classes with unruly behavior, or talked disrespectfully to their teachers. According to Nisa, “At school, the students can

yell back to the teacher! That surprised me a lot.” Others commented that they felt uncomfortable when fellow students did not respect their teachers, but like Nisa, they eventually “got used to it.”

Some of the students reported that at least initially, they had difficulty understanding English well enough to complete their school assignments. When I asked how they resolved this issue, several told me that they received extra help or attention from their teachers. For example, when Sitti was overwhelmed by a writing assignment, her teacher assured her that she would help her complete the essay:

I mean, vocabulary that I don't know before – it's hard . . . I understand when they talk, but it's so hard for me. Like I did remember my first class in U.S. history, they want me to write essay. Oh my God! I did not know what to do. I send them the blank paper and I told them “I am exchange student. I don't know what to do with this.” “Oh, okay. You are fine. I will teach you later.”  
(Sitti, Thailand)

Emad talked about having difficulty in his Algebra class, due to the mathematical symbols and the language. Unlike the other students, who talked about how helpful their teachers were, Emad thought his teacher was rude and disrespectful:

Algebra II [was the hardest class] . . . The communication, like the symbols, in America they're very different in English, the names of them. Second, the teacher – the teacher was very rude. He was disrespectful. I don't know why. I never asked him. Afterwards, I just got frustrated from that class and just gave up, but then I realized that I'm failing, so I have to make it better. (Emad, Saudi Arabia)

Despite the initial difficulty in this class, Emad was able to maintain a passing grade for the year.

All except one of the exchange students in this study attended public high schools during their stay in the U.S. Yusef, from Saudi Arabia, was the exception. Yusef said that he enrolled in a Catholic school because his host parents thought that “the public school wasn't that good.” Although Yusef found going to Catholic Mass each week “a

little weird,” he was able to make friends and commented that overall the experience was “completely fine.”

### ***Being Muslim at School***

Many students of the exchange students said that their peers at school did not know they were Muslim, at least at first, because they did not “look” Muslim. Furthermore, other students and teachers often made incorrect assumptions about the exchange students’ home countries. Lila, who attended a large, diverse high school, remarked in an amused tone of voice: “No one thinks I’m Muslim; they think I’m Spanish.” Mifta from Indonesia, said, “They think I’m from India sometimes. . . They don’t even know where Indonesia is and stuff and they don’t know what Islam is – like they have *no* idea!” The students from Indonesia and Thailand said that they were often mistaken for Chinese, probably because Americans were less familiar with their countries. According to Nura, “My first day at school, my friend came to me and like, ‘Do you speak Chinese?’ . . . There were a lot of people that thought I was Chinese, Japanese, Korean, or something.”

Firas said that before he was well-known at school, he was mistaken for “a black man from Africa.” Wafa, who regularly attended church with her host family, commented that her friends were “shocked” to find out that she was Muslim. Her friends (whom she saw both at church and at school) knew that she was an exchange student from Turkey, but did not know that she was Muslim:

At first they didn’t know that I was Muslim because I was going to church with them [laughing]. I think they thought Muslim people would look different, but I look this way, so they weren’t expecting me to be a Muslim. (Wafa, Turkey)

Several other students, including Yusef, said that people made assumptions about both nationality and religion based on appearances:

Actually, they thought I was Mexican because they said, “Well, you’re fluent in English and you have the dark skin.” They thought I was Mexican, so they thought I was Christian. (Yusef, Saudi Arabia)

Many of the girls remarked that other students at school did not identify them as Muslim because they did not wear the hijab: “I don’t wear a veil, so people wouldn’t really recognize that I’m Muslim.” (Nisa, Indonesia) And sometimes even the girls who wore the hijab were not identified as Muslims. As Sitti explains, wearing the hijab made her stand out from their classmates, but she still had to explain about being Muslim:

But like two of my five friends at my high school here, they said, “So you are wearing that for fashion or something?” I said, “No, it’s part of my religion.” [laughing] Hello! Because like, sometimes nobody know, that doesn’t know we’re Muslims. (Sitti, Thailand)

### Acceptance

Through casual conversations, or sometimes through classroom presentations, the exchange students eventually revealed to others at school that they were Muslim.

Overall, the exchange students said that they felt accepted by friends, classmates and teachers. A number of the students remarked that their teachers and administrators respected their religion and were very willing to make accommodations so they could do their prayers at school. For example, Ismeena shared her experience:

I’m talking about this girl and she’s Muslim too – my friend from Syria. And we had to stay after school for tennis and we have to pray in between like to go after school. So they had this room for us that was open for us and it was really respectful. I did not expect that. I think a lot of people like understood . . . Like old people, like adults and principal and all. They respect it so much. Like, we had our own room. It was really nice . . . The main thing, they were respectful. (Ismeena, Egypt)

Ismeena went on to say that, for the most part, the other students at her school were also respectful:

Like most people know about it [Islam]. Like, “Oh you are? You cannot eat pork at lunchtime. Oh, okay.” Like, some people question, which is really nice and okay, and some are just, “Oh, whatever.” But overall, most of the people understood and they were real respectful. (Ismeena, Egypt)

Lila, who attended a large, diverse high school, commented that “all the students accept our religion.” Firas, on the other hand, said that students in his school did not seem to care much about his religion:

Nobody cares if I’m Muslim or not here. They’re like, “Oh you’re Muslim.” They said, “All right, cool.” . . . It’s cool. It’s different, but they don’t care at all. Like, “What is your religion?” No, they don’t say that. Nobody asks that. (Firas, Saudi Arabia)

Rani thought that her friends did not “mind” that she was Muslim because they were teenagers:

I told my friends that I am a Muslim but they are okay with that. Since they are teens, they don’t mind. They never treated me like “you are a terrorist” or “you are somebody different among us.” No, my friends are really good, so I never had any kind of problem regarding my religion. (Rani, India)

This sentiment was echoed by others including Wafa who remarked, “No one like told me that I was a terrorist or I was a bad person since I was Muslim.” Yusef, who attended a Catholic school, also said that he felt accepted at school:

I thought it was gonna be bad because they wouldn’t accept a Muslim there, but then when I went there, it was okay. And I got to know different people and they weren’t all Catholic. I had a lot of Catholic friends, but I had Jewish friends too, and there was one Muslim there, so he was happy when I got there. (Yusef, Saudi Arabia)

Similarly, Ahmed remarked that he did not experience any discrimination due to his religion:

No, that [discrimination] didn't happen actually. People were so nice from the beginning. Maybe they treated me in a different way for other reasons, but not for religion. Maybe just the fact that they didn't like me, for example, or a situation happened at school in class or something – not like religious or anything. Everybody was totally interested and cool with me being from Egypt.  
(Ahmed, Egypt)

Nura, too, found that she was not judged on the basis of her religion. She felt that her peers at high school were more interested in her personality:

In my high school, people are not judging you like what your religion is, or like where you came from but . . . First of all they look for your personality – like how fun. What makes us want to be your friend? I think that's it. (Nura, Indonesia)

As is evident from the remarks above, most of the students felt both accepted and respected by other students and teachers at school. Although the general tone was one of acceptance, when I asked questions about prejudice, 9/11, and terrorism some of the students described incidents in which they (or friends) were called terrorists, or times that they heard negative remarks about Islam. Since these incidents did not seem to override the students' general feeling of acceptance at school, I will address these issues in the next chapter when I examine how the students fulfilled their role as young ambassadors.

### Prayers

As discussed in Chapter 6, in their home countries, some of the exchange students were accustomed to doing their prayers during the school day, and a few were concerned about how they would manage their prayers in American schools. Generally, the students found that teachers and school administrators tried to be understanding and accommodating about their religion. When students asked for a place to pray at school they were usually given space in the library or an unused classroom (as Ismeena described above). Lila, who attended a large, diverse suburban high school, remarked

that “Whenever we need something for Muslim people or anything, they will do it for us. They’ll make us anything for to practice our religion.” Nisa, too, found that she could pray at school and remarked that practicing her religion “went well for her.” She describes praying in a classroom before the start of an after-school activity:

Back in winter when I was still busy with poms, you know, staying after school and everything, I used to pray in my teacher’s room, and she loved me . . . I pray in my teacher’s room pretty much every day if I stay after school.

(Nisa, Indonesia)

While some students made arrangements to do their prayers at school, others, like Ahmed, said they just prayed at home because at school “there’s not much space and prayer times are during class or something like that.” Others, like Dana, noted that if they could not pray at school, they could combine their prayers and do them later, but this approach was not always easy:

Sometimes, like at school, we have to pray five times a day. But we can combine it, so that’s the dispensation. So if we are traveling are doing something like going to school, we can combine it. So it is nice. But if you really think about it, it is hard. It feels like you would get full credit on time, but like my school is out at 2:30 and I missed my mid-day prayer, and I have to combine it with the prayer before the sunset. And then, like if I’m really strict and I don’t want to miss it, maybe I will pray in the library and just ask the teacher to get out – and it’s really hard. (Dana, Indonesia)

None of the students reported being told that they could not pray at school, but many apparently chose not to pray during school hours for one reason or another.

### Ramadan

As noted in the previous chapter, all of the students (with the exception of Amar) started out with the intention of fasting for the entire month of Ramadan. However, only about half of the students completed the fast. All of the students talked about how challenging it was to maintain a fast during the school day when their peers were not

fasting, and most had never heard of Ramadan. Lila described her frustration with trying to fast at school:

It was really hard. It's hard when everyone is eating here. I have a couple friends that are fasting at school, but it's hard when . . . In my country when I'm fasting, everyone is fasting, so you feel like it's okay – it's normal. But here you feel like you want to eat something because everyone is eating. (Lila, Saudi Arabia)

Sometimes their American friends seemed to struggle to understand why they were fasting. In the following quotation, Anggita tried to reassure her friends that she is fine and wants to fast because it is part of her religion:

My friends are like, "I feel so sorry for you." I'm like, "It's fine really. I do this my entire life. Really it's okay." "Oh my God, I wouldn't do that if I were you." I'm like, "Oops, that's my religion – sorry!" (Anggita, Indonesia)

A few students talked about being teased by their friends at school. Aya recounts how her friends' teasing, although in a light-hearted way, made fasting more difficult:

There was a little bit of a problem about fasting because other people were tempting me to eat. "Aya, look, I have a bag of chips in my hand! Aren't you getting hungry?" I'm like, "You are so mean!" [laughing] (Aya, Philippines)

While some of the students, such as Lila, were accustomed to situations in which everyone at school and in the community was fasting, Aya explained that being the only one fasting was nothing new for her. She remarked that her friends in the U.S. were not any different from her friends in the Philippines, where she had attended school with many non-Muslims:

I was like, oh my God, there's no . . . this is no different from my friends back home! They do the same thing at home: "Aya, look. Aya, I have a soda, look." I just like, oh my God, I'm so hungry that I can't wait until 6:00! Oh my God, my saliva is like flowing out of my mouth – and I just laugh! But, you know, no matter what you do, I'm not going to eat! (Aya, Philippines)

A number of the students attended large, diverse schools in which there were at least a few other Muslim students. I asked Nisa whether she got together with the other

Muslim students in her school during Ramadan. She responded, “A lot of friends of mine that I know right now are Muslim, but I just didn’t know them then.” For Nisa, and for several of the other students, Ramadan fell so early in the school year that they hadn’t yet “found” the other Muslim students in their schools who might have provided some support and companionship during the month of fasting.

Many of the students coped with fasting at school by avoiding the lunch room altogether. This was sometimes a delicate balance because the students wanted to make new friends at school, but at the same time they did not want to be teased or tempted to break their fast. According to Emad, from Saudi Arabia, “I don’t want to see the food because then I will die! So I just go outside and just play, or find someone to talk to.” Other students, however, stayed in the lunch room and took the opportunity to talk with their friends about Ramadan and the significance of the fast (I will provide examples of this in the next chapter).

Even aside from the lunch period, getting through a full day of classes with no food or water was difficult for the exchange students. While school activities and schedules in their home countries may be adjusted during Ramadan, the students found that the pace of life in the U.S. does not slow down. Many of the students talked about how they dealt with physical education (PE) class. Generally, when they informed their PE teachers that they were fasting, the students were permitted to cut back (but not totally stop) their physical activity. Lila commented that her PE teacher told her to “work out, but not that much – just slow down a little bit.” Even so, she remarked that “you really get tired!” Rani, too, remembers that any kind of physical effort was difficult:

Rani: During those times I was doing a lot of things in gym too. Even the running – when I was fasting they made me to run.

*Carol: The gym teacher told you to run, even after you said you were fasting?*

Rani: I started running because I thought I could do it. Then I stopped and I told her that I am fasting and I can't do it. And they said, "Okay, don't do it." But then we were doing some other things too in the gym and I could not, you know, just get out of that activity and do nothing. They said, "At least you will have to do something, otherwise you will get zero." But that was such a hard time during Ramadan. (Rani, India)

Participation in social events and after school activities also involved food and posed challenges to the students. Anggita laughed as she described her experience at a high school football game:

I remember the football game. I watch football games with my friends and then, you know, there are like french fries and hamburgers . . . Football game usually start five minutes before the sunset, so I'm like, ten minutes from now at sunset I'm gonna get to the counter and buy french fries and then like five minutes before sunset, I'm like oh my God! . . . Then we already have the *Islamicfinder.com* so you can tell what time it is. So, I'm like, oh my God, this is the time and I'm just gonna eat that french fry! It was fun, actually. (Anggita, Indonesia)

A number of the students took part in school sports, including soccer and track teams. Mostly they described the heat and the difficulty in participating in practices and competitions without drinking water. Some of the students, including Firas, skipped an occasional day of fasting while they were participating in sports:

It was hard. I was having soccer during Ramadan and school every day. And it was hot too! And I almost made it! It was rough . . . I missed a couple days, like five days. That's it. (Firas, Saudi Arabia)

Those involved in sports said that in general their coaches recognized their religious commitments and encouraged them to participate as much as they could. With great enthusiasm, Dana recounted her experience at a track event. It was meaningful to her that she was accepted as part of the team, and that the other parents offered words of encouragement and support:

And then I ran when I fasted in Ramadan. And they appreciate me a lot when I did it. The coach will say to me, “You don’t have to do 3.5 miles. You can just stop in one mile. You are part of our team, but you can just stop there because you can’t drink after that.” And every family . . . because we ran, and then there is my friend’s family – they came to watch. And they will just say, “Oh, you’re fasting. Oh my God, you did really good!” (Dana, Indonesia)

Aya’s statement to her friends that “no matter what you do, I’m not going to eat,” as well as Anggita’s comment above that “it’s my religion – sorry,” demonstrate that despite teasing and questioning, and despite having to watch others’ eat and drink, many of the students tried to adhere to the fast and to their religious commitment. According to Dana, what kept her going during Ramadan was the knowledge that “It’s not like somebody forced you to do it. You want it and you do it.”

### ***Making Friends***

As discussed in Chapter 6, prior to their arrival in the U.S., many of the exchange students worried about making friends here. Would other students talk to them or would they be left to ride the bus or eat their lunch alone? In the first days at school, many of the students were relieved to find that other teens did talk to them and, as described by Lila, were generally “friendlier than I thought.” On the first day of school, Anggita was pleased to find that her movie-based stereotype of American teenagers did not hold true:

But at school, I was really afraid my first day of school. I thought they’re gonna be kind of like *Mean Girls* movie, you know? I was so afraid because of that movie. But people, like my first day, I rode my school bus by myself. You know, it’s pretty much scary for me. I sat in the back. It was like, “Oh, okay, a lot of Americans here!” [laughing] But after that there was this guy who sat beside me, and then I was like, “Do you know where the guidance is?” And he was like, “Sure I can show the guidance office.” And then I go to guidance and people are pretty much friendly. And then when I got to the home room, there is one girl sat beside me. She’s like, “Hey, where you come from?” And then she asked me to talk and stuff . . . That’s not what I expected. People here are pretty much friendly. So I was really surprised of that. (Anggita, Indonesia)

Emad, too, was happily surprised to find that his American peers were friendly:

Well, like before I came [to the U.S.], I thought it was gonna be like weird for me because I wouldn't know how to deal with those people, but when I go there and went to school, it was friendly. Everybody there was friendly.  
(Emad, Saudi Arabia)

Generally, the exchange students described their peers at school as friendly and approachable, but that is not to say that making friends was an easy process. Indeed, many found that making friends was their biggest challenge of the exchange year.

Amar's comment was typical: "My biggest challenge here was making friends . . . It's not a problem at all in Ghana, so it is a big problem for me here – taking a while to make friends, or working hard to get friends was a challenge." The first weeks, and sometimes the first few months, at school were difficult and lonely for many of the students. Aya from the Philippines explains, "Well, at first, I just felt so isolated. I thought, 'Oh my God, how am I gonna be able to do this?' I was like, 'I want to go home!' I was just in a state of isolation!"

The common practice in American high schools of changing classes for each subject was a surprise to many of the exchange students. It also afforded them fewer opportunities to get to know other teens because they might only see most students for a short period each day. This practice, coupled with the perception that many American students seemed to have known each other since primary school, made it difficult for the exchange students to make friends. In the quotation below, Yara reflects on her experience making friends in a small-town high school:

I think it is hard for me . . . I have friends, but we get closer in my country because we share the classroom . . . but here, like in the morning in this class you have this set of people and then in another class you have another set of people,

just like, okay, so meet another group of student again. So it's just like . . . I don't know, it just like feel a little bit hard for me to make friends I think.  
(Yara, Thailand)

Amar had a similar experience with making friends at school. In this passage, he uses the pronoun “us,” as if speaking for all exchange students:

And one thing, at the end of each period or class you walk from one classroom to another, which was very different. And that was one of the problems that struck us. It was difficult to get friends when you were changing friends every day. So it was difficult to get to know somebody very well. (Amar, Ghana)

While most of the students cited changing classes as part of the problem in making friends, Ismeena thought that changing classes afforded her an opportunity to meet more students and to socialize in the hallways between classes:

It was just like, the school over there [in Egypt], we sit in the same class and the teachers rotate around and all. Here the teachers have their own rooms and we rotate and all. Here it's better like to get to meet more people. Things like between class you go and meet other friends and all. Here it's better, I think.  
(Ismeena, Egypt)

Many of the students, however, found that it was difficult to get past the casual “hellos” exchanged in the hallway. Almost across the board, students discovered that they had to take the initiative to reach out to their schoolmates in order to find friends, as Rani explains below:

So I thought that when I go there [to school], they would kind of come to me or something, or they would want to make friends is what I thought. But this didn't happen. Then I decided that I would have to do something. I went in the group and I started talking, talking, talking. Then I made a couple friends. But in the beginning it was hard making friends. (Rani, India)

When I asked how they made friends, Sitti, a young woman from Thailand, said, “Smile! . . . And then we just talk. ‘How are you?’ And, ‘What is your name?’ You have to be talkative.” Firas, from Saudi Arabia, adopted a strategy of being extremely friendly and outgoing, saying “hello” to everyone he met. Firas lived in a rural area and attended

high school in a nearby town in which there were very few people from other countries.

It wasn't long before everyone in the school knew who he was and where he was from:

Everybody, when I passed in the hall, "Hi" and "Hi" and "Hi," because I was the one who talk. I was like, "Hi, my name is Firas, and I'm from Saudi Arabia. How are you doing?" And I was asking questions like, "In my home we have this and this. You don't have that. Why?" So they ask a lot of questions to me too, so almost all the school know about an exchange student from Saudi Arabia! And even in the news . . . like one day they put in the news, "Oh it's warm in here. We need water. We feel like we're in Saudi Arabia. Let's ask Firas, how is it there?" . . . It was quite fun, and I laughed a lot on that! And I know everybody, and I say, "Hi" and everything. . . . Then you make friends.<sup>91</sup> (Firas, Saudi Arabia)

For many students, especially those less outgoing, the key to making friends was joining organized school activities and clubs. Nisa remarked that she had difficulty making friends for the first "six or seven months" of the ten month-long exchange program:

Honestly, almost the first six or seven months, it's kind of hard for me to find friends, believe it or not. It was really hard. I was very quiet in the first day, in the first month. I was really, really quiet. But then it came to fall when it was the dance concert. Then people start to recognize me because, you know, I can dance. In the winter I joined poms and recently I just finished my dance concert, so people like recognize me: "Oh yeah, that's Nisa, she's an exchange student." That really helps. And I did presentations in classes about programs about Indonesia, so people recognize me from there. So, it started to get easier to find friends. (Nisa, Indonesia)

Later in the interview, Nisa described her friends in terms of school activities:

I have friends from cheerleading, I have friends from poms, I have friends from the newspaper, from choir, from the dance, from football team . . . I just have a lot of friends. (Nisa, Indonesia)

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<sup>91</sup> As I clarified later, by "put it in the news," Firas meant the school news on the morning announcements.

Oh, you're the exchange student!

As is evident from the statements of Nisa and Firas above, “exchange student” became part of the students’ identities while in the U.S. In many cases, it seemed to give them a unique role and status in school. Their fellow students, as well as many teachers, often found the exchange student role a fascinating one – wanting to know more about the exchange students’ home countries, what they thought of the U.S., and what it was like to be an exchange student. As related by Ismeena, “They really seem to think it’s cool coming from Egypt. That’s how it starts mostly. And they just want to know more, and we start talking about it.”

Some of the exchange students attended large, diverse high schools in which they were not initially viewed as very different from others in the student body. They commented that they had expected to “stand out” (something they had discussed in their orientation sessions), and were surprised that their American peers did not immediately approach them and want to know all about their home countries and cultures. However, when the students became identified as “exchange students,” regardless of the diversity of the school attended, they seemed to take on a special identity. Being identified as an exchange student opened channels of communication between the exchange students and their peers, and ultimately helped the YES students to form friendships. Anggita remarked that other students would remember her because she was different:

It’s kind of a benefit for us because people know you because you’re different.  
“Oh, what’s your name?” And they’re gonna remember you.  
(Anggita, Indonesia)

Sitti, and Yara, both of whom wore the hijab, talked about their experiences at school:

And then they . . . my friends came to me. “Uh . . . oh, where are you from? . . . You are foreign exchange student?” “Yeah, I am.” “And, where are you from?” And they start to talking with me and ask me about religion and being my close friend. That’s it. (Sitti, Thailand)

It was funny. First time I get to school, like everybody looking at me. “What? Why are you like wearing that?” Okay, and then like, everybody in school know me because of my head scarf. And like, “Oh yeah, you are foreign exchange student.” . . . And then they ask about my religion and stuff and we talk. (Yara, Thailand)

Aya attended a large, diverse suburban high school. She explained how her exchange student identity helped her make friends in her new school:

And I started having friends in classes. And I’m like, “Hey everybody, I’m Aya and I’m a new student here, and I’m an exchange student.” The funny thing was I had the same responses: “Really? Cool! Oh my God, I really wanted to be an exchange student too! How is it like in there? Do you like it here?” (Aya, Philippines)

### Friends from Everywhere

Eventually, all of the participants did make friends, and most said they had developed very close friendships over the year. Their friends, as the exchange students described them, seemed to fall into three broad categories:

- Other exchange students (including, but not limited to, YES students)
- Students from other countries and cultures (or whose parents were from other countries). Friends in this category were often described as having been born in the U.S., or having lived here a long time.
- American students (including African-American and white students)

Most of the students talked about having friends from each of these categories. Many mentioned having close friends who were also exchange students. YES students are

generally placed in “clusters” of three to five students in one geographic area, but there are often other exchange students in the area too. Exchange students (who do not necessarily attend the same schools) get to know each other through social or educational activities organized by the local coordinators. This geographic “clustering” of exchange students provides a built-in friendship group. Friendship with other exchange students provided support for the students as they journeyed through their exchange year together. At the same time, because exchange students from many different countries were often placed in one geographic area, the friendships between exchange students often crossed cultural, ethnic, and religious barriers.

While all of the students talked about making friends with other exchange students, these were not their only friends:

My best friend is [an exchange student] because we always hang out together. And her host family is not far from my house either, but I also have many friends from America . . . I love my American friends so much! (Sitti, Thailand)

Not surprisingly, exchange students placed in areas with large international populations tended to have many friends from other countries or cultures. Lila, from Saudi Arabia, describes her friends in a large, suburban school: “I had a lot of friends from like different cultures. I had American friends, Spanish, Indian, and from Bangladesh.” In the following quotes, Amar and Ahmed describe their friends, including exchange students, students from other countries, and American friends:

The AFS friends were my best friends. Some of them were in my school and others were not. Those in my school were always my closest friends. And the other students I found in school were, I don’t know how to describe . . . some of them were of different backgrounds, but they are now Americans because they live here, but they were not necessarily Americans. Like, some of my friends were Ghanaians too, from my country, so we were close and talking all the time. But basically, most of them were Americans. (Amar, Ghana)

Well, from AFS I've known a lot of different people from different countries and from school I've known some American friends here. One of my best friends, like my best friend here, is actually from Israel. She's Muslim though, but she's from Israel. (Ahmed, Egypt)

It was clear from the students' comments that their friendships were very important to them. Many talked about how much they "loved" their friends. For instance, Nisa, who described such difficulty finding friends, remarked, "I make friends with a lot of people. Thank God that I have a lot of friends from different groups and they've been really nice to me. And I love them so much!" As quoted above, Sitti, from Thailand, said that the best thing about being an exchange student was meeting American friends "I love my American friends so much! That's my best thing." Since it was the end of the school year, the students were starting to think about leaving their friends and going home. Aya describes her friends' reactions to her impending departure:

This year is terrific! I had fun in the school. They're like, "You're gonna come back." And, I'm like, "Yeah, I'm gonna come back – hopefully." "We're going to kill you if not!" [laughing] . . . I just feel the bonding is strong between me and my friends. (Aya, Philippines)

### Learning about Judaism

Most of the exchange students learned about Christianity primarily through interactions with their host families or by accompanying their host families to church. However, since none of the students in this study lived with Jewish families, what they learned about Judaism was primarily through the friends they met at school. Particularly the students in large, suburban schools had the opportunity to interact with, and make friends with, Jewish teenagers. Nisa, who had several Jewish friends including a young man from Israel, describes how learning about Judaism was a "cool" experience that she did not have in Indonesia:

It's like in my country, there's no Jewish. Like, we know that Jewish exist but it's not that a lot of people are Jewish in my country. I don't know at all about Jewish, I don't know about Hebrew, I don't know about Yiddish. When I got here, oh there are some of my friends who are Jewish. I knew them a lot, and I kind of like explore it more, and it's kind of like, "Oh yeah, you're Jewish. Your big holiday is this and you speak Hebrew. Oh yeah, it's like Muslims speak Arabic." You know, that kind of stuff. It's like really cool. I mean, I didn't really . . . like, I was kind of spacey when I was in Indonesia. Okay, a Jewish exists, but I have never seen them really before. Like I've never face them in the real life. So, yeah, that's really cool. I mean I didn't get this kind of experience back home. (Nisa, Indonesia)

Several of the students mentioned that they learned about the Holocaust in their classes at school. A few of the students even visited the Holocaust museum in Washington, D.C. Lila remarked that visiting the Holocaust museum was one of her most memorable times. Her host family took her there because she was studying the Holocaust in school at the time:

That was real interesting. I liked it, especially because I was studying about it at school that time. I just like understood more about it and how Jews was treated and their culture from a long time ago and how everything was going on. It was scary but . . . it was really interesting. (Lila, Saudi Arabia)

Aya (whose mother in the Philippines converted to Islam from Christianity) was also interested to meet Jewish teenagers and to learn more about Judaism at school, both from her class and from her friends:

What I'm really exposed to [at school] is more Jewish people . . . I learned some things in my English class, especially when [the teacher] gave us a chance to watch that movie. And she let us read a book about the Holocaust. . . It was when all the Jewish people were killed. I was just so interested about it . . . They [her Jewish friends] were like . . . "Oh, we're going to synagogue." And I'm like, "What is that?" I read that word but I don't know what that means. So, they explain a lot about it. (Aya, Philippines)

Ahmed, too, had a Jewish friend at school. He explained that he respected his friend's religion and tried to learn about Judaism and its similarities and differences with Islam:

That [being friends] wasn't a problem at all. We know that we worship one God, but in different ways. And I'm not that person who will judge you – why do you follow this religion and do that? That's not my job. It's not my job to tell people, to ask them to change their ways of how they worship God because this goes back to them, between them and God. I've got nothing to do with it. So, why not talk to people like that and just have friends that way, and learn from them how they worship God in different ways. (Ahmed, Egypt)

Interestingly, Ahmed stated that it was not his “job” to question or to judge others with respect to their religion. In the next chapter, I explore how the exchange students describe their “job.”

### *Summary and Discussion*

The exchange students found that American schools were quite different from schools in their home countries. Many of the students remarked on the common practice in American schools of changing classes during the school day. Most of the students found this hampered their efforts to get to know other teenagers. Some of the students also commented on the disrespectful behavior and lack of discipline of their fellow students. Academically, some of the students reported difficulties, particularly related to language. In all but one case, the students said that their teachers were understanding and provided extra help when needed. While the schools were quite different from what they were accustomed to, all of the exchange students eventually “got used to it” and adapted to their new school environments.

Identity was an interesting issue for the exchange students. They found that fellow students (and sometimes teachers) often made assumptions about their ethnic, cultural, or religious identity based on their physical appearance – and most times those assumptions were wrong. When the students told others where they were from, they were surprised to find that their peers knew little or nothing about their home countries.

Furthermore, most of the exchange students (sometimes including the girls who wore the hijab) were not identified as Muslim until they shared that information with their peers, at which time their peers were often surprised.

Eventually, all of the students became identified as “the exchange student.” Being an exchange student was a role and identity that American students (and teachers) could readily understand. For the most part, the students reported that their American peers were interested in their experiences and thought it was “cool” to be an exchange student. “Exchange student,” then, became an important identity for each of the students. It provided a way for their American peers to understand who they were and why they were in their school. This new identity gave the students a topic of conversation with their peers, and helped them to form friendships. (The exchange students then used their friendships as a way to share information about their countries and about Islam, which is the topic of the next chapter.) Overall, the exchange student identity seemed to be a very positive identity – one that was seen as attractive and special by fellow students.

It is interesting that the exchange students in this study did not seem to face many of the identity issues raised in studies of Muslim-American youth (Sirin & Fine, 2008). The exchange students did not have “hyphenated” identities (Sirin & Fine, 2008), but instead were quite comfortable in their own identities – national, cultural, religious, as well as the new identity of exchange student. They knew that they were in the U.S. for a short period of time and could, therefore, remain comfortable in their own identities. Their formal presentations about their countries (which will be discussed in Chapter 9) served to reinforce their cultural and ethnic identities. In their daily lives, then, the exchange students straddled cultures, but not identities.

For the most part, the students in this study reported that they felt respected and accepted at school, both by teachers and by peers. Indeed, many students used the word “respect” to describe how others treated them at school. It is difficult to determine the extent to which the exchange student identity was instrumental in promoting this respect and appreciation. As described in Chapter 2, American Muslims do not always feel this level of respect and acceptance at school. This is not to say, however, that the exchange students did not encounter any prejudice or discrimination based on religion or ethnicity. They recounted a number of incidents of name-calling and negative stereotyping (which I will describe in the next chapter). Yet, they seemed to feel that these negative experiences were isolated cases and were not representative of how most people treated them at school.

One might ask why the exchange students in this study seemed to feel so little prejudice or discrimination. I believe this was probably due to a combination of factors. In part, the students may have expected a certain amount of prejudice (particularly being labeled as terrorists), so it did not alarm them when it happened. Also, as described in Chapter 6, the students were motivated to help improve understanding about Islam, so they may have viewed instances of prejudice or discrimination as opportunities to teach Americans about Islam – in other words, as part of their “job” as exchange students. Another possibility is that the very positive “exchange student identity” protected the students somewhat from negative behavior of their peers. They were not generally known at school as “Muslim students”; they were known as “exchange students.”

Furthermore, most of the students in this study were from Asia, and the majority were young women – characteristics that do not fit with the usual stereotype of the

Middle Eastern terrorist. Since the students were often not identified by their peers as being Muslim, it is not surprising that they were spared some of the prejudice often related to their religion in the U.S. Indeed, many of the students said that they talked with their friends about their religion *after* they became friends. These friends had the opportunity to relate to the exchange students as individuals – as friends – rather than as stereotypes of Islam or the Middle East. According to the exchange students, their friends did not make judgments about their religion. Whether this was because they were more interested in their personalities (as noted by Nura), or because they simply were not interested in religion (as cited by Firas) is difficult to say. What seems clear, though, is that friendships were probably instrumental in lessening the incidences of prejudice and discrimination experienced by the exchange students.

As far as practicing Islam at school, none of the students reported that it was a problem. Students who wanted to pray during or after school were generally given space to pray in an unused classroom or the library. Many of the students, however, said that they did not pray at school because they did not have time. Some chose to combine their mid-day prayers with later prayers so they would not have to make arrangements to pray during school. Ramadan was a challenging time for all of the students. Some students chose to avoid the lunchroom all together, while others sat with their friends and took the opportunity to talk with them about Islam. Some teachers, particularly PE teachers, permitted the students to lower their level of participation during Ramadan. However, all of the students remarked that it was difficult to get through the school day when their peers were not fasting.

For many of the exchange students, making friends was one of their biggest challenges of the exchange year. The students expected to have difficulty making friends (as cited in Chapter 6), and indeed, many of them did have trouble making friends. Although they found their American peers to be generally friendly (and often friendlier than they had expected), the exchange students found that it took time and effort to form close friendships. They also found that they had to be the one to reach out to American peers. By the end of the school year, however, all of the students had made friends, and many talked about how sad they would be to leave their new-found friends.

According to the students' descriptions, their friendships could be divided into three broad categories: other exchange students; students from other countries (or who had parents from other countries); and American students (including various racial and religious groups). This categorization varies somewhat from the way foreign students' friends are often described in the literature (Furnham & Bochner, 1986; Ward et. al., 2001), particularly in that the exchange students did not describe their closest friends as being from their home country. This divergence may be explained at least in part by the fact that many of the exchange students attended schools in which few, if any, other students were from their home countries. (This would, perhaps, be a less likely scenario for international college students, the target population of most research on friendship patterns.)

Home country nationals aside, exchange students from a variety of countries (possibly including the home country) provided an important friendship group for the students in this study. Several of the students said that their best friend was another exchange student. Other exchange students would be a natural support group since they

would be going through similar experiences – living with a host family, going to an American school, and trying to negotiate a new culture.

Not all of the students, however, said their best friend was an exchange student. Some described their closest friends as “American” or from another country. A few of the students declined to designate a “best” friend at all, saying that they had many friends with different backgrounds. Friends falling into the category of “from another country” were often described as students who had lived in the U.S. a long time, perhaps their entire lives. Furthermore, the term “American” encompasses a huge amount of diversity and I did not delve deeply into what the students meant by this term, other than that they recognized these friends as being “from” the United States.

An interesting finding in this study was that many of the students, particularly those in more urban areas, talked about having Jewish friends and learning about Jewish beliefs and traditions from their friends. Since all of the students in this study lived with Christian families (except Ismeena), their main exposure to Judaism was through people they met at school. Some of their Jewish friends were from other countries (primarily Israel), and others from the U.S. In other words, they did not fit neatly into one of the above categories. It is likely that there is considerable overlap between these friendship categories, as the students described their friends based on their own perspectives.

Based on past research (Bachner & Zeutchel, 1994; Hull, 1978; Klineberg & Hull, 1979; Ward et al., 2001) and on my own observations, I think it is likely that the exchange students in this study relied on their American friends and probably their friends with international backgrounds (who had been here longer than the exchange students) as culture guides to help them navigate daily life as a teenager in the U.S. They

most likely relied on their exchange student friends for emotional and moral support as they journeyed together through the year. Overall, it is safe to say that the exchange students in this study did not limit their friendships to any one group of people. To the contrary, they described their friends as very diverse – including other exchange students and students with international backgrounds, as well as “typical Americans.”

## Chapter 9: Young Ambassadors

The focus of this chapter is how the exchange students carry out their role as young ambassadors. The YES program was designed to “promote mutual understanding and respect” between people in the U.S. and the Muslim world (U.S. Department of State, 2008a). One of the goals of the YES program is to “Enhance Americans’ understanding of the foreign students’ countries and cultures” (U.S. Department of State, 2005). Furthermore, YES students selected for the program have been identified as outstanding “young ambassadors” with leadership potential (PAX, 2008). In the following pages, then, I look at how the students in this study interpreted and carried out this ambassadorial role.

I begin this chapter by discussing the students’ perception of their “job” as YES exchange students. In the next section, I relate what the students said about their American peers’ knowledge regarding their countries and cultures. The bulk of the chapter is devoted to discussing how the students fulfilled their role as young ambassadors – by making formal presentations, and by engaging in everyday conversations at school and in the community. I examine the content of their presentations and conversations, as well as their reactions to questions and stereotypes. I look at what happened when the students were called terrorists, and how they often turned these negative experiences into positive teaching opportunities. In Chapter 7, I discussed how the students shared their religious beliefs and traditions with their host families. Most of this chapter, then, is focused on the students’ experiences at school. However, in the final section I talk about some of the students’ interactions with the larger community.

### *It's my job*

As reported in Chapter 6, many of the students said they were motivated to participate in the exchange by a desire to help change Americans' attitudes about their countries and Islam. Moreover, it was clear from the interviews that the exchange students perceived one of their key roles as representational – as young ambassadors. Rani summed up this role in her statement, “I think that my job is to represent my country, my culture and my language.” All of the students talked in some way about the commitment they felt to doing their “job,” and promoting understanding between Americans and people in their home countries. Anggita, for example, was committed to “making a difference”:

Our job is, for me, is to make a difference – to change at least, not change people's minds, but a little bit make a better understanding here. And to my friends – what terrorists are like, like we were talking about before, and the terrorism, and the Muslims. And about my country too – I wanted to promote my country. Indonesia has a lot of things and cultures, and I think that's our purpose. (Anggita, Indonesia)

Many of the students, such as Israa, described their job as one of correcting negative stereotypes, particularly about Islam:

My mission was to tell them that stereotyping is not the right thing. I change [Americans'] perspective about Islam, because people only see Islam from the TV or from the news about terrorist activities, but I told them that they don't represent us at all. (Israa, Indonesia)

Lila said she wanted “to prove to other people that there's like a difference between Muslims and terrorists.” In the following quote, Ahmed explains how after a trip to the site of the World Trade Center in New York he became more committed to promoting mutual understanding between Americans and Muslims:

Then when I came here I realized even more when I talked to people about 9/11, and people start talking about it like around during September and October – that

period that people started to talk about it a lot. I realized how people got hurt. It was kind of like we, not we, but they, broke their wings down and they're kind of afraid that something bad might happen because it already happened. So, it was just like they need help. And we all need help to stop these things from happening anymore. And I visited Ground Zero in New York, and it was just horrible. So, I just took the decision that here I should be doing something to help in teaching the people here and there about what happened, and like what our religion tell us about that. (Ahmed, Egypt)

Anggita remarked that sharing information about their countries and religion, as well as promoting mutual understanding was the responsibility of all of the YES exchange students: "I believe that we *all* can do that. Why not? That's my opinion." Later in the interview, Anggita related how she reprimanded one of her friends for not doing his "job" as a YES exchange student:

There are a lot of exchange students that forget about what they're doing here. Like one of my friends, and I ask him, "Hey what are you doing? Do you have a lot of presentations? And, "Do you do a lot of activities?" And then, "What are people asking you and stuff?" And he is like, "No I don't do presentations." "Why?" "I don't want to. I'm scared," he said. . . I said, "Why? It's just not you that has a big school." He should have at least talk with people so at least they know. . . I remind him why we're here. "You got a scholarship. It's not like free scholarship. You have to do something!" (Anggita, Indonesia)

### ***Where did you say you are from?***

While they were prepared to represent their countries and religion to American audiences, many of the students were dismayed to discover that their American peers knew little or nothing about their home countries – and often could not even locate their countries on a map:

"Where's Indonesia? Isn't that part of India?" "No! Indonesia is really far from India! It's closer to Australia and China." [laughing] (Mifta, Indonesia)

Firas had a similar experience in telling one of his classmates about Saudi Arabia:

I said, "I'm from Saudi Arabia." She said, "Oh, really? Is that . . . part of the USA?" I said, "Saudi Arabia is a whole different country in the Middle East!"

But, geography – if they would just have a geography class everything would be perfect! (Firas, Saudi Arabia)

According to Nisa, even a substitute teacher in her history class was not familiar with Indonesia: “Some people they’ve never heard of Indonesia. Even one of my substitute teacher, she doesn’t know where Indonesia is. She never heard of it!”

The exchange students considered many of the questions asked by their classmates to be quite “silly,” and yet they patiently answered them, as Lila and Firas explained:

They ask me about the camels [laughing] and stuff like that. And they told me if the pictures [in her slide show] are real, or is it like we have desert, or do we live in a desert or something like that. I told them that the camels are in the desert and part of our country is a desert, but everyone lives in the city. (Lila, Saudi Arabia)

[They ask] a lot of silly questions . . . They asked me once, “Do you have a flying carpet like Aladdin?” I said, “No” [laughing] Or cell phones. They ask, “Do you have cable?” . . . stuff like this. A lot of questions – I can’t even count them. . . Give them just what you know about your country. (Firas, Saudi Arabia)

Nura remarked that once the other students felt comfortable with her and started asking questions, she encouraged them so that they would learn from her:

When you got like that, close in to them, they start asking questions. “Oh, where are you from?” “I’m from Indonesia.” “Indonesia – is that close with Hawaii?” and then I say, “Oh, you’re close!” Then they start learning from you. (Nura, Indonesia)

Ismeena, too, noted that American teens did not seem to know “anything” about the rest of the world. At the same time, however, she tried to understand why this was the case:

Like how do they not know anything about other countries? Like for Egypt, it was like pyramids, sand, and mummies – that was it! [laughing]. It was kind of funny. Like, they do not know *anything*! Well, it’s hard, like in a small town and it’s really different and like, why would they learn this? (Ismeena, Egypt)

Ahmed attributed Americans’ lack of knowledge about other countries to the fact that they do not have anyone to provide first-hand information about other places:

So I put myself into people's here shoes and find that they don't know anything about there. They don't have their family there to tell them about the news there. . . I realize that the problem is that people just don't know – they just need to know. They need to learn, and reading a book or watching TV is not enough for people to know, especially about cultures. (Ahmed, Egypt)

Ahmed also remarked that bringing exchange students to the U.S. to teach about their own countries is “a good way, a successful way” to help Americans learn about the world. Indeed, many of the students said that they enjoyed answering questions because it meant that people were interested in their countries, cultures, or religion.

### ***Cultural Presentations***

The YES program requires that participants make at least two cultural presentations to American audiences during the school year. At least one of the presentations should be made during International Education Week in November. Some of the students made presentations to community or church groups, often with the assistance of host families or local coordinators in organizing the events. For instance, Ahmed made several presentations at a Jewish school, and Khalil spoke to a group at a synagogue. Ismeena, Firas, and Wafa talked to elementary school students during a special program arranged by their local coordinator. The majority of the students, however, made most of their presentations to fellow students at their high schools. Generally, the students prepared slide shows with typical scenes of their home countries. Some also brought in clothing, crafts, or food to share with their classmates.

For some of the students, standing up in front of an audience and making a presentation was a new and rather frightening experience. Lila describes her feeling about her first presentation:

I think at the beginning, I was kind of scared about people's reactions, like I'm going to present something about my country in my class and that doesn't have to do anything with the subject [of the class] or anything, but after that people reacted very nice. They all were interested. (Lila, Saudi Arabia)

In general, and after they got over their initial nervousness, the students seemed to enjoy the presentations and many said it was "fun" to help people understand their home countries and cultures:

It was fun! If I have time, I really want to do that again because it feels great when people can understand my country more . . . It's really great giving people like, uh, "Hey, I'm from Indonesia!" (Nisa, Indonesia)

As noted above, many students also remarked that they were happy to answer questions because it meant that their classmates were interested in learning more about their countries and their cultures:

Like, when I have a presentation and, like, if they ask me a question that mean that they are interested. I like when people ask questions because it's like, "Okay, so you are interested in something that I said." (Yara, Thailand)

And, especially for those students in smaller or less diverse high schools, the teachers were also very interested in hearing about the students' experiences:

And even the teacher, appreciate everything. They said, "We didn't have any exchange students from really far away. We always have from Germany or Italy or something and that's it . . . or China – just one or two. We didn't have a lot from like Turkey or Saudi Arabia." That was the first time a Saudi Arabian guy go there. (Firas, Saudi Arabia)

Most (or perhaps all) of the students made substantially more than the required two presentations. For instance, Nisa said, "I did my presentation in English class, in four classes – no, I think it's five classes." Anggita arranged a week of presentations:

I tried to talk with the principal so I can make a presentation in the auditorium, or like in every class. It's like last year I had one week full of presentations about Muslims and my country. So that was pretty good – from freshmen to seniors. So they all know that Muslims are not terrorists! (Anggita, Indonesia)

Yara also commented that she made many presentations, including one on the day she left her host family to attend the pre-departure conference:

I have a lot of presentations. Even the day that I come back to Thailand, my coordinator take me to presentation at like a house for the older people. And then she just took me there, and then I give them a presentation. . . It's just like, "Okay last minute – okay, do it!" You know, it's a lot of fun too! (Yara, Thailand)

### Focus on Everyday Life

The program requirements for cultural presentations are suggestive rather than specific about content. In their presentations at school the students often talked about geography, history, or government, particularly if teachers asked them to relate their presentation to the topic of the class. All of the students said they included information in their presentations about their cultures and everyday life in their countries.

Wafa, for instance, gave a detailed description of a presentation that she made in her American government class at school. She shared information about the government of Turkey, and pointed out to her classmates that Turkey is a democracy. However, she also focused on the culture and many aspects of everyday life, bringing food and beads to share with the class:

I also made a presentation in my American government class at school. The teacher wanted me to do it, and I did it. And my friends were real interested too, but they didn't know where Turkey was when I asked them. And my friend from Arizona [another YES student] was here too. She came here to visit me, so we did the presentation together. And we had this map and we didn't point to Turkey first and we asked them where it was, and then the next slide we show them where it was and we showed them how we were at school, and we had to wear uniforms and stuff like how we looked and how is our relationships with our friends, with our family. Also, like about music bands – and they were like really surprised because they didn't think that we would have like the same kind of music. And, then we showed them some pictures of cities that we live in and other famous cities.

And we cooked Turkish bread the night before and also my friend brought some Turkish cheese, so we like gave them this food. We have a bead in Turkey and we call it the “evil eye.” And we believe that it saves you from all the bad things – from jealousy all these negative thoughts about you . . . So we gave them some of these to every student and they thought that it was really neat. And it had a little needle [pin], so like if they wanted they could put this on their clothes, so if someone sees it if they have a bad thought about them then it will protect you from that kind of thing. So it was very interesting. And they found out about our government system and how the government works and like we vote for our own president and that it’s not a dictatorship like that. (Wafa, Turkey)

Nisa, too, said that she spoke mostly about everyday life in her country, as well as her experience as an exchange student. She noted that she did not talk much about Islam, except for some of the intersections with everyday life:

I just give them how is it different from here and my country, and how is my program going, who I live here with, and pretty much about being an exchange student, and about my country. Not a lot about Islam, although I said that I’m Muslim. Like, the majority of my country is Muslim so we have this social like rules about dating, about how to behave and everything. (Nisa, Indonesia)

Aya found that most of the questions that her classmates asked following her presentations were about everyday life, including the weather and language:

They ask, “How is it like there?” “Is it pretty?” “Do you have a desert?” [laughing] “Does it snow in there?” “How many seasons do you have?” Well, we only have two weathers – rain and sunny. They were so surprised. They were really interested about [my city] and when they learned about my dialect, they were like “Oh my God, it’s really surprising because it’s like Spanish!” [laughing] (Aya, Philippines)

Similarly, Ahmed described the type of information that he conveyed during most of his presentations at his high school. He found that his audiences were most interested in everyday life in Egypt, and particularly the everyday life of teenagers. Like the other students, Ahmed seems to have really enjoyed sharing information about his country and responding to questions:

I gave a lot of presentations. People were happy about it. They ask a lot of questions. It was helpful to give presentations to people who don’t know about

your country. It was fun, talking to people. I tried to figure out what they know about us and then tell them the actual thing that would be most useful. And tell them about the existing . . . politics and law in Egypt, or science. So I talk about something interesting they might like. From the questions I realized that they want to see entertainment things and like one of the questions was, “Do you have Hard Rock Café in Cairo?” That was weird, but yeah. They want to know what entertainment things you do for your spare time, like theaters, what kind of activities do you have at school, what subjects. So I focused on that – on everyday life and language a little bit. They like it, and they were glad and they asked a lot of questions, of course. (Ahmed, Egypt)

### Talking about Islam

As described above, many of the students focused their formal presentations on everyday life in their home countries. Some of the students, however, did discuss Islam in their presentations, particularly if they were asked to do so. For instance, a teacher at a Jewish school asked Ahmed to talk about peace and Islam. Ahmed found that his audience was interested, and not “afraid” of Islam:

I’ve got a lot of opportunity in Jewish schools to talk, through my counselor, to talk about religion and peace in the Middle East and Islam . . . I remember that time I was a guest speaker and I was talking about – because they were praying – and I talked about different prayers in Islam. So that was kind of a different thing as well . . . So, I found that people are interested . . . They are not kind of afraid anymore, although some people are, but the majority started to relax and calm down about these things. They’re not that sensitive. And if we keep doing that, I believe it will be perfect after that. Seriously. (Ahmed, Egypt)

Anggita said that she included some information about Islam in her presentations, and at the request of one teacher she showed her classmates how she prays (also part of her everyday life). Anggita had very positive responses from her classmates:

One time I have a presentation about Muslim in a class, and they ask me to bring the hood and how do you pray. And I brought it to school and when I had a presentation, the teacher was like, “Can you show us how to pray in Islam?” And I’m like “Okay, sure.” And I start to wear it, and my friends are like, “Oh, that’s so cool!” And I’m like, “Yep, that’s how we pray.” And I showed them what I did. I showed them how to pray. I show them one by one the movements. And they’re like, “Is that how you pray five times a day?” I’m like, “Yep, five times a

day!” And then, they said, “It’s really neat how you do that. I never thought that you’re gonna pray like that. I thought you’re gonna pray like sitting, and before you sleep and stuff.” Now they know. They said “Oh my God, it’s really awesome! It’s really cool.” (Anggita, Indonesia)

During their presentations, the girls who wore the hijab often talked about the significance of covering. Some of them showed their classmates how to wear the hijab. Dana describes this sharing as a very positive experience; her classmates seemed quite interested to learn about her hijab:

Oh yeah, like every single presentation that I made, I put like hijab. And I say, “Do you want to know about my hijab?” And they’re like, “yeah,” and they come to me. “Do you want to just try it?” And they will try it and take picture. (Dana, Indonesia)

Ermy went one step further and tried to arrange a special “hijab day” at school, but found that her counselor interpreted it as a religious activity, and would not permit her to organize such an event:

I was trying to have hijab day or something like that at my school, but my counselor said, “No you can’t do that. You can’t do religious talk at school.” . . . “I can say that it’s culture, right?” But she didn’t want me to do it. (Ermy, Indonesia)

### 9/11 and War

Most of the students said that they did not address issues surrounding September 11, or the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan during their formal presentations. Emad, however, said that he talked about 9/11 because he wanted people to know that although many of the attackers were from Saudi Arabia, they had been “brainwashed” and did not represent Muslims or Saudi Arabians. He commented that he liked to “put it out there to correct people” so that they do not think all Muslims are terrorists. A few of the students said that they expressed their opinions about the war in Iraq during their presentations.

Khalil remarked, “I said like, Turkish people believe these wars are unnecessary and these wars, they damage world peace.” Yusef also touched on the Iraq war: “I didn’t focus on 9/11. I focused on Saudi Arabia, and like on the Iraqi war and stuff like that.” I asked Yusef what he said about the war in Iraq and he replied, “I was talking about how Americans or the United States should get the military out of there.”

Ahmed described a presentation to preschool children in which he talked about 9/11, and the need for peace in the world. Ahmed also remarked that his counselor (local coordinator), who had arranged for the presentation, told him that 9/11 was an inappropriate topic for such young children. While Ahmed admitted that this may have been the “wrong” audience, he went on to describe how the children seemed to grasp the basic concepts of war and peace that he was trying to convey:

Ahmed: And, I gave a presentation – it was to the wrong class though, it was to little kids, but somehow we got out of the topic and started talking about 9/11. That was a problem.

*Carol: Oh, why was it a problem?*

Ahmed: Because they were little kids and talking about something like that is not the best idea. One, they don’t understand it, and two, it’s not good to talk about something that happened and they weren’t existing back then. When we tell them about something like that they get scared because they’re little kids. I got off the topic, but the kids, they were like four years old, and they started asking me questions about why these people do that. “How could we stop them?” “How should we do that?” I was just so happy how the questions came out from these little kids about these things. They asked me, “What does Islam say about that? Is it okay?” And then I started actually talking with them about it . . .

But after that, my counselor told me “You shouldn’t have gone that far.” But, well . . . and I found a picture on the Internet. That kid he made a sketch or drawing. On half of the page there was kind of planes and blood and fire, and the other half was kind of blue. And there was a key, and he wrote in the key: “peace.” And it was just green down there, like grass or something. And I took that picture and put it on there [on the slide], like something they might be interested in even though they were kids. I even got the attention of the teacher and my counselor and myself. That kid thought that way, and these little kids are

asking me this way. There's a better world out there, and we'll understand things like this. I can't believe that things like this aren't going to stop soon because people just don't accept it and just don't believe it anymore. (Ahmed, Egypt)

Since earlier in the interview (and as quoted above) Ahmed said that his presentations had focused primarily on everyday life in Egypt, I asked him whether or not he had talked about 9/11 during his high school presentations:

Ahmed: No, I didn't do it in high school. The high school was first. At the high school it was just basically about Egypt and culture and religion, but it wasn't about what happened at 9/11. I talked a little bit after the presentation, but it wasn't enough because I didn't have the time. If I had that presentation, instead of little kids, if there were high schoolers or adults, it could have been better. I hope other people than me will do better than me and will actually talk to high schoolers about that.

*Carol: So, you mean it was mainly because of not having enough time that you didn't talk about 9/11 at the high school? Was that it, or were there other reasons?*

Ahmed: It was kind of like because the teachers wanted me to talk about certain things in certain classes, so it was kind of difficult. But that school asked me, the Jewish school, they asked me to talk about peace and Islam. So, I went out of topic a little bit and talked about 9/11. (Ahmed, Egypt)

In hindsight, Ahmed seemed to wish that he had talked about 9/11 and related issues during his presentations at the high school, but felt constrained by the requests and expectations of the teachers.

### Not Always the Expert

It is important to note that while they were expected to answer many questions, the exchange students were not experts in Islamic law and practice. A number of the students said that sometimes people asked questions about Islam that they did not feel prepared to answer. Khalil, for instance, remarked that people "ask me a lot of questions about Islam that I can't answer because I don't know the answer." Nisa, too, said that

“Honestly, my knowledge about my own religion is always not really deep.” Generally, the students’ strategy for dealing with these questions was to seek further information, either on the Internet, or by contacting someone else who could answer the question. For example, Nisa commented, “If I’m afraid I will give them the wrong answer, I will email Imam and like ask him some of the things.”<sup>92</sup>

### *Everyday Ambassadors*

All of the students made formal presentations at school or in the community, but they also shared information about their countries, cultures, and religion with their friends, classmates, and people in the community on an everyday basis. As Mifta explained, the students saw this as a natural part of their exchange student “job”:

We live here 24/7, so we can make the presentation into everyday conversations, like with your friends and you don’t have to stand on a podium or give a speech to tell them about it. You can just tell them in a friendly way at school.  
(Mifta, Indonesia)

Nura described her casual conversations with friends about her country and her religion. She remarked that the casual approach was important because her peers did “not really care” about these topics:

And then sometimes I’m not having a big presentation, but just between me and my table lunch friends . . . Even like for gourmet food class, we cook something and then we start to talk – you know how when you’re cooking and talk at the same time? It’s fun . . . then you show the people. It’s not like you’re over the top . . . I learn in my school that everybody not really care about that, so you have to [be] more like easy going. Not like too much push them to know where you came from [and] what is terrorism, because kids in this century, they’re not really care . . . You know what I mean? (Nura, Indonesia)

Many of the students recounted stories of joining in everyday activities with their friends

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<sup>92</sup> The AFS Consortium established a relationship with an Imam in Baltimore who is involved in the orientation programs and is available to the YES students to answer questions or discuss concerns about Islam during their stay in the U.S.

and how that helped to demonstrate that they were just “normal” teens. Firas went swimming, kayaking, and jumping off a bridge with his peers to demonstrate that he was not so different from American teenagers:

Even in the Middle East or any part of the world, there’s no such thing as war all the time. They always hear the news – there’s war, there’s war, fighting, fighting, an argument between this country and this country. But it’s not like this. Sometimes there’s people live like them, exactly the same. I come here and I show them, you know. We go swim in the river. We go kayaking. I show them that, “I’m like you guys. I like activities.” . . . You can’t show your people that you live like him by just sitting there. Talk to them, do what they do – like jump off the bridge one day! Yeah, that was fun. Yeah, that was scary! [laughing] (Firas, Saudi Arabia)

Firas also took advantage of the American holiday of Halloween to show his schoolmates how he usually dressed in Saudi Arabia, and to answer questions about life in his country. He remarked that other students were “afraid” at first, but he put them at ease by letting them try on the clothing:<sup>93</sup>

I did something, like because my culture dress, it’s kind of like . . . they got that whole thing in the Middle East – the scarf on top of your head and like that. I wore that on Halloween . . . I wear it just to show the people how I dress back home all the time – this is my culture dress and everything. In the beginning of day, they got afraid a lot of it, but I said, “You want to try it once?” I gave it to my friends. There was like ten friends wear it. (Firas, Saudi Arabia)

All of the students talked about how they informally answered many questions from friends and classmates – about their countries, cultures, and religion. Through the friendships formed at school, the students felt they were able to correct some of the negative images of Islam and the Middle East. Yusef talked about the importance of getting to know each other as individuals:

Especially at school because you are spending more time at school than at your house. You make a lot of friends and they get to know you better and they get to

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<sup>93</sup> Firas’ host mother, who I interviewed later, told me that she was very worried when Firas got on the school bus dressed in his native attire on Halloween. She was afraid that he would be hurt by the rude or insensitive comments of other students, and she was relieved when he told her the outcome of the day.

know the image that they have of people of the Middle East is wrong. And there're different people with different characters and different ideas.  
(Yusef, Saudi Arabia)

Aya said that while she fielded many questions about Islam, her classmates seemed more interested in learning about the exchange program and about her country:

It's funny because I got like a whole lot of questions. But, I think what really interested them was about the exchange program – like they were really interested about other countries involved in the exchange program. Oh, how do you get together? They were just so interested in how we interact with other people from countries with exchange students. They were like, “We've got a lot of Muslims here so we're not that interested in it, but we're just like wondering what it's like in your country.” (Aya, Philippines)

A while later in the interview, however, Aya related some of the questions that her friends asked about her religion:

“Do you need to wear that thing on your head? What do you do? How do you pray? What do you do in the mosque? How do you read the Qur'an? Do you go to Muslim schools? Do you know how to write Arabic?” Well, yeah – a little, but I'm not from Saudi Arabia! [laughing]  
(Aya, Philippines)

Rani also described some of the questions that her friends asked about her religious beliefs and practices. Her friends seemed interested in learning about Islam, but at the same time, she did not feel as if she had to give “deep” explanations:

They sometimes ask me question about religion and just normal questions like, “What do you do?” and “How do you pray?” and all that. So I talked about the five basic pillars of my religion and some basic stuff that they can understand. It's not like they have to go in deep, or I have to go in deep, and explain in detail, but I told them a little bit about my religion and they are okay with that.  
(Rani, India)

Israa answered many questions and pointed out to her friends that there are differences between cultures and religions:

[They would ask,] “Can women go to the college?” “Can women go outside alone?” Because they see that from the culture of some countries, but that is not

religion. That is the culture. They have to know that there is religion and culture, and it is different. (Israa, Indonesia)

The exchange students were in the U.S. during a time when the war and sectarian violence in Iraq was often headline news. Israa remarked that she was frequently asked “Are you Sunni or Shia?” Ermy was faced with the same question about the tensions between Sunni and Shia Muslims, which she noted was not an issue in Indonesia. In order to help her peers understand the sectarian divisions, she likened the situation to the conflict in Northern Ireland:

Yeah, since I’m here I got those questions. In Indonesia, we don’t care – Sunni or Shia, we are Muslim. We are one. Here I got that question. Then they are also asking about the question about the conflict between Sunni and Shia in Iraq, which I don’t know exactly, because I’m from Indonesia! [laughing] But I just told them, “It’s like in Northern Ireland, there was a conflict between Catholic and Protestant, and they are both Christian.” So maybe they can see that. (Ermy, Indonesia)

As described in the previous chapter, sometimes friends and classmates were surprised to discover that the exchange students were Muslim. In the following quote, Wafa describes her conversation with a friend at school:

Wafa: So one day, one of the guys asked me what kind of bands I like to listen to. And I told him a band’s name and this band they have normal songs too, but they also have Christian songs. So he was like, “Oh I love that band!” And I said, “But you know I’m not a Christian, right?” He just looked at me. Like he stopped for awhile and he looked like, “Oh my God, you’re not Christian?” He was very surprised! And I was like, “No, I’m not Christian, I just love the song. And sometimes I go to church because I want to learn different things from your religion too, but that doesn’t mean that I’m a Christian.” And then he says, “Well, I love you – you should be a Christian!” [laughing].

*Carol: Do you think he was just joking about it, or was he serious about wanting you to be a Christian?*

Wafa: He was not joking. He wasn’t like trying to convert me into a Christian, but he thinks that since I’m not a Christian I have like so many sins and I’m going to hell because my savior isn’t Jesus Christ. So he says that he loves me so much and he wants me to go to heaven. [laughing]

*Carol: So, what did you tell him then?*

Wafa: I think he didn't know anything about my religion because I told him that like we have the same God, just our prophets were different. And Islam is the last religion that got people to believe in it. And I think that it's the most true religion and that's why I believe in Islam. I told him that, and he was like, "Oh it's the same God, then do you believe in Jesus Christ?" And I said, "No. We know that there was Jesus Christ and we know that he was a prophet, but he's not like the leader of the religion that I believe in." And he just like thought about it for a while, and then he kind of like stopped talking about it. (Wafa, Turkey)

Wafa interpreted her friend's desire for her to be Christian as a sign that he really cared about her. Indeed, she was smiling and laughing while recounting this story. In her response, Wafa demonstrated an understanding of how the Abrahamic religions are related. While she firmly stated her own beliefs, she took advantage of the situation to help educate her friend about the similarities between Islam and Christianity.

The students were also called upon to represent and explain the beliefs of the people in their home countries. Although Mifta noted that "not a lot of people care" about Islam, she said that teachers at her school wanted to know if Indonesians hate Americans. Mifta told them that some Indonesians hate Americans (presenting a different perspective on terrorism), and then returned to her mission as an exchange student:

*Carol: So, at school, did you find that people were interested in learning something about Islam? Did they ask questions or want to know anything?*

Mifta: Yeah. Well, not a lot of people care. Like some kids don't really care about it. They just get on with their life and stuff. But some kids care about it and some teachers, especially social studies teachers care about it. And they ask me about it. Like, "I heard that a lot of Indonesian people hate Americans." "Wow, how do you know that?" Yeah, that's the truth that a lot of people in Indonesia hate America because they think that America is terrorists. Like a lot of American people think that we're terrorists, but we think that it is the Americans who are terrorists.

*Carol: So how do you answer them when they ask you if Indonesians hate Americans?*

Mifta: Well, yeah, but that's why we're here! [laughing]  
(Mifta, Indonesia)

Nura recounted a similar experience with her friends. In this quotation, she makes a distinction between the U.S. government and the people. She also learned that not all Americans agree with their elected officials:

My friends ask me, "So you're Indonesian, do you hate us?" "What do you mean do I hate you?" "We're American. Everybody hates Americans." "But, actually, we do not hate Americans, but we hate your president." They say, "Oh yeah, we hate him too!" [laughing] (Nura, Indonesia)

These informal, everyday conversations with friends, peers, and teachers just seemed to be part of the "job," but a few of the students noted that it takes a certain type of person to do the job right. Nura, for instance, pointed out the importance of having a friendly and outgoing personality in order for others to learn from you. She expressed her hope that the next cohort of YES exchange students would be chosen based on their personalities, rather than their academic prowess:

[For the exchange program next year] I hope they pick like a more personality person, not like a genius . . . like a personality, so that like the first impression for knowing a new person is how is their personality. If you are interesting they will learn more from you, but if you're just bored and study all the time, you're not gonna talk about much with your friends. So, I think personality is important.  
(Nura, Indonesia)

### In the Classroom

Sometimes classroom participation provided a venue for sharing information and experiences. Several students said they contributed to class discussions, often in history or social studies classes, about their countries or about Islam. Sitti, for example,

commented that she talked about 9/11 and Islam in her history class. She emphasized that “real” Muslims would not commit terrorist acts:

When we talk about 9/11, most of like people will view Muslim as like the bad side. And I will try to explain to them that it’s just a group of bad people that claim that action on Muslim, but it doesn’t mean all Islam have to be a bad person. Like, okay, one bad person did it – one group do it, and why all Muslim have to be responsible for that? So people not gonna come and just bomb America or something. And we discuss about that in my history class, and I just told them that okay, and I just explain them that Muslim – the word “Islam” mean “peace” and real Muslim . . . It’s like if we are real Muslim, we not gonna do something like that. So just tell them, like explain what Islam is, and that we don’t have to be a bad person. (Sitti, Thailand)

Yusef, from Saudi Arabia, remarked that he “got to really study the religions” in his theology class. He was able to “get their point of view of Islam, and correct it if there is something wrong.” Nisa also talked about studying world religions at school. She cited one incident in her history class that was particularly uncomfortable for her. The teacher had asked the students to read a document, which, according to Nisa, described religious texts as “just books written by people.” Nisa shared with her teacher and classmates that she found this reference to the Qur’an offensive. She went on to talk about her faith in Islam:

It was kind of like offensive to me. It was offensive to Islam actually. . . They refer to Prophet Mohammed as a person, but actually [the Qur’an] was not written by Prophet Mohammed, because Prophet Mohammed didn’t write and didn’t read. And I told them it was God’s word and it was written, actually not by Prophet Mohammed. It was written on a book, like converted to a book, by some followers of Prophet Mohammed. I told to my teacher that it was kind of offensive for me . . . And I said, “It’s all about faith. I just believe my religion.” (Nisa, Indonesia)

Some of the students participated in classroom or school-wide projects and activities in which they could share aspects of their cultures or experiences. Nisa, for example, performed traditional Indonesian dances at the school’s international festival.

Aya signed up for a class in journalism and was involved in writing and producing the school newspaper. Over the course of the school year, she wrote several articles for the school newspaper about the YES program and her experiences as an exchange student:

In the first article I mentioned the goals of the program and what were the intricacies of being an exchange student and what were the requirements that we were supposed to be doing. In the last article, it was all the experiences and how is it like [to be] an exchange student . . . Well, it's cool! (Aya, Philippines)

### Ramadan

Ramadan, which fell early in the school year, presented a special opportunity for the students to share their beliefs and practices with their fellow students and teachers. Many of their peers noticed that the exchange students were not eating or drinking during the school day, which prompted many questions about Ramadan and Islam:

People at school, they were just surprised. "Why are you fasting?" I'm like, "Ramadan." And they're like, "What's that?" So we started having a conversation about what is it and why do we fast, and all these things. (Ahmed, Egypt)

They see me not eating the lunch and all. It was like we talked a lot and most of the people understood. . . That was pretty much how we started the conversations and all. (Ismeena, Egypt)

Yusef also used the lunch period to answer questions about Ramadan and Islam:

"Do you really pray five times a day? Is that true?" I told them, "Yeah." . . . They said, "Are you fasting the whole month or you just fasting a day?" I told them I'm fasting the whole month, but just from dawn to dusk. I had a lot of conversations with a lot of people. (Yusef, Saudi Arabia)

Dana's participation in the track team during Ramadan provided another example of a teaching moment:

It's only a mile, but they ask me questions. And I become like a spotlight. And they ask me like, "What is fasting?" and "Why do you wear this [hijab]?" and "Doesn't it feel like hard to run?" (Dana, Indonesia)

## Hijabi Experiences

Israa, like all the hijabi, said that she often got questions about covering. In addition to explaining the importance in religious terms, Israa also made sure that people understood that it was her decision to wear the hijab:

[They ask me] the common question – why I’m wearing this [hijab] and whether somebody make me to wear this or not. I told them that if somebody make me to wear this then I can take it off here, because nobody supervise me here. That’s what I told them. (Israa, Indonesia)

Dana, too, wanted her friends to know that she covered her hair voluntarily:

And sometimes there are people, especially my American friends that told me, “Oh my God, you are wearing this jeans and with this hood in the summer, don’t you feel hot?” [laughing] and they are wearing like a tank top or something. I just say that it’s not that hard when you really want to cover. (Dana, Indonesia)

Wearing the hijab made the girls stand out from their peers in the U.S.

classrooms; it was a constant visual reminder of their religion. Israa remarked that “being the center of attention – it was complicated, but I enjoyed it. They were asking me a bunch of questions, but I got used to it.” From the examples given in the interviews, the girls who wore the hijab seemed very willing, in fact enthusiastic, about discussing Islam with anyone who asked questions. Indeed, they seemed to field more questions about Islam, as well as their religious beliefs and practices, than the girls who did not wear the hijab. The hijabi also demonstrated that they were willing to discuss sensitive topics, such as sex and polygamy.<sup>94</sup> For instance, Yara talked about how she shared her beliefs about Islam and proper sexual behavior with other teenagers at her school:

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<sup>94</sup> This is not to say that the other exchange students were not willing to discuss these topics, only that they did not mention them to me.

I just got a lot [of questions] like, Muslim don't have sex before marriage, and we don't drink alcohol, and then we don't eat pork. And then, like a lot of people are like, "Okay, that's weird." . . . It's like more like healthy, I think. . . . like because alcohol cause some disease to your body and then pork have like germ and stuff in pork. Seriously, because we learned in biology that every part of pork have like some bacteria and stuff in it, so it's more like healthy stuff that we don't do. And then, like we don't have sex before married, so that's the more important part. Like American, usually they don't really care. Like really wild American teenagers, like not all, but more than 50% of teenage girl already done that. And then they just ask me, like, "Why don't you do it?" It's like, "No I can't, it's part of my religion, and it's good for you. Because when you are student, it means that you are not ready to do something like that yet. If something happen to you, like you're pregnant, what are you going to do with that? . . ." And then, they just, "Oh yeah, that makes sense." (Yara, Thailand)

Similarly, Ermy answered questions from her friends about polygamy. She shared her understanding of the teachings of Islam, as well as her personal feelings about the subject:

My friend also asked me about polygamy. He said, "You are Muslim, so you are going to get married to a guy with a bunch of wives?" [laughing] I said, "I don't think so!" [The three girls in the interview are all laughing and talking at once.] . . . "No, I'm not going to do that!" Anyway, in Islam, the guy can marry more than one wife as long as the first wife agrees. That's what I told him. So, if I'm the first wife, [laughing] I'm not going to marry a guy with a bunch of wives! But he has to be fair. In the Qur'an it says that nobody can be fair in the world, so it means that nobody can afford it. (Ermy, Indonesia)

Even the school bus driver had questions for Israa:

Then my bus driver, she ask me, "If you're wearing scarf and you're going to have a husband, can you take off your hijab?" . . . Well, I was like, "You're going to show everything to your husband. You can be sexy in front of your husband because your husband is like . . . everything, your whole body is for your husband. Well, he won't marry me for my body. He will marry me for myself, not my body!" (Israa, Indonesia)

The hijabi also talked about trying to "prove" that they were normal teenagers and wearing the hijab did not limit them in any way. Yara, for example, commented, "I just have my fashion, like normal, like regular girls, teenagers." Israa talked about how participating in school activities helped others understand something about Islam:

I was trying to be active at school to prove to them that I exist, you know, doing a lot of school activities with my hijab. It symbolized the freedom. It doesn't mean that I can't do anything with my hijab. So finally at the end of my year, I bring a lot of good experience. And then people get to know about Islam and people get to know about hijab. (Israa, Indonesia)

Dana participated in the school track team, demonstrating that her hijab was not a limit.

Her teammates had many questions, but she felt that they supported her:

And then at school I try . . . to show them that wearing the hijab is not like a limit. So I join in track and cross-country with my hijab, which is like, in cross-country you have to run 3.5 miles. And they usually have really short pants – shorts [laughing] and then little tank top. And then I have to wear Under Armour then also for my pants. And then I have to wear hijab. And they were like just, “Aren't you hot?” But I was like, “No,” but I was the slowest on my team. But they are like a really good team. They just support me. It's like there's a rainbow. It feels like forever running 3.5 miles and they just like clap their hands and support me, “Go, you're looking good!” and I say, “Why am I looking good, I'm so tired!” [laughing] (Dana, Indonesia)

Just as the hijabi fielded many questions about why they covered, those that did not wear the hijab were often questioned about why they did not cover. Either way, the girls found themselves explaining the meaning of the hijab and their decision to cover, or not to cover:

Sometimes they think . . . one of my friends wears the veil. And they're like, “Why is she wearing the veil and you're not wearing it?” So sometimes they think like we all should wear it and everything. We just like explain it to them. (Lila, Saudi Arabia)

Aya had an interesting experience with wearing the hijab. She did not wear the hijab when she first arrived in the U.S., but about six weeks into the school year she decided that she was ready to wear it as a sign of her religious commitment. Aya described the reactions of her friends at school, who at that time did not know that she was Muslim:

Aya: It's like, do you remember during those times I was wearing my veil?

Carol: Yeah, I remember. What happened with that?

Aya: It wasn't that I stopped wearing it because somebody is criticizing me. I wasn't wearing it regularly. It's just that I felt that like when I was wearing it, everybody was really scared of me. That's what I thought. Like even my friends, they wouldn't come to me. I would be like, "Hey, how is it going?" And they wouldn't be talking to me! So it's like I feel that they are so scared of me. And I'm like, "What's wrong?" And they were like . . . they wouldn't answer me. And I thought, "Oh, it's probably this" [pointing to her head]. And I tried it one day, like, not to wear it and it was all back to normal. Then I tried wearing it again and they were like . . . it was just the same.

*Carol: Really? That's interesting. So, what happened then? Did you talk to them about it?*

Aya: Yeah, I was like, "You know what, I was just wondering why you were not talking to me the other day. Was it because I was wearing my veil? Were you scared that I was a Muslim?" They were like, "Oh, we never thought you were a Muslim! We thought you were sick." "What do you mean?" "We thought you were sick and you have a contagious disease and you have to wear that." I was like, "WHAT?" [laughing] That was ridiculous!

*Carol: Wow. So, you told them you were Muslim, and then what happened?*

Aya: And they were like "Oh my God! You're a Muslim!" They didn't know that. And some people said . . . "Are you gonna terrorize the school or something?" [laughing] I'm like, "What are you talking about?" They just got scared when they knew that I was a Muslim, so I just thought, well, as much as I really wanted to do it here, since people are scared of me in that state, I was just not going to wear it regularly. Well, I said I could wear it, but there's some explanations that need to be done. . . . I said, "This is one of the reasons I'm here is to eliminate stereotypes. It's one of the goals of the program that I'm in. Well, it's just to promote peace and like that. That's why we're friends!" They're like, "Okay, we don't get it." "Yeah, that's why I'm explaining it!" [laughing]

*Carol: Then what happened? Do you still wear it sometimes?*

Aya: Yeah, I still wear it sometimes, and I've seen the different actions that they have acted before and acted now. There's a little bit of a change because I thought they understood what I explained. So they just react smoothly now: "Oh, she's not a terrorist." (Aya, Philippines)

Aya's friends were surprised and perhaps scared of her when she wore the hijab, but she took advantage of the situation to talk with them about Islam, as well as about the goals of the YES program.

## I'm Not a Terrorist!

When I asked about discrimination or prejudice, the students said that they did not experience much of either. According to Ahmed, “People don’t come and say, ‘Terrorist, go away.’ No, it’s not like that.” Wafa echoed this sentiment, “No one like told me that I was a terrorist or I was a bad person since I was Muslim.” Emad from Saudi Arabia remarked, “Since I’ve been here, no one has made a bad comment about my country or anything.” As discussed in Chapter 8, the students did not feel that their peers at school treated them differently because they were Muslim. Firas remarked, “Nobody cares if I’m Muslim or not here.” Rani, too, maintained that her friends never treated her like “you are a terrorist.”

At some point during the year, however, many of the students found themselves in situations in which they, or someone they knew, were labeled as terrorists. In other words, although they did not feel discriminated against because of their religion, sometimes they still had to deal with the negative stereotype. Generally, the students’ strategy for dealing with these situations involved calmly talking with people. For instance, as cited above, when Aya’s friends asked her if she was going to “terrorize the school,” she talked with them about her goal of helping to dispel stereotypes, and added, “That’s why we’re friends.” She continued:

. . . I’m like, “So why did you think I was a terrorist? This is your friend!” They’re like, “You might be a different Muslim.” “No, I’m not!” I just felt that I was able to share my religion with them and explain the ins and outs of the religion. (Aya, Philippines)

Aya concluded that she was able to correct some negative stereotypes about Islam, and in the process help the other teenagers “realize that they can have Muslim friends – duh!”

She wanted her friends to know that she was not a “different” Muslim (an exception to the rule), but rather she was a typical Muslim.

Anggita also faced questions about being a terrorist. Like many of the other students, she responded with both humor and information. Furthermore, Anggita wanted her friends to know that she is a human being – just like them:

Like when I got here people here, like my friends, saw me and like “Oh my God, you’re so different. Where are you from? And, what religion are you?” And then I said, “I’m a Muslim and I’m from Indonesia. I’m from Asia.” And they’re like, “Are you really a Muslim? Are you serious? You’re a Muslim?” I’m like, “Yeah, why?” “Are you killing people there?” “No,” I said, “Why?” “Well, that’s what I heard from TV and my parents,” they said. And I said, “Well, now you know.” I said, “Now you know, I’m not a terrorist. I’m just a human being like you guys.”

And since that, I have like my teachers and my friends ask me a lot of questions about Muslims and where I come from and that’s like my motivation. I want to change their minds about the Muslim thing, and their stereotyping things – like that Muslims are terrorists. Now they know that Muslims are not terrorists. “Like me,” I told them, “If I’m a terrorist now I’m gonna kill you guys! [laughing] But I don’t kill you. Like you guys, I’m just studying here, you know.”  
(Anggita, Indonesia)

A number of the students visited the site of the terrorist attacks in New York City. Mifta said that she was very “sad” about the terrorist attacks, but she tried to inform others that this was not the work of true Muslims:

We went to New York and we went to the church where – it’s an emergency place for 9/11. I forget what is the name of it. It was really sad and you see all the pictures and I’m really sorry about it. Like, I’m Muslim, but Muslim didn’t do it. Islam didn’t do it. I try to tell people that. Islam didn’t do it. Other people that think that they’re Muslim did it. (Mifta, Indonesia)

Ismeena, too, talked about how she dealt with negative stereotypes of Islam. She explained that people should be seen as individuals:

Ismeena: Well, some people talk about 9/11, but . . . I think they do not understand. Well, not that they do not understand, but they do not know much. Like, they do not know that not everyone is the same.

*Carol: Could you talk about that a little more? I mean, like what kinds of things do they say to you?*

Ismeena: Just like, they're . . . being a Muslim and some people are really, just because you're Muslim that means that you're not a very good person or you might do something to me. They have some ideas, but not all of them. Not a lot, but some say those kinds of things.

*Carol: So, what do you say, or how do you react to them when they say those kinds of things to you?*

Ismeena: Well, sometimes I just act like, "Before you knew I was a Muslim, you just like act normal. Like, I did not seem to be a terrorist or anything. The thing is that we're not all the same. Like every religion has its extremes and all. So, it's just like, you should judge me as being a person, but not like on my religion. It's not like important to know my religion or something." Well, some people like to know, but it's not like the main thing. But, yeah, and then they kind of like back up a little and like, "Yeah, that's kind of right." Like, I just help them understand that not all the people are just bad or not all the people are just good. It depends, because it's not that that is like your religion and then you're good or bad, no. It just depends on your personality and how you act and all.  
(Ismeena, Egypt)

Sitti echoed Ismeena's comments about the importance of differentiation – seeing each other as individuals: "We try to explain that Muslim is not bad. Everybody is not bad. Like, there is some of them bad and some of them good." Firas, who said that most of his peers did not care if he was Muslim or not, explained his way of dealing with the few "close-minded" people who thought he was a terrorist:

Not all the people think that terrorist thing, no. You find one of a hundred or two of a hundred. There's not a lot of people here think of that, but there's kind of close-minded people you find – like they've never been outside or something. Just sit with them for ten minutes and explain everything. Tell him the situation, what's happened and everything, and he'll be fine. That's what it's all about. Talk, that's the key. If you talk and explain – that's the key. (Firas, Saudi Arabia)

Nura explained that people often hold the beliefs that they are taught at home. By talking calmly about Islam and getting to know each other as individuals, Nura felt that she was able to change some negative attitudes about Islam:

I have a friend and his family is close-minded. It's not their fault. They think like the way that Muslims are terrorists, but like when he grew up in that family, his mother taught him that. . . It's like a misunderstanding. And he was like, "Oh, okay, now I see." And you don't have to be like, "Oh I'm a Muslim and what do you think is wrong?" I never did that because I know that it's hard for them to understand. (Nura, Indonesia)

Anggita related an incident in which she was at first upset, but then calmed down and talked "softly" to her peers. Like many of the other students, Anggita tried to remain calm and talk rationally to dispel negative stereotypes of Islam. She used the Oklahoma City bombings to illustrate how people should not perpetuate stereotypes based on one incident:

And then one time I got kind of like upset when it was like, "Oh you're Muslim, you're a terrorist." I'm not upset, but I'm just like – okay, okay. And I try to explain a little bit, softly to them, not like [raising voice] "I'm not a terrorist. I'm not a terrorist!" I use an example, like the bombing in Georgia – no Oklahoma City. And then who bombed them? Christian! . . . I just want to prove the point, like it's the same thing like you told us. You said all Muslim are terrorist. Now I'm gonna say "What about the Oklahoma bombing? What are you gonna think about that? Are you gonna say they're terrorists, and all Christians are terrorists?" And they're like, "No." So I said, "Right!" (Anggita, Indonesia)

Many of the students responded to negative stereotypes not only with information, but also with a degree of humor or light-heartedness. Firas, for example, noted that some of his friends teased him with some rather negative stereotypes, but he chose not to be offended. Instead, he advised, "accept the joke and give a joke too":

In the lunch, I discuss with my friends like this. And he comes and says, "Are you a terrorist?" And I said, "No, I'm not. I don't even know what terrorist mean. What do you think personally? Would I want to kill myself? Why?" I tell them that stuff. "Why would I kill myself? It's a stupid thing! They're brainwashers and they're all in the wrong side, definitely, without any question!" I explained all this and it went all right. Nothing happened. That's it. What they care is, I'm the "camel guy" or "desert boy." And that is fine, you know – a nickname. I explain, there's no desert, there's cities and all kinds of things. They know, but they want to make fun. There's a lot of people going to make fun of you, whatever you are and wherever you are. It's gonna happen. Just be yourself.

They're gonna make fun – jokes. Accept the joke and give a joke too. That's my system. (Firas, Saudi Arabia)

Firas then shared an example of joking around, but made a distinction between how he would react to a close friend or to a stranger:

I said, "All right. Want me to call bin Laden?" [pretends he is talking on the telephone] or something like that . . . you know, it's with my best friend. I know there's something wrong to say that at all [laughing]. It's gonna make you a big problem my friend, but it's with my best friend. I really know him . . . I tell him that I'm gonna call bin Laden. But if I don't even know the guy, if I don't know him at all, I'll just say, "No, I don't think so." (Firas, Saudi Arabia)

Many of the students in this study said that they were not personally called a terrorist and did not feel that they were the target of any prejudice against Muslims. However, some of the students related that their friends had experienced such prejudice. Lila, for instance, said that no one called her a terrorist (perhaps because many people thought she was Hispanic), but that her friend at school who wore the hijab was called a terrorist. Lila stood up for her friend and told the perpetrator that his actions were not funny:

There's actually one negative reaction, but it wasn't for me it was for my friend. My friend, she's Indian. She wears a veil, and there's this guy in her class – he put his hoody on and he was like, "Oh look, I'm a terrorist. . . blah, blah, blah." And then I was like, "It's not funny. Don't even like try to do any racists jokes, especially like that. Everyone is from different races in this school, so don't even try. It's not cool." He started laughing; he thinks it's funny. Then I just ignore him. (Lila, Saudi Arabia)

Wafa also said that she never felt that her peers showed any discrimination or prejudice towards her, but she described a disturbing experience of a fellow YES student in another state. Although it was a very upsetting incident, Wafa noted that over time, as the other students got to know the exchange student as an individual, they became friends with her. Wafa took this as proof that the YES program is working:

Like, one of my friends is an exchange student with YES program. She went to Arizona and she said that the first day of school when one student found out that my friend was Muslim, he just like walked towards her and he told her, “You’re a terrorist!” Yeah, and it made her real upset, because it was the first day and like she needs friends! She needs some like love because we are far away from our families, from our country, and like everything is different . . . But, like when people started to see what kind of a person she was, they like started to become friends with her. So I think this is like a proof that this program is working because maybe in the first sight, they think that since you’re a Muslim you’re a bad person, but then as the time passes they see how you are in fact, and like what you are doing, and like you are helpful and you’re trying to learn things.  
(Wafa, Turkey)

### More Stereotypes

The exchange students encountered many different stereotypes during the school year. The “Muslims are terrorists” was the most common, but the students also faced other stereotypes about their countries and cultures. Some of these stereotypes were evident in the questions that their American peers asked about their countries, such as “Do you ride camels to school?” or “Do you live in a tent?” As described above, the students patiently (and often with humor) set the record straight by describing the reality of their everyday lives in their home countries. The students also talked about the importance of forming personal relationships in order to change attitudes and stereotypes. Emad gave the following example about someone who “hated the Middle East”:

Emad: I had a friend and he wasn’t exactly a friend, he was an acquaintance. And then he felt, well, he kind of hated the Middle East because his brother got injured in a war or something like that and he feels differently. So when I came and I started showing my personality and everything, it was like, “Wow, I never realized that Saudi Arabians or Middle Easterners could be like that, you know? Most of them are serious and not outgoing or anything.” So, it helped.

*Carol: What do you mean when you say he didn’t think Saudi Arabians could be like that? Like what?*

Emad: Like, you know, I am very outgoing. I like to talk to people and socialize. And I like to have fun as much as I can. So he never thought of Saudi Arabians as

like that. He thinks that our traditions and stuff makes us surrounded or something. (Emad, Saudi Arabia)

Nura and Nisa, both from Indonesia, experienced negative stereotypes about Asians, but they dealt with the situations very differently. In the following story, Nura's recounted how she felt hurt by her friends' insulting remarks about Asians:

Nura: Well, one day, a long time ago, they [other students at school] didn't like this girl because she was Chinese and she was smart and she always be in the top. Like, she was in FBLA [Future Business Leaders of America] and was a state competitor. And you know some kids are kind of jealous. And one day, my table bunch, and they're like my friends all of them, and they said "Well, yeah, Asian is stupid!" I couldn't handle it. I couldn't take it anymore! They always say that. So I say, "If you want to say that, you just say her name or something, not like stereotype and say all Asian is stupid."

*Carol: And then what happened? Did you remind them you are Asian?*

Nura: They know I am Asian. [My coordinator] told me that maybe because you are really close to them and they are not seeing you as an exchange student, just like their friend, so they don't really care about that. You know what I mean? . . . So now they're like more like careful to what they said. Now they know.  
(Nura, Indonesia)

As the coordinator pointed out, Nura's friends probably viewed her as an individual, rather than as an Asian, so may not have realized how hurtful their comments were for Nura. Still, Nura felt that her reaction (explaining about stereotypes) had some impact because her friends were subsequently "more careful" about what they said.

In contrast, Nisa found herself in a situation in which her friends were telling "stupid Asian" jokes. Her interpretation was that her friends were "just being silly," and that it did not constitute "real" discrimination. (Nisa attended a very large, diverse high school, and Nura a much smaller, less diverse high school.) Unlike Nura, who shared her feelings with her friends and pointed out the negative stereotyping, Nisa decided that it was not really a "problem":

*Carol: So, did you ever feel any discrimination because you are from Indonesia, or because you are Muslim or anything like that?*

Nisa: No, not particularly like that. Sometimes people are just being silly, you know . . . Well, sometimes there's this point where my friends are telling stupid Asian or whatever. I just don't care. It's just them being silly.

*Carol: Jokes, you mean? Jokes about Asians?*

Nisa: Yeah, it's not that they're really racist and it's real discrimination. I don't think so. It's just them being silly. Because I'm sure they're getting used to live in a situation where there are a lot of different people. So, I feel like I don't have to put that in the problems. I'm sure it's just like them being silly.

Nisa also related a disturbing experience in which some boys taunted her at school, perhaps because she was wearing batik clothing from Indonesia:

Nisa: In first semester . . . I wear my batik skirt at school, and there's these guys there – black, without being racist, but I'm describing them . . . Every time I walk past them, they like start to laugh. Like they laugh from small laugh to like BIG laugh. All of them are boys. I'm like, "What is your problem?" I asked my friend, "Do I look weird or something? Should I do something with it?" She said, "No, no they're just being silly, just being stupid." So I start to just ignore them. I knew that one of them, that boy, tried out for my dance. [laughing]

*Carol: So, what was going on? Why do you think they were acting like that?*

Nisa: Just being stupid, or being silly. And at the end, one of them just make friends with me. They know me, and start to be nice and everything. Well, partially they are being nice because they know I can dance. (Nisa, Indonesia)

Nisa again attributed the boys' behavior to "being silly." It is impossible to know whether the boys' taunting had anything to do with stereotypes of Asians or her batik clothing. (After the first semester, Nisa stopped wearing her batik skirts and tried to dress more like other teenagers at her school so she would "fit in.") At any rate, as Nisa remarked, after the boys came to know her as an individual (and know that she could dance), the teasing stopped and they were nice to her.

## In the Community

Being a young ambassador sometimes extended beyond the realm of school, friends, and host families. One of the ways in which the exchange students came in contact with other community members was through their volunteer work. As part of the YES program, the students were required to perform twenty hours of community service during the school year. Many of the students volunteered at their schools, but some participated in church or community service projects. In the community, not surprisingly, the girls who wore the hijab were more likely to be identified as Muslims than the other students. Probably as a result of this visibility, these girls talked about their volunteer work as another opportunity to show that Muslims are not terrorists. During the group interview, Dana described volunteering at a church with the Salvation Army. Through her participation, she was able to demonstrate her willingness to help people in need, regardless of their religion:

I work with one pastor in the church because it's our duty, you know, to make better understanding about 9/11. And I went with this pastor in the Salvation Army to cook for breakfast, and then I helped them. We did it maybe six times, because it's once a month. We did it like for six months. These people, they come to the breakfast, will see us wearing scarf and they will ask, "Why are you wearing this?" And I say, "Because I am a Muslim." And they are just shocked. They say, "You're a Muslim and you help here, and you are in the church." [The three girls in the interview start talking at once, excitedly, but inaudible] . . . Yeah, it's like – we're not like we hate somebody. We're like, "I want to get involved in my community and doing something right." And they just like, "You're just awesome!" And I'm like, "Oh, thank you!" [Laughter from all girls] There is so many ways to show that we are not terrorists and we just want peace! (Dana, Indonesia)

Dana continued to talk excitedly about her community service work. She and Ermy lived in the same community, and both volunteered for the Salvation Army at Christmas.

Again, through their volunteer work, they demonstrated that they were kind and caring human beings, not terrorists:

Dana: And then me and her [Ermy], and then there is another friend . . . And then there is before Christmas and we volunteer for Salvation Army in front of J.C. Penney, to ring the bell for four hours in the snow, in the winter storm! [laughing] And then, you know, we ring this bell and jump around because it is very cold. And like, I'm not comfortable to say the Christian sayings, like "Merry Christmas." I just don't feel comfortable saying that. So, we put a cassette and there is music on the tape and we just dance – and for four hours! And so many people, they said, "It's entertainment!" [laughing] And they will come with \$20, and then we earn like more than \$200 that night. And we are the best group that night to ring the bell for Salvation Army!

Ermy: They said, "You are here from tropical country. Wow. Very cold here!"

Dana: There is this person in the Salvation Army and he said, "So you are Muslim," and he said "Thank you. You're doing just great because you did something in our community, and you are a Muslim." And we're like, "We want to help and to prove it that it's not all Muslims that are terrorists."  
(Dana and Ermy, Indonesia)

Some of the students described other situations in the community in which they engaged in conversations about their countries, cultures, or Islam. Emad gave an example of talking with some "guys" in a nearby city about terrorism. He tried to explain to them that any religion has its share of radicals:

Once [in the city] when I was talking to these guys, and they're like "You are bombers" and everything. If we're gonna talk all night, we're gonna argue and never settle down. I told them – of course, I told them that in every religion there are radicals. And it just happens that a large amount of radicals are Muslims, and they have really stupid beliefs, you know, about everything – that everybody should die and everything. Muslims gonna rule the world and stuff like that. I think it's stupid, you know? So, that's what I explained to them. In the Catholics . . . there are radicals who are Catholic. He didn't listen to me. He was an old guy, so I just agreed with him. I didn't want to do something and he would have a heart attack or anything right there. [laughing] (Emad, Saudi Arabia)

In the end, Emad decided to drop the subject rather than chance letting the casual discussion turn into an argument. In contrast, Wafa recounted a story in which she

persistently tried to convince a friend's father to let their daughter come to Turkey for a visit. Since she really wanted her friend to visit, Wafa was willing to expend considerable time and effort in reassuring the father that Turkey would be a safe place for his daughter to visit:

Like one of my friends . . . who invited me to their table [the lunch table at school], I met her family and we become really good friends with her. And I told her Dad that I want her to go to Turkey. And then he was kind of thoughtful about it and like, "Maybe we'll think about it later." And I said, "You don't want her to go?" And he said, "I don't think so." He doesn't want her to go. And I asked him if it was because it was Turkey, or if it was he doesn't want her to go anywhere out of the country. And he said, "I don't know. I think that like she is too young and she can do that after she graduates from college." And I said that it's like five years from now – it's too long!

And he said that your country is in a war. And my country isn't in a war! I just told him. It was the time that my government sent the army for a week to Northern Iraq and I just explained this to him . . . It wasn't a war. And now they came back to our country. And he was like, "I don't know. . ."

And I asked him if he was worried that it was a Muslim country. And he said, "Yeah, it could be a reason, I think." And I said, "If you think that Turkey is so much different from the United States, then you are wrong, because it's not. Like people are free to believe whatever they want. They do not have to be a Muslim. If they aren't Muslim it's not like they are going to jail or something. You can believe whatever you want, even if you think there is no God, then you are free to believe in that. And like, we don't have to have a scarf in our head. I wear what I want in Turkey too, and no one tells me anything because I'm free to wear whatever I want." . . . So he said, "Okay we'll think about that later."  
(Wafa, Turkey)

Wafa patiently and calmly tried to put the friend's father at ease, but after a while she clearly became frustrated with the situation. Although negative stereotypes are obviously at work in this conversation, (and Wafa recounted this story as an example of prejudice) the father also expressed his concern about his daughter being very young, and it is not clear that he would have let her go to any country alone. At the time of the interview,

Wafa's natural mother was visiting for a few weeks and was invited to dinner by the friend's family:

Yesterday [my friend's family] wanted to take my mom out to dinner. They are like a very nice family, and he's a very nice guy. . . And yesterday my mom said that they were a very nice family and if they wanted to go to Turkey, they were more than welcome to stay at our house. And I translated this and then he was like, "Hmmm, I don't know." [laughing] (Wafa, Turkey)

When I talked with Wafa again at the pre-departure conference, she was still hoping that her friend would be allowed to visit her in Turkey in the not too distant future.

A final example of the students' encounters in the community was Yara's experience in a shoe store in New York. Yara, who wears hijab, offered this story about a time that she faced discrimination and prejudice in the U.S. Yara felt hurt that the clerk in the shoe store did not want to wait on her, and concluded that it was because she was Muslim and Asian:

I feel it [discrimination or prejudice] because the last time I went to New York City and then I walk in Times Square, and I went to one store. Like, actually two. I went in to buy the shoes, one pair of shoes – and like they're expensive, like \$180 or something. I want to try it on, but they just don't care about me. They think like I'm Muslim and I'm Asian, so like I didn't have enough money to buy that. So I just feel like, okay, so why do you think like that? . . . They just don't care . . . and then they just walk and take care of somebody else. And I was just sitting there for a long time and tell them that "Will you sell it to me?" And then, just like, "Okay, you have to go, right, so, go." They don't really care for me. It's just like, okay, they treat me like, not real good. (Yara, Thailand)

There are several aspects that set this situation apart from many of the other stories told by the students. First, this was a casual encounter outside of Yara's home community. This is notable because it was the only example that Yara offered about feeling discriminated against during the exchange year. Second, she did not respond to the incident by giving information or trying to change the store clerk's attitude, as was the response of most students to prejudicial remarks or behavior. This is certainly

understandable in this sort of casual public encounter; it is unlikely that the store clerk would have the time or the interest to engage in a conversation. Another interesting aspect of this situation was that Yara did not seem to consider that the clerk may have been reacting to her age (Yara was a very petite and young-looking student) in addition to, or instead of, her religion and nationality. Still, this was a disturbing incident for Yara, and one which she interpreted as discrimination against Islam and Asians.

### *Summary and Discussion*

During the exchange year, all of the exchange students in this study actively represented their countries and their religion to others at school and in the community. As discussed in Chapter 6, many of the students were motivated to participate in the exchange because they wanted to help improve the image that Americans have of Islam. Furthermore, they were motivated to promote understanding between the U.S. and the Muslim world. Anggita thought that there were a lot of exchange students that forget why they are here, but all of the students with whom I spoke seemed to know exactly why they were here. They seemed to take it to heart that they should share information about their cultures and religion with American audiences. In essence, being young ambassadors was their “job” as exchange students.

The exchange students fulfilled one of the YES program requirements by making cultural presentations to American audiences. The students made most of their cultural presentations at their high schools, although some made presentations to community or religious groups, or to younger school children. Overall, the students seemed very enthusiastic about their presentations, and most said that they made far more than the required two presentations during the school year. They were surprised that Americans

seemed to know so little about their countries and cultures, but patiently answered questions and explained the realities of everyday life in their home countries.

For the most part, the students focused their cultural presentations on aspects of everyday life in their countries, especially the lives of teenagers. Some of the students, particularly the girls that wore the hijab, shared information about religious beliefs and traditions in their presentations. It appeared, however, that during their presentations, few of the students talked about 9/11, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, or relations between the U.S. and the Muslim world. There seemed to be several reasons for this focus. First, the students were often asked by their teachers to address particular subject areas, and those generally did not include issues surrounding 9/11. Other students said that they understood from the orientation that they were supposed to talk mostly about their countries and cultures (they were, after all, called “cultural” presentations). It is also possible that some of the students may not have felt comfortable addressing these sensitive, and possibly explosive, topics during their presentations. I will return to this topic in the next chapter.

While few of the students talked about 9/11 or relations between the U.S. and the Muslim world in their presentations, they did not shy away from these topics in casual conversations. These everyday conversations seemed to be the primary way that the students fulfilled their role as young ambassadors. The girls who wore the hijab were more visible and seemed to field more questions about Islam than the other students. For all of the students, however, as they got to know their peers at school, they felt comfortable talking with them about their religious beliefs and practices. The exchange students emphasized that they were not terrorists, and by participating in everyday

activities with other youth, they demonstrated that they were just normal teens – who also happened to be Muslim.

When the students encountered negative stereotypes or hurtful remarks, they generally responded with information or education, and often with humor. Their coping mechanisms, then, were not so different than their American Muslim peers (Ayish, 2006; Sirin & Fine, 2008). Ayish (2006) suggests that joking about negative comments or incidents helps to minimize the impact on friendships. Given the time and effort that it took the exchange students to make friends, it is likely they would not want to endanger their friendships by becoming angry or upset. As Firas suggested, “accept the joke and give a joke too.”

Educating others about Islam, of course, fits precisely with the goals of the program, the motivations of many of the students, and the students’ perception of their “job” as exchange students. Sirin and Fine (2008) found that Muslim-American youth also often reacted to prejudice or discrimination by trying to educate others. Two of the messages that were important to the youth in that study – to educate others about Islam and to remind others that they are “normal” young people – were echoed time and time again by the exchange students in this study. In this way, the exchange students showed similarities with American Muslim youth. (Notably, some of the exchange students mentioned that they were happily surprised to find so many Muslims in the U.S., and that they felt a natural bond with American Muslims.)

Although the exchange students related quite a few incidents in which they were called terrorists or endured other pejorative remarks about Islam, overall the students said that they experienced very little prejudice or discrimination. At this point in the

narrative, I have included *all* of the experiences of prejudice or discrimination that the students recounted during the interviews. I considered not including Yara's experience in New York because it seemed so dissimilar to the other experiences – and because it was not in her home community. However, I decided to include it so that I could show the range of responses to prejudice and discrimination. That said, it seems unlikely that one negative experience in New York, disturbing as it may have been, significantly colored Yara's vision of the U.S., or her feeling of acceptance into her host family, school, and community. Indeed, it seemed as if many of the students, Yara included, were sometimes stretching to come up with examples of prejudice or discrimination to tell me about.

At the end of Chapter 8, I discussed some of the possible reasons for students' perceived lack of prejudice or discrimination. At this point, I just reiterate that the students viewed educating about Islam and improving relations between the U.S. and the Muslim world as part of their role as exchange students. They understood from the beginning that relations between the U.S. and the Muslim world were fraught with negative stereotypes and media-generated misinformation. Therefore, when they encountered such situations, they dealt with them mainly through rational and thoughtful discussions about the realities of their cultures and religion. As several of the students noted, if relations between the U.S. and the Muslim world were not so tense, the YES program would not exist – and they would not have been in the U.S. as exchange students.

## **Chapter 10: Looking Back and Going Forward**

The exchange students in this study arrived in the U.S. in mid-August, 2007 and returned to their home countries on July 4, 2008. All of the interviews were conducted at the end of the exchange year, in May, June, and early July. During the May and early June interviews, the students talked about finishing school, going to the prom, saying goodbye to their friends, and attending graduation ceremonies. One of the students, Anggita, participated in an interview in the morning, and walked across the stage at her high school graduation the same afternoon. The eight students interviewed at the pre-departure orientation had already said their goodbyes to friends and families in the U.S., and were only days away from going home.

As discussed in the Methodology chapter, the timing of the interviews may have introduced some bias into the research – mainly a tendency to cast a positive light on the year. However, the end of the school year was also a time during which the students were beginning to reflect on their year in the U.S., what it meant to them, and what it would mean for their future. It was a particularly good time, therefore, to ask the students about their overall exchange experience – what they learned, how it changed them, and what they thought about the program. Furthermore, as the students prepared to return to their homes, they were eager to talk about their expectations, concerns, and future plans.

The first half of this chapter, then, is devoted to the students' reflections on the exchange experience. For many (if not all), it was a life-changing experience, one which helped them to “grow-up” in many ways. Using the students' words, I discuss their personal growth under the headings of maturity, friendliness, independence,

responsibility, and self-confidence. In addition to these personal, “growing-up” sorts of changes, the students also talked about having a better understanding of other people, cultures, and religions. I discuss these reflections under the following headings: broadening horizons, correcting stereotypes, discovering commonalities, and developing empathy. The final part of the “looking back” half of the chapter is devoted to the students’ comments about leadership development, and to their reflections on the YES program.

The second half of this chapter focuses on the students’ lives after the exchange year. First, I discuss their concerns and expectations about going home. What will it be like to see family and friends after nearly a year away? Next, I present the students’ comments about continuing their role as young ambassadors in their home countries. What will they tell people at home about Americans and life in the U.S.? How will they communicate with others about their experiences? Finally, I take a brief look at the students’ future college and career plans.

### **Looking Back – A Life Changing Experience**

The exchange year provided the students with an opportunity to gain an insider’s perspective on another culture by actually living in the culture for an extended period of time. The students formed personal relationships, gained knowledge and insights, and matured into young adults during the year. Many of the students remarked that they would not have had this type of learning experience at home:

I think that like, by movies or anything, I wouldn’t be able to learn how people live here and what they live for, and like what are their goals and everything. So I think the best thing is you are learning the culture by living it. I had so many good friends. I hope that they will be like lifelong friends some of them.  
(Wafa, Turkey)

Well, right now, thinking about it, I was like, I get to experience something that nobody gets to experience at my age – just to go to another country and study high school. . . . So, I get to experience a lot of stuff that I never know and I realized what’s the differences and how to . . . what’s the good things and the bad things about each country. And that’s it. I think that’s the most important thing that I know this year. (Emad, Saudi Arabia)

Amar spoke enthusiastically about how much fun he had during the exchange year. He also enjoyed “being different” and getting the chance to try new things:

It was a great year. It was the most fun time in my life! The greatest time I ever had! And for the exchange students – they all say the same thing. I mean, you do have that much fun in your country, but it’s very interesting being different and doing things you wouldn’t get a chance to do in your country. (Amar, Ghana)

For Nisa, the exchange year exceeded her expectations:

I just feel that it’s better than I imagined. I just feel it’s awesome . . . It’s like, a lot of experience that I didn’t get if I live in Indonesia, if I live in my city with all the same things that I had before, since I was in kindergarten. (Nisa, Indonesia)

Essentially, the year was a life-changing experience for the students. Israa summed up her thoughts on the year:

You know, one year here is like a hundred years back home – the time to grow up for me. Even, here I learn a lot of stuff, which I wouldn’t learn back home. It changed my life. Really. A lot! It’s really a big benefit for my life, and I’m so grateful. (Israa, Indonesia)

### ***Growing Up***

While the students described many ways in which they had changed over the exchange year, the most frequent comments were about maturing and “growing up.” Many of the students remarked that they had grown more responsible, more independent and more self-confident. Quite a few of the students commented that they were now more friendly and outgoing – more confident in relating to others than before the exchange year. Some of the students claimed that the exchange experience transformed

them in a number of different ways. Yusef, for example, thought his “whole character” changed:

For me, I became more outgoing. I became independent, and I kind of just build my whole character in the United States, because it was a point where I’m a teenager and I’m really developing into an adult. So that was the most important year in my life. (Yusef, Saudi Arabia)

Nisa recognized that she had grown and matured in some ways, but pointed out that in other ways she was still the same person as ten months before:

Honestly, there are some parts of me that I feel changes, but there are some parts of me that I don’t feel like it’s changed. Maybe maturity is getting higher, level of independence is getting higher, but there are some levels that just stay the same – like my laziness is still the same [laughing], it’s not decreasing!  
(Nisa, Indonesia)

In the discussion below, I present examples of the students’ reflections on their growing maturity, friendliness, independence, responsibility, and self-confidence. There is, however, considerable overlap between these categories, and many of the quotes could be used as evidence of several characteristics.

### Maturity

Many of the students said that the exchange program had helped them become more mature. Ahmed remarked, “A lot of my friends here say I’ve grown up a lot.” Aya said that she “learned how to think about things before acting,” and she has “developed a very, very mature attitude.” Emad learned to make decisions for himself:

I think it helped me a lot. It helped me to make decisions about how, like to make really big decisions. So I think it helped me to, you know, develop from a teenager to an adult, to go through that process. (Emad, Saudi Arabia)

Similarly, Yara said she had become more grown-up this year and was now able to make decisions for herself:

I think [the program helped me] to become a growing up person. I make a lot of decision by myself. Like, okay, I grow up now. Okay, before I come here just like a sixteen years-old little girl, you know. It's like everything . . . actually my parents, they teach me to make my own decision, but I always don't do it. I just make them make a decision for me because I couldn't decide what right and what wrong. It's just like . . . and I feel like if they decide for me I can blame them later if it's wrong, if it's not right for me. But like right now, I am here and I have to be like, okay, I have to make my own decision. (Yara, Thailand)

Nisa thought she matured because she is better able to control her emotions: "I mean, I used to cry a lot, a lot, a lot, for all case. Right now I realize that I don't cry that much. I mean, I cry, I whine, but not that much." One of the ways that Lila thought she matured during the year was by learning a new way to handle her feelings of anger:

And sometimes, like I have to understand. Like, back in my home when I'm mad, I'm mad. I don't care, because like I'm used to my family and everything, but here when I'm mad I just . . . I can't let it . . . You just have to try to be okay. I just keep it. Sometimes I just go to my room. Sometimes when I'm really mad, I just talk to my friend in Minneapolis. Just like I talk to her and I feel okay then. (Lila, Saudi Arabia)

Part of growing up is forming your own identity. A few of the students, such as Ermy, said that the exchange experience helped them to better understand themselves:

Actually, when I was here I learned a lot about myself. . . . You just realize, oh, I'm a person like this or like this. You never realize it before. (Ermy, Indonesia)

Some of the students discovered that they felt differently about being Muslim when they were not in a majority Muslim environment. Dana, for instance, reflected that it was sometimes challenging to be a Muslim in the U.S., but that she was proud of being a Muslim here:

It means so much to be a Muslim here. I feel like more challenging to be a Muslim here and I'm proud of my religion here than in Indonesia, because in Indonesia everywhere is Muslim. (Dana, Indonesia)

Nisa also felt that it was "more special" to be Muslim away from her home environment:

It feels different being a Muslim here. . . . It's so much different than back home when the majority of you are Muslim and you already getting used to it. It feels like here, I feel like it was more special. (Nisa, Indonesia)

### Friendliness

Many of the students remarked on how they had become more friendly and outgoing as a result of their experience in the U.S., a change they viewed as quite positive. Rani, for example, said that she was “kind of shy and quiet” when she first arrived. She remarked that she is still rather quiet, but she credits the exchange experience with giving her the confidence to talk more often with people that she does not know.<sup>95</sup> Several of the students also pointed out that their experiences in reaching out to their peers helped them become more friendly and outgoing themselves:

Like, when I first came here I was very shy. I didn't talk to people unless they talked to me, and it wasn't a good thing for me. Like, sometimes right now I feel regretful about that because then I could have more friends and I was just too shy and I didn't talk to anyone! [laughing] But as the time passed, I don't feel that way anymore. I talk to people and stuff. (Wafa, Turkey)

Nisa, too, worked hard to make friends at school. As a result, she developed some strategies for making friends, and now says she makes friends more easily:

I feel like I'm more friendly. Yeah, I feel more friendly. Maybe that's traditional since we're exchange student and we don't know anyone in the beginning of the year and we have to make friends and everything. That was really a good impact for me. I'm getting used to make friends easily. (Nisa, Indonesia)

### Independence

Many of the students credited the exchange year with helping them become more independent. They described learning to depend on themselves and manage their own

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<sup>95</sup> I point out here that Rani was very talkative in the interview, which ran 75 minutes, and probably would have gone much longer except that Rani's host sister was waiting to take her to an amusement park.

daily lives. Ismeena commented that becoming more independent was one of her many goals for the exchange year, and she felt good about having accomplished it:

I really wanted to learn German this year, and just to improve my language, and meet new people, and make friends, and to be more independent, like by myself for the year, and – yeah, I did it! [laughing] (Ismeena, Egypt)

Yusef observed that becoming more independent was one of the best things about the exchange program. He also seemed to have a great sense of satisfaction at having become more independent:

The best thing is like depending on yourself and knowing how to adjust and how to build yourself and build your own self. Like, that taught me a lot about independence. For example, school – the host parents told me to study and stuff like that from time to time, but I did it by myself – and I did well at school! That was the most . . . that was the thing that I got out of it [the exchange year]. (Yusef, Saudi Arabia)

Another aspect of independence is the ability to solve one's own problems. Nisa remarked that she tried to solve her own problems during the year. She also demonstrated a concern for her host family in that she did not want to burden them with her problems:

Here, even though I have my host family, sometimes I just don't want to share too much problems with them. I don't know why, but I just don't feel like it. I just feel like, it's my problem, so why should I share it to somebody else who is actually, they have their own problems? So I just keep it to myself and deal with it myself. (Nisa, Indonesia)

Likewise, Ahmed described how he had become more independent during the exchange year. Ahmed reflected that this newfound independence was not always easy, but it helped him to gain confidence in his ability to manage his life and deal with new or unfamiliar situations. He also observed that the exchange program presented a unique learning opportunity:

The experience itself, of being alone in a country, without your family for a year is challenging, just to be there and take your own decisions for the first time, maybe. For the first time you take care of simple things, like your budget, your food, your drinks, go to school or be studying. No one actually tells you to study or do that, or come here and go there. Actually, you can figure out everything by your own self. You know when you should take that decision by your own self. There are people to help you, but for the first time you kind of depend on yourself more than before. . . .

And just being on your own gives you a lot of stuff. Just the experience itself – you wouldn't get it anywhere, so you just have this year to be by yourself and face all these problems. Like, I've been thinking about it. I have some issue with the bank and stuff, and I've gone and talked to them and told them the situation and talked to these people. So even the problems, you solve it by yourself, even though you don't speak the language very well, or fluently, you still have to make your way and do it. You solve your problems. You go buy things by yourself. You do everything in a different language. It's not that easy, but you do it. (Ahmed, Egypt)

Firas remarked that the exchange experience helped him to find the leader in himself:

When I was home, always you have to follow a leader, but here you're a leader yourself. There's no one watching you and you have to make your own rules, organize your life, let's see about the money – collect your money, save your money, when to spend it. You have to clean your room, and stuff like that. And especially when you don't have like host brothers to help you out, you're on yourself. (Firas, Saudi Arabia)

Many of the students found that adhering to Islam while surrounded by people of other faiths required new-found independence and determination. No one would wake them up in the morning for prayers or remind them to do their afternoon prayers. As described in earlier chapters, the students were often alone in their fasting during Ramadan. Some requested places to pray at school or arranged rides to a mosque, but how they practiced their religion was largely up to the students themselves. Continuing with his theme of being a leader, Firas remarked,

The hardest thing is to hold your own religion. Stick with it. Be a leader yourself, because there's nobody to watch you – nobody. (Firas, Saudi Arabia)

According to Mifta, “staying on track” with her religion required determination and self-control:

It’s hard for me because at home my parents always keep it in track. But I don’t have my parents here so it’s like pretty much by myself. You have to control yourself. You have to keep yourself in track. (Mifta, Indonesia)

Aya was both surprised and pleased with herself for being able to manage her prayers on her own:

I was like, Wow! I can’t believe that I’m doing it myself [her prayers] because I’m not usually . . . it’s just that I’m used to doing it with my father and uncle and all together. (Aya, Philippines)

### Responsibility

As they reflected on how they had changed over the year, many of the students talked about becoming more responsible. Lila commented that she had learned to take responsibility for cleaning chores that she would have left to the maid at home:

And I think I’m a lot more responsible now because back home I had housemaids and everything. When I came here I was kind of messy and everything, but after that I was like, I have to clean my room. (Lila, Saudi Arabia)

Wafa’s family in Turkey did not have maids, but even so Wafa did not participate in the housework at home. By the end of the exchange year, however, she hoped that her mother “will not have to get tired anymore for me.” In the following quotation, Wafa described trying to convince her natural mother that she is now more independent and responsible, perhaps foreshadowing discussions that many of the students would have with their parents when they returned home:

Like my mom is here right now you know [visiting from Turkey], and she still thinks that I’m the same girl as last year, so like she’s always like, “Do you have this? You didn’t forget this, right?” . . . And sometimes, I’m like, “Mom, I’ve been living here for ten months by myself and I did all of this by myself, and I can do this. You don’t have to tell me.”

And sometimes she tries to clean my room, like if I have stuff on the floor she puts it somewhere. And I'm like, "Okay, you don't do this anymore because I'm gonna do these things now." Like, I didn't even wash my clothes in Turkey. My mom would always do that for me. But like, right now I'm here and I know how to wash my clothes and I know how to do some snacks when I get hungry. So I think that I have . . . I feel that I have more responsibility right now, and my mom like won't have to get tired anymore for me. I feel like I can do things for me. So I think I changed in a positive way. (Wafa, Turkey)

Similarly, Yara was not accustomed to doing chores at home, but felt that she became more responsible while living with a host family in the U.S. Yara decided to help out around the house to lessen the burden on her host mother. She saw that if she did not clean the house, the chores would be left to her host mother after a long day at work. As a result of her actions, Yara not only became her host mom's "favorite," but also gained confidence to be on her own:

I don't . . . back home in Thailand, I don't have to do any chores because I have my auntie come to stay with me and she be like my nanny. She do like everything. I don't even have to make my own bed. But when I'm here – okay, I do like everything, like cleaning the dishes. I feel like, okay, my host mom is a single mom and she have two kids. One is 14 years old and one is 10 years old, and not like a real grown-up person, you know, so they don't know how to do things. So like, I feel like, why I have to put mom in a bad thing when she come home tired from work? Why I should not like do something? Like, when she come back and do something, and she gonna feel fresh, like, "Oh yeah, the kitchen clean, the room clean, and things."

So, I become her favorite, like my host mom's favorite. Like, because my sisters, they just keep their room like where it is, like not really clean and stuff. And like, they don't do *anything*. Then they just put plate on the table and then they just go somewhere. Sometimes they just put in the sink, but they didn't wash it, so I just like . . . One time I just think, "Okay, all right. I am not going to wash the dishes this week." And I just see like a pile of the dishes, and I think, "Okay, so nobody do it but me!" [laughing] So I have to do it. And then, so, okay right now I'm okay. I think I'm ready to be by myself. (Yara, Thailand)

## Self-confidence

The students frequently made comments reflecting their increasing self-confidence (as evidenced in several of the statements above). During the exchange year, the students faced a myriad of challenges in navigating everyday life. Overcoming these challenges not only made the students feel more independent, responsible, and mature, but also boosted their self-confidence. Everything from speaking English, to making presentations in front of the classroom, to managing their own money gave them the confidence to face future challenges. Rani, who had some very difficult times with her host family, was proud that she was able to overcome her problems and have a successful experience:

Whenever I think about those challenging experiences, tears actually come to my eye automatically. And then I say, “Oh, why?” I did it successfully! I have done this! (Rani, India)

Rani went on to describe the confidence that she gained over the year:

Now I have the confidence to do things, and to speak up, and to say what I feel, and to share my thoughts. So, I think that’s a good thing. And, now I’m at least good at English too. I don’t suck at English as much as I used to, so this is a good thing. And maybe I would realize it after I go back home and I would hear from people that, “You have changed in this way and that,” and now I’m not afraid of trying many things. (Rani, India)

A number of the students said that they gained self-confidence through performing community service work. Aya, for example, found that she could successfully tutor a child with special needs:

And like volunteering in [my teacher’s] class. There was this girl, she was a special child and she comes to his class. . . .The girl is really – she could hardly speak, but she can talk, but not pronounce. So, he [the teacher] said, “Teach her how to read the notes and how to read the words.” So, yeah, I’m not really used to it because I really don’t have the patience to teach. Really, I hate teaching, but I was like, well, why wouldn’t I try to do it here?

So, I did it. I was just scared at first because I thought she's had tantrums and I'm scared that she's wild and she'd hurt me or something. . . . But it was okay because she was friendly. She wasn't that hard to teach. So, that was one of the things I enjoyed. (Aya, Philippines)

Through her tutoring experience Aya discovered that she had patience and skills that she had not known she possessed:

I never thought I would have the patience to teach her, especially to her because she was a special child. . . So, I just thought that – wow, I have the skills! I have the patience! (Aya, Philippines)

Nura told a similar story about the challenges of tutoring a middle school child. She concluded that the experience “makes me learn. Now I feel like I know everything about kids right now. They're like my little sister and I have no problem.”

The exchange year helped the students build the confidence and courage to try new things and face new challenges. In general, the students seemed very pleased with their increased level of self-confidence. Some of the students also talked about how it would impact their lives later:

For me, [the exchange program] really encouraged me to try new things, and to go to different places in the world. Like what I did this year, I learned a third language – Spanish. So, I'm gonna keep up that. (Yusef, Saudi Arabia)

I think that when I go back to my country I can do whatever I want by myself. Like, some things that maybe I didn't have confidence in before coming here, but now I think that I can do it alone. (Wafa, Turkey)

Nura, a self-described optimist, now believes she can do anything she puts her mind to:

I'm such a person that I have more optimism than pessimism. There's no such thing as impossible. I learn that in the United States. So, like you challenge yourself to get better and better. . . . The PAX program makes me want to think that there's no such thing as impossible, if you really want to do something. (Nura, Indonesia)

## *Understanding the “Other”*

Beyond growing-up and becoming more responsible, mature, independent, and self-confident, the students also talked about having a better understanding of other people, cultures, and religions. In this section, I discuss the students’ increased understanding of others under the following four themes: broadening horizons, correcting stereotypes, discovering commonalities, and developing empathy. To some extent, this topic has been addressed in previous chapters (particularly with respect to experiences with host families, in Chapter 7). In this section, then, I will present new quotations, but I will also make some references to the previous discussions.

### Broadening Horizons

As a result of the exchange experience, a number of the students remarked that they were now more open-minded, more tolerant, and more accepting than they had been prior to the exchange. According to Aya, “I think I have broadened my horizon to, like, welcoming other values, and not only other values but like, I appreciate other cultures.” Ismeena claimed that she “learned to respect other opinions and all.” Khalil, who met teens from many countries and cultures in his high school, said that he was more open-minded because he had made many friends and learned to “understand other cultures”:

Now I’m more flexible and open-minded about it. I learned a lot of things from my friends. And now I can’t judge what is going on, and I can feel like why they are doing it. I don’t think I will judge why they believe it or why do they do it. It’s just the way they are. (Khalil, Turkey)

Ahmed reflected that he became more thoughtful: “I take time to think about things now, not just the first look.” Ismeena also commented on the reciprocal nature of the experience: “Like you gain language and how do they live, exchange cultures . . . you

teach them and they teach you.” Ahmed said he learned about other religions by interacting with Christians and Jews, and listening with an open mind. He was also cognizant of being part of minority group in the U.S., something that was a new experience for him:

It wasn't a problem for me being a Muslim between all these people, being a minority basically between these different religions. . . Sometimes we have talks about religion and we listen to each other in an open-minded way.  
(Ahmed, Egypt)

Khalil remarked that his attitude about 9/11 changed after he talked with people and visited the site of the World Trade Center attacks in New York. He started to understand the events from another perspective:

I can understand more about why people are so eager about 9/11 because like, I saw the place in New York and I like talk to people and now I know why they're angry. I think they are right to be angry because it was terrible. Like, actually, before I came here, I was feeling like maybe they got what they deserve. Now I don't feel like it. They were innocent people. (Khalil, Turkey)

For all of the students, the exchange year provided the opportunity to interact with and form personal relationships with people very different from themselves. Ahmed remarked that his point of view changed “a little bit” when he started to talk with people of other faiths. He began to understand the narratives of the “other”:

I sort of started thinking about it in Egypt and thought that this is not that way it should be – that we are hating these people so much because they're in our land or something. They have reasons for that and they have a point of view, so why shouldn't we just listen to that? I just didn't know this point of view yet, so I was like, there's gotta be something, but I just don't know what it is. When I came here, I started to realize it, and when I've known these Jewish people and talk to them and reading different books and doing research, my point of view started to change a little bit. We just can't say, we hate Jewish or we don't like Christians or we don't like Muslims. If you don't like one person this doesn't mean that you hate the whole nationality or religion – it's just about that person. Maybe you don't like him because it's something in his personality. That's why I said it's people's fault that they do mistakes and then they blame it on religion or the country. (Ahmed, Egypt)

Nisa also talked about tolerance and not judging people based on their religion:

If people . . . for example, if I'm Muslim and my friend is Jewish, if I don't like one of their rules, I try not to tell them. Like, I try not to tell him. I just let them do their stuff. I don't hate them because of their rules. I don't hate them just because they're Jewish or something. (Nisa, Indonesia)

### Correcting Stereotypes

Correcting stereotypes, particularly those garnered from the mass media, emerged as a common theme among the exchange students. Just as they did not want all Muslims to be stereotyped as terrorists, the students came to see that Americans or Christians or Jews should not be judged based on stereotypes. Nearly all of the students said that at least some parts of their media-influenced impressions of the U.S. turned out to be incorrect. Recall that several of the girls worried that American teenagers would be “mean,” like in the movie *Mean Girls*. Across the board, however, the students found Americans to be generally friendly. The students also discovered that not all Americans are financially well-off, a fact they sometimes learned through their community service work with homeless or needy populations. Some also commented that the U.S. is not as dangerous as the media led them to believe. According to Yusef, the U.S. has a reputation for being the “crime capital of the world,”

But, still, you're not gonna live in a place where the gun is like right in front of you. So, yeah, I'll definitely change people's [in Saudi Arabia] point of view on that. It's not dangerous at all. It's just TV. It's CSI and stuff like that. (Yusef, Saudi Arabia)

The students also came to the U.S. with stereotypes about Americans' loose morals and rampant drug and alcohol abuse. Again, they were able to see people as individuals. Several students commented that there are “good and bad” people in every culture and religion. Many concluded, as Rani did, that “whatever we see in movies is not true.” I

will provide further comments by the students about corrected stereotypes in the discussion below about being young ambassadors in their home countries.

### Discovering Commonalities

During their stay in the U.S., the students also found many commonalities between people in the U.S. and in their home countries. Some of the students, such as Ahmed, were surprised at this finding:

They told us before we came here in orientation that we're kind of like an iceberg and then you hit each other. And then you start realizing the differences between each other, and the similarities. . . And I thought before I came here that I would find a lot of difference, and I would have to struggle to survive the differences, but I actually found a lot of similarities. . . Morals and values, they are pretty much similar. Of course, some people are different than the others, but there are a lot of common values between my country and here. Like, here people respect each other, they advocate each other, they help each other a lot . . . I found it between most of the people here. It's common, and the same in my country, so that is a similarity. (Ahmed, Egypt)

Nisa commented on the similarity of teens around the world, Rani discovered that American parents set limits and guidelines for their children just as Indian parents do, and Wafa found that Americans "really like love." Khalil pointed out the importance getting to know one another as individuals. He also recognizes that there are "good people" everywhere:

I know that I can become friends with anyone because there are like good peoples all around the world, so it's not a problem. You just need to make some effort to get to know each other and trust each other. (Khalil, Turkey)

Many of the students seemed to have been aware of the common roots of the Abrahamic faiths before they arrived in the U.S. Still, by going to church and interacting with their host families, as well as talking with their friends at school, they explored and

deepened their understandings of the commonalities (and differences) between Islam, Judaism, and Christianity.

Many of the students' comments regarding what they learned about stereotypes or commonalities came up during the discussion of what they would tell people at home about their exchange year. To keep the comments in context, I have included these quotations in the section below, "Ambassadors at Home."

### Developing Empathy

Closely linked to tolerance and open-mindedness, is that ability to see the world through another's eyes. Indeed, understanding others' thoughts and feelings, is key to developing empathy for others. I use the phrase "developing empathy" to describe an ongoing process, not to imply that the students showed no empathy prior to the exchange (that would be unlikely, as well as impossible to measure). I report on their developing empathy here because it seems congruent with their self-reported growing maturing and increased capacity to understand others.

Throughout their interviews, the students provided many examples in which they tried to make meaning of the situation by understanding others' thoughts and feelings. As described in earlier chapters, when Rani felt hurt that her host family did not seem to care about her injured knees, she tried to understand the situation from her host mother's point of view. Nisa, too, put herself in her host mother's shoes as she tried to reconcile her role in the family and the fact that she did not receive flowers after her dance concert. Concern for others' feelings is also evident in the fact that many of the students said they did not ask their host families to take them to a mosque very often (or at all) because of the potential burden on their families. Similarly, in Yara's example above about taking

responsibility for cleaning the kitchen every day, she considered how her host mother would feel coming home to a dirty house after a long day of work. And, in Wafa's comments about learning to take more responsibility, she expressed a hope that her mother will "no longer get tired" for her.

At school, too, the students tried to understand others' thoughts and feelings. For instance, they tried to understand why their peers knew little about the rest of the world – perhaps they had no need to do so, or had no one to tell them first-hand about other countries and cultures. With respect to religion, the students opened themselves to learning about Christian and Jewish beliefs and traditions. Wafa did not take offense when her friend told her that he wanted her to be a Christian. Instead, she looked at the situation from his belief system: his desire for her to be a Christian grew out of his love for her, and his concern that she could not go to heaven if she was not a Christian. Lila's experience at the Holocaust museum also demonstrated that she came to better understand the Holocaust and how the Jews were treated – and it was "scary." Many of the students said they could understand the sadness and the anger that Americans felt about the 9/11 attacks. Recall that Ahmed realized that so many people "got hurt" and the attacks "broke their wings down and they're kind of afraid. . ."

The students also learned about what it is like to be a minority because as Muslims in a majority Christian nation they lived that role everyday. A number of the students remarked that this was a new experience and it felt "odd" or "weird." As discussed earlier, many of the students found that it took a tremendous amount of inner strength to be true to their religion in this environment. Nisa said she now understands what it feels like to be a minority – and it's "okay":

Like, back home as a Muslim, I'm a majority, but here I feel how it feels to be a minority – weird. . . It's kind of weird but I like it. I mean a lot of people are different, so that's okay. (Nisa, Indonesia)

Another way that the students came to understand and empathize with others was through their community service work. The YES program requires that students perform twenty hours of community service during the school year. Many of the students said they performed far more than the required twenty hours. In general, the students spoke very positively about their community service work, using such descriptors as “great” and “satisfying.” Emad's remarks were typical: “It's a great feeling. It feels good to know that I'm actually doing something, helping somebody.” Dana echoed this sentiment and added that it was good to be able to give back to the community:

The best thing [about being an exchange student] is that I can involve in the commitment and do something. I can help in the volunteering. I do something – I'm tired but I don't get paid for it. It just feels good. The best thing is just to give back to the community. (Dana, Indonesia)

For many of the students, community service or volunteer work, particularly as associated with school, was a new concept, but one which they seemed to embrace. Sometimes through their community service activities the students were able to correct stereotypes that they had of Americans, for instance the idea that there are no poor Americans:

Community service is not part of graduation from school [in Indonesia], so I felt great about doing community service. You know, try to build your sensitivity about helping people and everything, and I love doing that. I think it's just great! Like when we went downtown [to hand out sandwiches to the homeless], I've never seen that kind of people. I've never seen that there are a lot of homeless people. I thought America is already a big country. They're already not developing anymore, and they're already a success. America is a success in the world, so I didn't think that there are homeless people, but there are. They were out there. Yeah. (Nisa, Indonesia)

Nura reflected that involvement in the exchange program gave her a new perspective on the world and a sense of responsibility to help others less fortunate than herself:

Now, like the PAX program taught me a lot of things. Now before I go to sleep I always think about that. I sleep like on a really nice bed and there's a lot of people starving and hungry out there, you know what I mean? So, PAX really opened my mind. Seriously – about everything. Before I don't really care what happened in the world and with my country. Now, it's just . . . I don't know, it just came to my mind and I start thinking about that and like, yeah, I have to do something for these people. (Nura, Indonesia)

For Amar, being away from home and on his own for a year gave him the opportunity to grow more independent and solve his own problems. At the same time, he thinks he is better able to “feel” the problems of other people. Amar makes a direct and poignant link between coming to know the “other” and living together in peace:

I now get to understand people better than before. I see . . . I mean, living at peace with people – I've been to a higher level, living at peace with any other people. It's like I'm passing through all these differences, enduring all these problems, and knowing . . . It's like before I came, I was always with my parents and my family, so you don't get to experience how different things are like when you are outside home. And you don't feel the problems of other people because you are always with your own family. But when I came here and lived with another people, I found out these problems and I passed through them and I knew the problems of other people too. . . And now I have endured it and I know . . . and I *feel* like somebody when I see them. So, it will always make me live peacefully with them. (Amar, Ghana)

### ***Leadership***

Leadership development is integrated into the YES program through orientation and training, as well as through community service and other activities directed by the local coordinators. I asked the students to tell me about the leadership activities in their clusters, and what they learned about leadership over the exchange year. Some of the students had difficulty articulating specifics about activities aimed at leadership development. Ahmed remarked, “Leadership? Well, we talked about it in orientation but

we didn't do an actual thing, like a group project or something like that.” Other students, however, said that they participated in leadership development activities, such as speaking to community groups and performing community service. According to Emad, “My local coordinator has made up a lot of leadership events, and lots of events that we had to do. And I felt like I accomplished something by going here. I've helped, you know. So I think that this program is amazing!”

Regardless of their perception of leadership-related activities, most of the students felt that the exchange program had molded them in ways that would make them better leaders. The personal changes described above – independence, responsibility, and maturity – contributed to the students' perceptions of their leadership abilities. The cultural presentations provided opportunities for the students to improve their presentation skills and boost their self-confidence. Students also had opportunities to take on leadership roles in clubs and other school activities. Moreover, as Amar observes in the quotation below, sometimes people expected the exchange students to be leaders, and it was really up to the students themselves to “stand up to” the challenge:

One of the biggest talents or things I've found in me, being an exchange student is my leadership role. I've found that I'm the greatest leader I can be. Even among my friends, I was always the leader and AFS or this exchange program reveals some hidden talents in us. Particularly, when you come here, you become independent more or less. You make decisions on your own. You manage your own resources, and . . . you get to be a leader wherever you go – if you want to. Especially in school, they find the new boy and they want you to do so many things and people expect more from you. So if you stand up to it, you always become a leader. And, that's what I've found. (Amar, Ghana)

In another quote (which I will present in the next section), Amar demonstrated his confidence in his leadership abilities when he acknowledged that he might someday become president of Ghana. Khalil, who hoped to become a foreign diplomat, reflected

on what it takes to be a leader. Interestingly, he thought he could provide guidance, but was less certain about his future role as a leader:

I think leading people you need a lot of knowledge and stuff. And I think when I return to Turkey, I feel like I'm ready to answer questions and maybe lead them. Well, maybe not lead them because I never think to lead people, but I can like try to make the right relation or tell to them a better direction. (Khalil, Turkey)

Aya, on the other hand, seemed quite confident in her strengthened leadership skills:

I think leadership is a matter of balancing your skills and time. So, I don't know, back home I felt that I didn't have that. I did not trust myself. But this year, I think I was able to gain, and I was able to imbibe a whole lot of leadership skills through this experience. I think the main strength of my leadership is when I follow my sensibilities. (Aya, Philippines)

Although many of the students seemed to have trouble bringing the concept of leadership to a practical level, it became apparent from their answers to other questions that many of them planned to use their leadership skills to promote positive changes in their home countries. For example, Firas planned to change attitudes about women in Saudi Arabia, a challenging task that would undoubtedly require him to take on a leadership role (and a controversial one at that):

My plan is just to change the thoughts back home. It's kind of a strict country Saudi Arabia. Even the women can't drive. That's sad, right? You just drive here. You didn't have any trouble with it. Well, things like this need to be changed. Not the whole thing, just fix the things you need to fix. (Firas, Saudi Arabia)

Ismeena described how she gained in self-confidence and now feels as if she can "start something" on her own:

Before the program I've never even made a presentation so like now I'm more confident to do one and talk to people more, like people I do not know. It's not as hard as it seemed to be. Like I can start something on my own and I think when I go back home I'll try to tell my friends a lot about things that I should like change and try to start something. . .

And like, I'm thinking also because as a country we do not have any like special things for people who are like special education. So, we do not really have anything like that, which is really unfair. Like, here I was amazed at how do they help them, and how do they have aides and after school teachers, special classes and all. Even the handicapped, they're able to just go to the same school in normal classes. . . So, I'm thinking about that. I'll try to do something.  
(Ismeena, Egypt)

Similarly, Amar (who used crutches to get around) predicted, "Maybe in some years to come I'll be a voice for disabled rise – maybe for the government to pass some rules to make people's lives better." Emad, too, intended to take on a leadership role at home: "Well, there's not a lot of homeless people in Saudi Arabia, but there is some . . . so, I think maybe in the near future I'll start a foundation or something that feeds the homeless."

### ***Reflections on the YES Program***

Most of the questions that I asked during the interviews focused on the exchange students' experiences living with host families and attending American schools. The one program-related area that was included on the interview guide from the beginning involved the goals of the YES program. I asked the students to describe the goals of the YES program, as well as their thoughts on the effectiveness of the program. Before I present the results of those discussions, however, I will discuss another program-related matter that arose during the interview with Ahmed – how the topic of 9/11 was addressed during the YES program orientations.

### **9/11 and Orientation**

Prior to coming to the U.S., all of the students in this study attended orientation sessions in their home countries. It is likely that these in-country programs varied

somewhat in content and approach to issues surrounding 9/11. Upon arrival in the U.S., the students participated in a several-day orientation in Washington, D.C. before traveling to their host communities. In the comments below, the students do not necessarily distinguish between the two orientation programs, and as program-related issues were not the focus of this study, I did not attempt to sort it out.

This line of inquiry began with Ahmed's interview. Recall that Ahmed did not address issues around 9/11 in most of his formal presentations at school, but he later wished he had done so. Upon reflection, Ahmed felt that the exchange students should have had time in the orientation sessions to discuss the issues surrounding 9/11, as well as their own feelings about it. As a result, they would have been better prepared to engage Americans in dialogue:

Ahmed: Here, they talked about it [9/11] a little bit at orientation, and talked about being a Muslim here, but it should be more than that. They should have a session just talking about it . . . and asking the students, "What is your point of view about it? What do you think?" And ask the students themselves and see what they think so they'll be able to figure out somehow . . . because we're here to talk to people about these things, so we should talk about it . . . As ambassadors here, you should be talking about it. You should dialogue with the students and tell them that they should talk about it, but. . . I don't know if other people did actually talk about it, or just gave presentations about Egypt and culture.

*Carol: So, you're saying that you weren't really encouraged from the exchange organization to talk about 9/11?*

Ahmed: No, but I wanted to do that. I wanted to get my voice there so people know. I wanted to do that when I joined that program. From the programs I've seen on TV and the books I've read, people don't think the right way. They don't have the right image, so I kind of wanted to fix it, or help in fixing it and make them understand more what exactly is it. What exactly is *jihad*? Who are Muslims? Who are these people that came on 9/11? Were they actually Muslim, or claiming that they are Muslims? I wanted to tell them the truth. I wanted to tell them what the Qur'an says and what the Prophet says, and then leave the choice to them.

*Carol: So, then what would be your recommendation for the YES program – for the orientation sessions?*

Ahmed: To have a session and talk about 9/11, and talk about it with the students and volunteers, and see what they know about it, what is their background, and encourage them to talk about it. You convince them it's a big issue to talk about and it's important to talk about because you're Muslims and some people have stereotypes about you that you're a terrorist . . . I know some people say we want the people to forget about what happened and erase it from the history and all, but, no. We need to teach the people and help them understand about it. It's better to understand what happened wrong, so we can fix it in the future.  
(Ahmed, Egypt)

After the interview with Ahmed, I asked a few of the other students for their thoughts on how 9/11 was addressed in the orientation sessions. Ismeena (who, like Ahmed, was from Egypt) had the impression that the YES students were not “supposed” to talk about 9/11: “We talked like mostly about religion especially [in the orientation]. We're not like really supposed to talk about 9/11 as much.” However, Ismeena went on to say that the students were told that “people might ask us questions” about 9/11 and terrorism.

In Wafa's opinion, however, the orientation program did prepare the students to answer questions about 9/11 and Islam. They were also encouraged to respond in “a nice way.” She also remarked that building personal relationships was emphasized as the key mechanism for dispelling stereotypes about Islam:

Since it was mostly Muslim student program, they talked about 9/11, and that this program started to work after 9/11. And that some people here could have wrong ideas about us, but some people might not have. So, like they said we should be ready for everything, for every kind of questions and maybe some like expressions like “you're a terrorist” or something. They wanted us to be ready for that. And they said that just try not to get mad and try not to tell them bad things because then they will think that you're a really bad person and that all the Muslims are like that. So, like try to explain to them, because people who think that might have like a fear of the world. Like, they might not know anything about other countries because some people think that the United States maybe is the only thing in the world! [laughing]

So, they wanted us to explain everything and try to talk to them in a nice way. So, they would be, “Maybe this person is right, maybe every Muslim aren’t like that.” So, maybe they would start learning about you and you aren’t a bad person, you aren’t a bad enemy. (Wafa, Turkey)

Other students commented that during the orientation sessions they learned that the YES program was created in response to 9/11, and that they might have to respond to questions about being a terrorist. None of the students, however, mentioned having sessions about the events of 9/11, or discussing their thoughts and feelings on the subject. According to Lila, “They didn’t really explain that much about 9/11.” Still, Ahmed remained the only student that seemed particularly concerned about the lack of time devoted to discussing 9/11 during the program orientation.

### YES Program Goals

As part of the interview protocol, I asked the students how they defined the goals of the YES program and whether or not they thought the program was meeting those goals. All of the students appeared to be comfortable talking about the goals of the program. Emad, for instance, said the main goal of the YES program is “to build bridges between nations and try to make the world a better world.” Sitti described the goal of the YES program as, “to try to understand. They want us to like, tell everybody, so they understand about Muslims, that we are not all bad.” Wafa emphasized the importance of correcting stereotypes and learning to live together:

I think this program was found after 9/11, and like after 9/11 most of the Christian people, they started to think that Muslims were kind of bad people, and they were trying to kill other people. Then, I think it was a wrong idea because for some people you can’t think that in general. Because if some people do bad things, you can’t say that all Muslim people are like that. So I think it was a wrong idea and it needed to be fixed. That’s why this program was found – so people from different countries and different cultures could get together and try to learn and live together and learn from each other’s cultures, and how they live and like how

are they in fact. Not like, just from news, or just the bad things. So I think this program is for that, and I think it's working very well. (Wafa, Turkey)

Khalil, speaking about all AFS exchange programs (not only about the YES program), made the connection to a more peaceful world:

The AFS program is making the world more livable, so like everyone is together and understanding cultures – like understanding each other, and like making peace, basically. (Khalil, Turkey)

Aya, too, described the program goal as building bridges for peace (and from her laughter, I suspect that this was not the first time she had made this “speech”):

The goals of the YES program are to, mainly to eliminate stereotypes on Muslim students, as well as to promote peace. Yeah, that's the main thing – to promote peace through Muslim students who . . . are the best bridge-builders of our nations. [laughing] That was such a speech! Thank you! (Aya, Philippines)

Yusef remarked that the goal of the YES program is for “the exchange students from the Middle East to come to the United States so everybody could see their country from their point of view.” Ahmed echoed the importance of exchange students as credible, first-hand sources of information:

What I think is that if we actually bring people from there to talk to people and start opening their culture, and spreading it between society here, the understanding will be more . . . will be better, because this person comes from there and he totally knows his culture and religion so there's no way . . . There will be mistakes of course, but it's a better source [than the media]. (Ahmed, Egypt)

Lila maintained that the exchange program was a “really big step because they understand that we're normal people, and not terrorists or anything.” Ahmed suggested that the YES program was successful because people came to know each other as individuals:

I think it's doing a lot of success. . . I've met a lot of people from different countries, different nationalities, different religions, different cultures. And we've sat together, we've talked about many things and we've had different opinions

and we've had similar opinions on other things. So, when a person from the West or Europe think about a Muslim city, he will think differently because the idea he had before he met me is that they are kind of bad and ignorant and like that, but when he met me he didn't find all these things. He just like, found a person. (Ahmed, Egypt)

Yara pointed out that the YES program brings together Muslims from different countries and that there is a certain amount of sharing and learning taking place between the Muslim students, as well as between the students and their hosts. Yara also made the connection between mutual understanding and living in peace. In her assessment, the program was working because she was able to help people see others as individuals, rather than through stereotypes:

Yara: I think they try to make all the youth kind of become like a goal in the future. Everybody from like different country, even we are all Muslim, but we pretty much like . . . Muslim from Turkey, Muslim from Egypt, and Muslim from Thailand and from Indonesia. It's just like, we all claim ourselves as a Muslim, but we sometime we have a different way of like, of things, so they want everybody to understand each other and not just Muslim, but to Christian and to American people, so American people will learn more about Muslim and Muslim learn more about Christian, so we all understand each other. That is gonna be like the best thing because the more you understand person. . . . Like, if you understand each other it's gonna be peace, you know. You're not gonna fight because all the fight that happen, like the war and stuff, is coming from the wrong understanding.

*Carol: So, how do you know that people are understanding more now?*

Yara: Because like, before that they would be like, "Muslim is bad," especially from the Middle East. And then I just like, "Why you say they're bad?" And, "I don't know, I saw from the news they're bad." "So, did you know them? Did you try to know them at all?" . . . I explain it that way. Like, not all people have to be bad. Like some Christian is bad too. Some Christians take and abuse their child. It's not like just Muslim do the bad thing. Some Christian do the bad thing too. Some like do drug and smoke and drink and stuff. Not just Muslim that can be a bad person. They like more open their mind and try to understand what I try to say. So, I think it's working. (Yara, Thailand)

Aya felt that the YES program was meeting its goals because it facilitates the formation of strong personal bonds across cultures. Recall that Aya's friends said they were going to "kill" her if she did not come back to visit them:

Yes, it is [meeting the goals] because by just merely sending us here and like sharing our cultures to the Americans and other people, I think we are . . . well, just befriending a foreigner. It's like, you know, there's a mutual understanding in that type of sharing and befriending other people. . . so we are creating a bonding – to peace and goodwill. I think it works. . . I just feel like there's strong bonds with other cultures with the aid of us exchange students. (Aya, Philippines)

Likewise, for Amar, the personal bonds formed during the exchange year are key to the success of the program. He talked about his bonds with Americans, as well as the close friendships he formed with exchange students from other countries. Because of these strong personal ties, Amar predicted that he would never "break the peace":

Amar: I know no exchange student now will be in conflict with another exchange student or another country in some years to come. For example, if I become the president of Ghana, which may come true some time [laughing], there is no way I will break the peace between Ghana and U.S. because I've lived here. I know the way they live, and U.S. have done some good to me and I want to do something good too. So, I know the other exchange students, they all have the same plan in mind, or if not, they still have some love for each other that they didn't want to break ties or cause any conflicts.

*Carol: Okay, I'll watch for you to become the president! So, you said about your love for the U.S., what about other countries? How do you feel about them?*

Amar: More precisely, it was the U.S., but for other countries, absolutely. My best friends are all exchange students from other countries. And, I had never met an Indian before and some people I have never met, but I came here to know them, and they are now my friends. And, I know we are friends with each other and that we will actually promote the goal for this organization in some years. (Amar, Ghana)

The final quotation in this section is from Nisa. Although it is a rather long quotation, I include it here because it reveals how Nisa's thoughts about the program were still developing and changing at the end of the school year. Similar to many of the

other students, she began by saying that the purpose of the program was to increase Americans' understanding about Islam. As she continued to talk about the program, however, she came to the conclusion that the goals are really much broader:

Nisa: I just think about it, being an exchange student . . . What is it we're giving – understanding? What kind of understanding? I know that I'm in YES, so pretty much the goal is giving understanding about Islam, but, well . . .

*Carol: Hmm, so, you see the goal as giving understanding about Islam?*

Nisa: That's what I thought. Ideally, the YES program is giving understanding about Islam. But I think like, I don't really have big knowledge and deep knowledge about Islam, so yeah, that kind of thing in a way, but there's other things . . . I'm still confused sometimes, like what is the goal? I make friends, yes, and I join in activities, and I help my host family, yes. And, I do the requirements from PAX, yes. But what is the actual goal? Honestly, right now, I am confused about that – really. I think it is more than giving understanding about Islam and your country.

*Carol: Well, what more do you think it could be?*

Nisa: About love and friendship. Yeah. I think that's it.

*Carol: The YES program is about love and friendship? How so?*

Nisa: You know what I think, it's about sharing love and friendship and peace – it's not only from your own people. It can be built by other people. Usually like you can be touched real easily by people who is totally different from you, so if American teenagers meet me . . . They live with their own family right here and they have everything, but when they see me being an exchange student, living with other family, maybe . . . If I were her, I can be touched easily by a person who is totally different than me. . . So, that can be like love because I live here not with my family, and I'm looking for friends, and friends give love to you and support you. And, you make a friendship with her and we try to, even though we're different, we try to understand each other. That's how everything goes. I think it's all about love and friendship.

*Carol: So, love and friendship, that's what it's about. So, do you think it's just with friends, or what about host families? Is that different?*

Nisa: Yeah, host families too. I mean, you know, when I first got here, I don't know my host family at all. It's just like totally strangers for me and I have to live with them with all the things going on here right now, but I have to deal with it anyway. It teaches me a lot about respect to people. Well, honestly, I was not

this diligent at home – you know, like helping to do the household chores. But now I know how it feels, you know, living with other family and helping. And, now I can understand like . . . even though I have my parents, my biological parents, it's about me living with other humankind, like we have to help each other. That's what I realized right now. (Nisa, Indonesia)

Nisa's insight on the goals of the YES program was very powerful. After reflecting on her year in the U.S., she looked beyond sharing information about Islam, and concluded that the program was all about love, friendship, and "living with other humankind."

### **Going Forward – Returning Home**

As noted above, all of the interviews were conducted at the end of the school year, and several of them just days before the students would be returning to their home countries. In the second half of this chapter we gaze forward with the students as they prepare to go home and be reunited with their friends and families. First, the students talk about their expectation and concerns related to returning home after nearly a year in the U.S. Next, we look at how the students propose to share their experiences with people in their home countries, continuing their young ambassador role. Finally, I present some of the students' comments about their future plans for college and careers.

#### ***Expectations and Concerns***

The students had very mixed emotions about going home. The year was not all fun and games. They had worked hard to make friends, be part of a family, and understand a very different culture. They formed close personal relationships with friends and host families. They faced numerous challenges and overcame many obstacles. While many students expressed a great sense of pride and accomplishment at having

successfully completed the exchange year, they were also quite sad that they would soon be leaving their friends and host families:

I came here, I found some friends better than back home, you know. I'm really gonna miss them. I don't know what I'm gonna do when I leave. . . The hardest thing is to build your life here, to make your own friends, to make friendships, you know, and everything in one year. It was really hard to pass it, and then you have to leave all that you built. That is the sad thing. And I'll come back here and visit for sure. I'll never forget what my host mom did [for] me. It was great! (Firas, Saudi Arabia)

I realize that I'm so glad I came here – and I really don't want to go back! I love it. My host sister, we are so nice friends. My experience is a like all round experience – it has everything. It has sorrow, it has happiness, it has shocks – it has everything! (Rani, India)

As they were preparing to leave, the students made plans to keep in touch with friends and host families via the Internet:

Also, it's like I feel very sad leaving the people I have met here, but I have my own computer and I have access to the Internet too, so it will be okay – emailing them and writing letters, and sending them gifts at Christmas and birthdays. (Amar, Ghana)

Although they were sad about leaving the U.S., the students were also excited about seeing their friends and families at home. In many ways, though, they were not the same people that left home ten and a half months earlier. Most of the students had some concerns about how they would readjust, and how this “new person” would be received:

It's gonna be hard. . . Coming here, it wasn't really a big thing. It was a big thing, of course, but not like a very hard thing that I almost thought about. But going over there . . . Will I have the same friends? I changed so much . . . I just change, and it's different. (Ismeena, Egypt)

I'm very unsure and feeling very different. I feel I'm very different now and it's going to be hard to adjust to the culture again and to adjust to all those differences. (Amar, Ghana)

I'm not going to change all the way back to before I came here. That's why I came here – to change and learn different things, so I have to adapt with my new skin to how life is there. (Ahmed, Egypt)

Some of the students said that friends and family would be surprised, but happy to learn how they had changed over the year. Lila, for instance, anticipated that her mother would be pleased:

I think it's going to be . . . I'm gonna be excited at the beginning to see everyone, but I think my mom is going to notice that I'm like more responsible now. She's gonna like it. She wanted me to change. [laughing] (Lila, Saudi Arabia)

Many of the students said that they had become more independent during the exchange year and were worried that they would not have as much personal freedom at home. Khalil anticipated that his family would be "tight about it, and have some more rules about things." Firas also thought that he might accidentally violate some of the strict rules in Saudi Arabia, but he planned on asking his family to try to accept the "new"

Firas:

Saudi Arabia is kind of strict a little bit . . . So, I'll just face it, and when I come I'm planning to tell my family: "Listen, please. I'm gonna be myself. If you see me do a wrong, say 'please don't do that.'" Or [I'll] tell them, "You're gonna see changes in me, but please accept it." (Firas, Saudi Arabia)

Aya thought that people at home would have high expectations for her since she had the special opportunity to live in the U.S. for a year. However, since she had matured during the school year, she was confident that she would be able to cope with the situation:

Well, if I go home, for sure there is going to be a whole lot of eminently profound, or whatever adjectives, high expectations that awaits me. Well, I don't know how to face those expectations when I get back because it's like, "Oh my God, she's gone the United States. I bet she's very, very arrogant right now. I bet she's been so Americanized and all that." So, I don't know how I'm going to face it, but since I think I've developed maturity while I'm here . . . well, I think it's just gonna be a piece of cake for me! [laughing] (Aya, Philippines)

### *Ambassadors at Home*

The first goal of the YES program is to “promote better understanding by youth from selected countries about American society, people, institutions, values, and culture” and the fifth goal is to “increase the capacity of organizations in participating countries to engage youth in activities that advance mutual understanding and civil society through alumni activities” (U.S. Department of State, 2005). Together, these two goals point to an expectation that YES students will learn about Americans and life in the U.S. during the exchange year, and then, as alumni, they will share their experiences, skills, and attitudes with others in their home countries.

Just as the students understood and were enthusiastic about carrying out their role as “ambassadors” to the U.S. from their home countries and cultures, the students seemed equally committed to taking on the reverse ambassadorial role – telling people at home what it is “really” like in the U.S. Many of the students talked about this role as part of their mission:

Americans have stereotyping towards Muslims, and then we have stereotyping towards Americans [laughing]. So . . . I brought the mission to tell about my country and then when I go home, I’m bringing the mission to tell them about the United States. (Israa, Indonesia)

I want to add something. I said that I want to change people here, but I want to change people in my country too, because a lot of people . . . they say American people are bad. I’m gonna tell them when I come back in my country, that’s totally wrong. . . So, that’s important. [The job] is not just here, but back in my country too. (Anggita, Indonesia)

One of the primary messages that the students wanted to convey to friends and family in their home countries is that life in the U.S. is, as Emad pointed out, “not like what you watch on TV.” Israa remarked, “I want to tell them that America is not

completely like Hollywood lifestyle.” Wafa, too, said she will tell people that the movie stereotypes are not correct:

I will tell them, like how they live here. That it’s . . . like school and everything is very different and that they live in a very quiet place . . . and like except big cities, life is very different. Because sometimes in the movies you don’t see very good things. Sometimes you see all these bad things – drugs and alcohol. And I will tell them that in fact all the families are so peaceful and they really like love. That it’s very nice here. (Wafa, Turkey)

In their presentations and conversations with Americans, the students often focused on everyday life in their home countries. Likewise, the students expected to share information about everyday life in the U.S. with friends and family at home. Kahlil said, “I’ll tell them about my school experience and my host family experience and how is daily life in the United States, and how the things work in the United States.” Dana wants people in Indonesia to know that “American people is friendly – very friendly – super friendly!” Amar said his approach would be to elicit ideas from others, and then share his own thoughts and experiences, hopefully influencing their opinions:

I’m going to ask them, “What do you think of America?” And if it’s in contrast with what I think or what I experience, then I will share with them my experiences – the way people were nice to me, the way people treated me, and how different things were done because they are different people. (Amar, Ghana)

The exchange provided the students with in-depth and personal experiences living with American families and attending American schools. Consequently, the students were confident that they would be credible sources of information about the U.S. Emad remarked, “I know how do they live, you know, and how do they act.” Aya, too, expected that she would be a credible source to tell the “real” story of life in the U.S.:

Well, it’s not just that Muslims are being stereotyped that they are terrorists. Of course, Americans are also stereotyped when other people get to see them on television and all of that. They also get stereotyped with their actions and what they show on television. Well, most of the stereotypes are all negative, so I

believe it's gonna be easier for me, since I'm gonna be credible, and I'm gonna be reasonable since I've been here, and I have lived with Americans. So, it's gonna be easier for me to explain, and to tell them how is it like to be with them, how are they like. (Aya, Philippines)

Many of the students commented that they would point out the commonalities between people in the U.S. and in their home countries. Rani, who also noted the influence of media-generated stereotypes, said that she wanted people at home to know that Americans care about, and set limits for, their children, just like parents in India:

I would certainly tell that whatever we see in movies is not true. Even though people wear short clothes here, but that's not the only thing. Like America is *bad* for Indians. Well, not for all Indians, but for people that I know, and I thought that Americans they are so bold. They are just so free to do, you know. In movies they show bad stuff. So I thought that every teen or everybody is like that. But when I came here I have this whole rules sheet that I have to follow those rules. And parents keep eyes on me. . . . They have rules and they keep eyes on their daughters and keep them inside the boundary lines. And I found that really good – like my real family, because my parents would do the same thing too. This is actually really good and I'm totally going to go back to home and say that Americans are not that bold, and let go of their children, and let them do whatever they want to do. No, they are not like that. (Rani, India)

Nisa said that she would share information about the lives of American teenagers. Her main message, though, is that teenagers are the same everywhere:

[I will talk about] American teenagers' life, Americans' life, cities . . . Like, American teenagers are just the same as Indonesian teenagers basically. Yeah, they're not really like different. There's not a very big difference between teenagers in the world I think, because we're just teenagers. We have the same spirit, you know. It's just different situations where American teenagers are in America, and Indonesian teenagers are in Indonesia. That's all. That's the difference. (Nisa, Indonesia)

Nisa went on to say that she wanted people in Indonesia to know that Americans do not hate Islam or Muslims, and consequently there is no reason to hate Americans:

I just want to tell people that America is not that bad, because I live with them. I live among them, and although some cultures of theirs are not really fit into us, but they're not hating Islam. They don't hate Islam. They don't hate people.

Maybe some of them not agree with Islam and Islam's rules and everything, but they're nice, you know. . . Why should you hate them? (Nisa, Indonesia)

Through her conversations with Americans, Israa discovered, "People complain about the war. Mostly they don't support the war in Iraq." Israa intended to tell people in Indonesia that not all Americans agree with the actions of their government, and that most Americans are very friendly.

Dana planned to tell people at home that they should not be afraid of the U.S. because there are many Muslims in the U.S. (a fact which surprised many of the exchange students). Dana also recognized the common bond of humanity and the importance of respecting differences:

What I want to say about the U.S. is like if you're a Muslim then you are really afraid to come here because maybe the Americans will think you are a terrorist, but Muslim is everywhere! I found so many Muslims in here in the United States. I feel like home. So many Muslims that saw me and then they say like "*Assalamu alaikum*" all the time, and then they just make me feel like home. That's what I want to say. If you are a Muslim and you're afraid to come here, I just say Muslim is everywhere. . . And then, American is just a human being too. . . . They can be their self. Then maybe it's just different culture; it's just different. There is nothing wrong or something. We can't say that there is something wrong with that because it's just different. (Dana, Indonesia)

Ahmed said he planned to talk to his family and friends about his experiences in the U.S. but he went on to explain his thoughts on how his experiences and the experiences of other exchange students contribute to world peace:

[I will talk] to my family and friends. It will be casual – like if someone asks me about that. And they'll be like curious. So, you start talking casually with friends. Of course, family, they will be interested about your presentations and the great things you've done. So the information starts getting out between friends and family and they discuss it somehow and people will know. Yeah, "My son went to a program in the U.S. and blah, blah, blah happened." They will be like, "My friend's son went to the U.S. and that happened" . . . So people will start sharing the information and their views about it, and then it will spread out somehow. As soon as the year passed on people [exchange students] will come

here, and go back and talk about it. And they'll keep doing that and it will go on and on until we finally have peace in the world. (Ahmed, Egypt)

### *Colleges and Careers*

Upon return to their home countries, most of the students had to complete another year, or part of a year, of school to fulfill their high school requirements. After high school graduation, all of the students planned to go to college. The students' interests, however, were diverse and they expected to enter a variety of fields, including medicine, law, architecture, engineering, psychology, geology, teaching, agriculture, and international relations. Some of the students hoped to return to the U.S. for college or graduate school. The students whose families were financially well-off did not seem concerned about college costs, but others said they would apply for scholarships. Nisa talked about studying international affairs in Indonesia, and then trying to get a scholarship to return to the U.S. for graduate school:

I'm planning to go to college in my country and then apply for scholarship to get here [the U.S.] again. I really want to take international affairs, because I'm going to take psychology for my college, and then I'm coming here to go to international affairs as a major [for graduate school]. (Nisa, Indonesia)

Khalil, also wanted to study international relations, and thought the exchange year had helped him understand "what it's like" to work across cultures:

Khalil: I have another year of high school and then I'm gonna graduate and I want to go to college in Europe and study diplomacy and international relationship. I want to be a diplomat.

*Carol: How would you describe that job, being a diplomat?*

Khalil: It's like relationships between the countries and putting them in order, and like, getting trade knowledge.

*Carol: What made you want to do that – to be a diplomat?*

Khalil: I always want to do something international, and like I always feel like it's the perfect job. . . I think my exchange year was a good experience for me, because like, I know what it's like now. (Khalil, Turkey)

Lila remarked that her experience in the U.S. caused her to think more about pursuing a career that would be enjoyable and fulfilling, rather than a job that just pays well:

I learn something here that a lot of people here have the job that they want – the job that they love to do. I used to think that I wanted a job that will make much more money, but, and then I noticed that if I'm going to take a job that I don't like, I'm going to be bored and I'm not even going to succeed in this job. So, I'm thinking more about this – about finding a job that I like. (Lila, Saudi Arabia)

Wafa, too, envisioned herself in an interesting job – one that would involve traveling to other countries and learning about different cultures:

I think that it was a very good year and it was a very good decision for me to come here. After this, even in college years, if I go to Turkey or here, it doesn't matter. . . And like for the rest of my life I just want to go to all the countries and meet all these people and learn different things from them. And I want to learn another language again. So I just want to . . . I don't want a job that I just go to the same place everyday and see the same people at the same time. . . I want to have a job that I can always travel and go to different places. And I always think that I did a good start. (Wafa, Turkey)

As described in Chapter 6, some of the students were motivated to participate in the exchange so that they could improve their English language skills. When discussing their futures, several of the students described how their improved language skills would help them in college and in their future careers. Rani, for example, hopes to become a high school English teacher:

I'll be a senior in my old school. After that I'm planning on attending this training college on teacher training. I want to be a high school teacher. I'm just studying teaching . . . Well, in my school, since it's not an English school I'm thinking that I'll be teaching English because now I can actually speak. Then I will be studying about English literature, and then I will be trained by then and I'll be good to go as an English teacher! (Rani, India)

Dana also talked about her plans for working in her home country of Indonesia. She hoped to “give back to her community” through her work as a farmer. Moreover, the lessons she learned during her year in the U.S. gave her the strength and inspiration to follow her dream:

In here [the U.S.], it’s about dream. We can always say that Americans dreams. Like, I have this dream, then, you know – I want to be a farmer. I want to work and give back to my community and to my country. I want to help and learn about agriculture and be a farmer. That’s my dream. When I was in Indonesia, my family doesn’t like it because they think it’s really hard work, and then really low payment. They wanted me to . . . they’re expecting more. But in here, everybody have their dream, and then they try hard to get their dreams. I mean like, my favorite subject is history, which is like I can see these people struggle, but for their dreams, like Martin Luther King. He have dreams for the black people to be equal. It’s not something that is impossible to do. It’s possible. It’s like me. My dreams – I believe in it and that makes me stronger, you know, to make my dreams come true. That’s what give me change in here. It’s benefiting me to reach my dreams because like – Americans dreams. (Dana, Indonesia)

Aya reflected that her exchange year will help her to be successful in whatever path she pursues in the future:

I think it’s gonna be – it’s gonna be a stepping stone to many opportunities. Like, all my experiences here is going to be a stepping stone to help me pursue any of my goals and to, you know, like, enter success in me. Basically, this is an edge to any of those who were given the chance to come here at this very, very young age. So I think this is really gonna help me a lot in terms of emotions, intellect, socializing, and all of that. I think it’s really, really going to have a great influence to my growing up. (Aya, Philippines)

### ***Summary and Discussion***

The first half of this chapter focused on the students’ perceptions of how they changed over the exchange year. Being in a far-away country, living with a host family, and attending an American school constituted a life-changing experience for most, if not all, of the students in this study. The students talked about how they had “grown-up” during the exchange year. They gained in maturity, independence, and responsibility.

Many of the students reported that they were now more outgoing and friendly than before the exchange year. This is not a longitudinal study, but my guess is that the students were probably rather independent and self-confident (in comparison to their peers) prior to the exchange. Common sense dictates that a fair amount of independence and self-confidence is required to embark on such a journey at 15, 16, or 17 years of age. However, it is significant that the students felt that the exchange experience helped them to become even more grown-up and independent.

Together, these “growing-up” sorts of changes can be seen as dimensions of self-efficacy. Bandura (1994) defines self-efficacy as “people’s beliefs about their capabilities to produce designated levels of performance that exercise influence over events that affect their lives” (p. 1). In other words, the students gained skills and confidence in their ability to manage their own lives, form relationships, achieve their goals, and make a difference in the world. The increase in self-efficacy reported by the participants in this study is in line with the results of other research on study abroad and exchange (including Bachner and Zeutschel, 2009; Dwyer & Peters, 2004; Van Hoof & Verbeeten, 2005), as well as the findings from the YES Program evaluation (InterMedia, 2009).

In addition to their increased personal growth and self-efficacy, the exchange students also reported a number of changes that I collectively call “Understanding the Other.” In the text above, I gave evidence of the students’ increased understanding of others under the following four themes: broadening horizons, correcting stereotypes, discovering commonalities, and developing empathy. The students learned to see the world from different perspectives, and to be tolerant and non-judgmental about those who

are different from themselves. They learned that their media-influenced stereotypes of Americans were no more correct than Americans' media-influenced perceptions of Muslims. As they struggled to be seen as individuals rather than through a lens of negative stereotypes, they also began to see others as individual human beings. Furthermore, as the exchange students learned about other religions and everyday life in the U.S., they discovered that they had much in common with their American peers and host families. These findings are also in line with the results of other studies of exchange students (for example, Bachner & Zeuschel, 2009; InterMedia, 2009).

As they broadened their perspectives, the students were often able to understand and feel the world from the standpoint of the other. Standpoint thinking, as defined by Ross and Lou (2008), "demands empathy, caring social imagination, and direct human interaction that can bridge social, cultural, and political differences" (p. 5). The exchange students in this study showed evidence of standpoint thinking and being able to bridge those differences as they went about their daily lives. Indeed, successfully mediating between cultures necessitates the ability to understand both cultures from the standpoint of people within those cultures (Bachner & Zeuschel, 2009; Bochner, 1981).

The focus of this study is the experiences of the YES exchange students with their host families, at school, and in the community. As such, I did not inquire about issues related to program implementation and management. However, in the course of the interviews, a few of these issues were raised. The main issue related to training and orientation was the extent to which the exchange students discussed 9/11 and the implications for relations between the U.S. and the Muslim world. Ahmed raised this issue because he felt that the students should have been better prepared, and encouraged,

to directly address the issues of 9/11. I pursued this line of questioning with some of the other exchange students because the YES program was developed in response to the events of 9/11 and is designed to promote understanding between the U.S. and the Muslim world. Therefore, it was interesting that none of the students perceived that they spent much time in the orientation sessions discussing these issues. I will return to this topic in the next chapter when I look at the students' experiences in relation to peacebuilding.

I spoke with all of the students about their understanding of the purpose of the YES program, as well as whether or not they thought the program was meeting its goals. Although some of the students said they did not talk much about 9/11 and relations between the U.S. and the Muslim world in their orientation program, all of the students understood the YES program to be “about” reducing stereotypes of Muslims and promoting mutual understanding. The students' responses not only indicated that they were aware of the program goals, but also that they had given some thought to what those goals meant in terms of their own experiences. The exchange students touched the lives of others, and were in turn touched by others. They talked about building bridges of understanding and making the world more livable. Some emphasized the importance of exchange students as conveyors of non-mediated information about Islam. Others pointed out that they thought the program is successful because they were able to form friendships across cultural and religious boundaries – relationships which helped others see them as individuals rather than as terrorists. Moreover, the students expected those relationships to last many years into the future, and help contribute to a more peaceful

world. Nisa beautifully summed up her reflections on the YES program when she described it as being about love, friendship, and “living with other humankind.”

The second half of this chapter was devoted to looking forward with the exchange students. As the students prepared to go home in a few weeks or a few days, they expressed sadness about leaving their friends and host families in the U.S. At the same time, they were excited about seeing their friends and families at home. They contemplated how they had changed over the year, and what it would be like to go home as more mature, independent, and grown-up individuals. Aya also raised a possibility that they might have to deal with heightened expectations from others. Although the exchange students had a number of concerns about how they would fit in at home, or how others would react to them, they also seemed confident and ready to begin the next stage of their lives.

Most of the students had another year of high school to finish after the exchange year. All of the students, however, hoped to go on to college in the not too distant future. They were interested in many fields of study, from medicine and geology to architecture and agriculture. A few of the students intended to pursue careers in international relations, and several mentioned hoping to attend college in the U.S. or a third country. There was no particular pattern to their college and career interests, but many of the students shared how the exchange experience influenced their choices for the future. Although their interests varied, many of the students expected to take on leadership roles related to their careers, politics, or volunteer work.

In the last chapter, we saw how the exchange students acted as young ambassadors for Islam and their countries. In this chapter, the students described how

they planned to continue their ambassadorial duties in their home countries. The students seemed equally committed to this part of the “job” of being a YES exchange student.

One of the main messages that the students wanted to get across to family and friends at home revolved around the inaccuracies of media-related stereotypes of Americans. The U.S. experienced by the exchange students was quite different from what they had seen on television or in movies at home. They discovered that sex and violence are not as rampant as portrayed in the media. Not all Americans are wealthy, and many do not agree with the actions of their government (nor do they have to). Parents love and care for their children in much the same way as in their home countries. In addition, the students wanted people in their home countries to know that they were accepted into American families and friendship groups, and most Americans showed respect for Islam.

The students planned on conveying information about their everyday experiences in the U.S. through casual conversations rather than formal presentations. The students imagined that they would be credible sources of information about the U.S. since they had lived here for a year and been part of American families, schools, and communities. They expected to be able to influence others’ opinions of the U.S. and facilitate better understanding across cultural and religious divides. Through this “ripple effect” (Bachner & Zeutschel, 1994), the students hoped to impact the attitudes and behaviors of others in the direction of contributing to a more peaceful world.

## **Chapter 11: Youth Exchange and Peacebuilding**

Peacebuilding, as defined by Galtung (1996b), is focused on creating and nurturing positive peace. Peacebuilding programs build knowledge, skills, attitudes, and behaviors which serve as a basis for a more peaceful and just world. In this chapter, I explore some of the connections between youth exchange and peacebuilding. In the previous five chapters, I looked at how the participants made meaning of their experiences as exchange students. At this point, I step back and look at their experiences through the lens of theories related to peacebuilding and peace education. First, I use Bachner's (1991b) "five propositions for understanding the role of international educational exchange in conflict reduction" as a framework for examining the experiences of the participants with regard to peacebuilding. In the second part of this chapter, I explore the connections between youth exchange and peace education programs.

### **Five Propositions for the Role of Exchange in Conflict Reduction**

These five propositions presented by Bachner (1991b) are based on an extensive review of the literature on exchange, conflict reduction, and related fields. The propositions address conditions of contact; attitudes; affect and dispositions; skills and behaviors; and multiplier effects. Although conflict reduction is not exactly the same as peacebuilding, many of the core concepts, such as promoting positive contact, reducing stereotypes, building skills, and changing attitudes, are essential to both. Accordingly, these propositions provide a useful framework for examining the connections between youth exchange and peacebuilding.

## ***1. General Proposition with Respect to Contact: Exchange Results in Constructive Intergroup Interaction***

For decades, researchers and practitioners alike have operated on the assumption that contact, under the right conditions, can help reduce prejudice and promote positive intergroup relations. In this section, I will look at the experiences of the exchange students with respect to some of the conditions believed to facilitate constructive intergroup interactions (Allport, 1954/1979; Bachner, 1991b; Cook, 1962; Pettigrew, 1986; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). Based on how the students give meaning to their exchange experience, we can examine the interaction between two broad groups – Americans and Muslims from other countries. It is important to remember, however, that this study examines intergroup relations from one side only – the perspective of the students (representing Islam and their various countries and cultures). It is beyond the scope of this study, but certainly an important task, to also examine these intergroup dynamics from the perspectives of the host families, friends, and others in the host culture.

Another aspect of intergroup relations to keep in mind is that the exchange students, while they do constitute a “group,” generally operate as individuals within their host families and host schools. In some cases more than one exchange student is placed at the same school, and occasionally more than one exchange student is hosted by the same family (as was the case with Ahmed and Khalil). Still, for the most part the exchange students in this study (and in many high school exchange programs) interact as individuals within the host society. This contrasts with youth programs, such as Seeds of Peace (which brings together groups of young people from conflict areas), in which the

participants interact both as individuals and groups within a highly structured context. While this may seem like a trivial distinction, it stands to reason that the nature of “intergroup” relations may be significantly impacted by the fact that one of the groups is often represented by a single individual.

As described in the literature review, contact is a complex affair, and identifying the “right” conditions is often an elusive process. Based on their meta-analytic study of contact research, Pettigrew and Tropp (2006) suggest that most conditions are facilitative rather than essential. With that in mind, I discuss how the experiences of the exchange students in this study align with several of the most often cited conditions of positive intergroup contact: a) motivations, traits, and skills, b) equal status, c) institutional support, d) personal relationships, and e) cooperation in pursuit of common goals. I include brief discussions about respect and discrimination under the topic of equal status.

### Motivations, Traits, and Skills

Some research has demonstrated that a willingness to be exposed to other cultures and ways of thinking is an important condition for developing cross-cultural understanding (Bachner, 1991b; Ben-Ari & Amir, 1988). High school exchange programs like the YES program are voluntary in nature. Students willingly participate in the contact situation, a fact which makes openness to the host culture rather likely, but not guaranteed. The motivations cited by the students in this study, however, demonstrate their interest in learning about the U.S. and building relationships with Americans. Although the students talked about a range of motivations, a common theme was learning about American life and culture through being immersed in it everyday. For

example, Ismeena wanted to know “how you guys live,” and Ahmed wanted “to be in society itself, not just outside watching movies.” Furthermore, many of the students in this study were motivated not only to learn about the U.S. and its culture, but also to help Americans understand their home culture and religion. Indeed, facilitating cross-cultural and cross-religious understanding was an important motivation for many of the YES students.

Attitudes and personality traits that individuals bring to the intergroup contact situation also impact the direction and intensity of outcomes (Amir, 1969; Pettigrew, 1998; Stangor, 1996). People who enter a contact situation with extremely negative or prejudicial attitudes towards the outgroup may have very different outcomes than those who enter with more neutral or positive attitudes. In other words, the starting point matters. Again, due to the voluntary nature of exchange, attitudes towards the host country are not generally negative. The students in this study did not give any evidence of holding extremely negative views of the U.S. at the start of the exchange (with the exception of Ermy’s comment about hating the U.S. government, but not the American people).

Bachner (1991b) also contends that other attributes that the student brings to the situation, including knowledge of relevant subject matter, language proficiency and communication skills, will impact the effectiveness of the exchange. In this case, language ability was a requirement of the program (and improving their English proficiency one of the motivations). YES student are selected at least partially on the basis of their “leadership potential” (PAX, 2008), which likely includes communication skills and personality traits favorable to working across cultures. Moreover, as I will

discuss below, the YES program orientations provide the students with information about the U.S., adapting to U.S. culture, and communicating across cultures. Overall, the YES students seemed to possess the motivations, traits, and skills that have been associated with positive intergroup relations.

### Equal Status

Equal status in the contact situation has been recognized as a key condition of positive intergroup interaction (Allport, 1954/1979; Amir, 1969; Pettigrew, 1998). Researchers have found that what matters most is perceived equal status *within* the contact situation, regardless of status coming into the situation or in society at large (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2005). Bachner (1991b) points out that equal status may be difficult to achieve in student exchange programs due to differences in age (within the host family), culture, educational level, or language proficiency. However, if we understand status to be a subjective term, we can examine the contact situation in light of the students' understanding of their status within the host family and at school. (I do not have enough data to make statements about the students' perception of their status within the communities in which they lived.)

First, I will examine the status of the students with respect to their host families. Taking into account their age, one could conclude that the students would not have equal status with their host parents. I argue, however, that a more appropriate yardstick would be the extent to which the exchange students felt that they were "part of" the family. In other words, whether or not the exchange students perceived that they held the status appropriate for a teenager in the family. As we saw in Chapter 7, often the exchange students did feel like part of the family, particularly to the extent that they were treated

similar to other children in the family. For the students who described their role in the family as like a son or a daughter, a case can be made for equal status. Moreover, a few of the students described their relationship with their host parents as good friends (or even “best” friends). In those situations (which, interestingly, seemed to be mostly with single host mothers), I argue that the students also felt that they were of equal status.

An important aspect of equal status is respect. Bachner (1991b) suggests that “Favorable contact will be enhanced by the sojourner’s demonstrated willingness to respect and accept local ways and viewpoints” (p. 151). To some extent, one could claim that the students demonstrated their respect for the American way of life by adapting to it. As in most exchange situations, the burden of adjustment falls on the student to adapt to the host culture (Bachner, 1988). Voluntarily changing one’s behavior to “fit in” with the host culture (as all of the exchange students did on a daily basis) could be construed as a sign of respect. As well, they demonstrated respect for their host families when they complied with family rules, participated in family activities, and showed concern about extra time or effort expended on their behalf. Beyond adapting to the culture and participating in family life, the students also talked about respecting their host parents’ beliefs and traditions.

But, respect is a two-way street. It is difficult to feel that one has equal status if one does not feel respected by others. “In the absence of respect, contact can impede the goals of intercultural understanding and cooperation by leading to withdrawal, rejection of things foreign, and confirmation of former prejudices” (Bachner, 1991b, p. 151). As described in Chapter 7, many of the students talked about mutual respect within their host families. “I respect them and they respect me,” remarked Firas. Similarly, Dana

commented, “They appreciate me being a Muslim, and I appreciate them being a Christian.”

The conclusions, however, are not so clear-cut. A number of students cited times when they definitely felt like outsiders to their host families (even if at other times they felt like insiders). In those cases, the students perceived unequal treatment and likely felt that they occupied a lower status in the family (although that is my interpretation, not their words). Therefore, the condition of equal status within the host family was not fulfilled for all of the exchange students in this study. At this point I note that the issue of religion was probably not a factor in feeling accepted into the family for two reasons. First, all of the host families knew that the students were Muslim before they agreed to host an exchange student, and it stands to reason that they would not volunteer to host someone for whom they harbored strong negative attitudes. More importantly, however, the students overwhelmingly described their interactions with their host families around religion to be very positive.

To determine the exchange students’ status at school it is necessary to examine how the students felt they were treated by their teachers and peers. As I described in Chapter 8, although their religion and their countries were not well known or well-understood by most Americans, the students generally felt respected and accepted at school. Ismeena, for example, commented: “Most of the people understood, and they were real respectful.” Others talked about how teachers made special accommodations for them to pray or gave them extra assistance with school work. Many of the students remarked that their friends did not treat them differently because of their religion or nationality. As Nura pointed out, teens in her school cared more about personality and

whether or not she was “fun.” Ahmed stated that other teenagers might not like his personality, but they were “totally cool” with him being from Egypt. As common sense would dictate, discrimination in the contact situation would tend to undermine positive intergroup relations (Altbach et al., 1985; Bachner, 1991b). Although the students seemed to expend a fair amount of time and energy informing others that they were not terrorists, they also described surprisingly few incidents of prejudice or discrimination (see Chapters 8 and 9).

From the interviews, it appears that the “exchange student” identity gave the students a somewhat special status in the eyes of their peers. It may also have “protected” them to some extent from prejudice and discrimination at school. The exchange students reported that other teenagers thought it was “cool” to be an exchange student; they asked many questions about their experiences as exchange students. I suggest, therefore, that once they students were known as “exchange students” they were assigned equal, if not elevated, status among their peers. Somewhat surprisingly, the students’ religion did not seem to affect their status at school. For most of the students, the fact that they were Muslim was either a non-issue with their peers, or it was something about which other teenagers occasionally expressed curiosity. Moreover, their identity as exchange students was generally associated with nationality (“the exchange student from India”) rather than religion (“the Muslim exchange student”). The exception to this statement may have been the girls who wore the hijab, since covering was a constant visual reminder of their religion. Yet, even for the hijabi, the fact that they were Muslim did not seem to result in a lesser status among their peers.

As a final comment on equal status, it is notable that the YES program was designed to “promote mutual understanding and respect” between people in the U.S. and the Muslim world (U.S. Department of State, 2008a). Therefore, the institutional structure (which will be discussed below) supports the idea of mutual respect, which in turn probably contributes to the perception of equal status.

### Institutional Support

Programs supported by an accepted institution or authority group (including, but not limited to government) generally lend legitimacy to the contact situation in a manner that researchers believe has a positive influence on intergroup relations (Allport, 1954/1979; Brewer & Gaertner, 2004; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2005). As discussed in Chapter 5, the YES program operates in a larger context characterized by tension, negative stereotypes, and prejudice between people in the U.S. and the Muslim world. Nevertheless, the exchange students enter the program with the institutional support (including financial support) of the U.S. government and the sponsoring exchange organization, the consent of their natural parents, the invitation of an American host family, and admission to an American high school. The students undergo extensive orientation programs in their home countries, upon arrival in the U.S., and at the end of the exchange year. In addition, established exchange organizations and their networks of local coordinators provide support to the students throughout the school year.

Institutional support may be examined from several different perspectives:

a) the extent to which the participants feel supported by the program, b) the structure provided by the program that guides and encourages positive intergroup interaction, and

c) whether or not the contact is perceived by the larger society as legitimate and sanctioned by social norms.

Although the program itself (and therefore the “institution”) was not the focus of this study, the students’ comments led me to conclude that, on the whole, they felt that the YES program provided support for their exchange experience. The students made references to their orientation sessions, as well as to conversations and meetings with their local coordinators. Some of the students also referred to information provided directly by the exchange organizations (such as Firas’ statement that the PAX information came in the mail at just the right time). There were exceptions – Ahmed’s desire for a stronger focus on 9/11 at the orientation, or Rani’s feeling that her local coordinator was rude and not helpful, for example. Overall, though, the students seemed quite positive about the YES program and the support it provided to them.

With regard to the structure of the YES program, I again emphasize that this study is not a program evaluation and does not directly focus on the program structure and function. That said, however, it is highly relevant that the main goal of the YES program is to promote mutual understanding and respect between the U.S. and the Muslim world – an objective which is very much in line with the promotion of positive intergroup relations. Indeed, the exchange students are expected to be “bridge builders” and “young ambassadors” (PAX, 2008). The program requirements for cultural presentations, community service, and leadership development are also congruent with promoting positive intergroup relations. Furthermore, the YES program is generally conducted as an experiential learning process, with the expectation that students will gain new

knowledge, skills and attitudes over the exchange year. This expectation is also evident from the emphasis on developing “leaders for tomorrow” (AFS YES Consortium, 2008).

The third aspect of institutional support involves the perception of the program in society at large. Ascertaining the perception of the YES program by Americans or people from the students’ home countries is far beyond the scope of this study. However, I will comment that the YES program gains some legitimacy from the fact that it is a U.S. government sponsored youth exchange program, and one which has maintained a fairly high profile. The program provides opportunities for YES students to meet with members of the U.S. Congress and other high-ranking U.S. government officials, and actively seeks out opportunities for positive press coverage (AFS YES Consortium website, 2008). In addition, the YES program is patterned after other successful government sponsored youth exchange programs, and is linked through legislation and administration to the well-known and highly respected Fulbright program. Together, these observations lead me to conclude that the YES program easily fulfills the condition of institutional support for intergroup contact.

### Personal Relationships

The formation of personal relationships across groups has been recognized as a powerful force for reducing prejudice and negative attitudes (Allport, 1954/1979; Cook, 1962; Pettigrew, 1998). Cross-group friendships facilitate attitude change, ingroup reappraisal, and promote mutual understanding (Pettigrew, 1998). Research also suggests that meaningful personal relationships can help reduce anxiety about interacting with the outgroup, thereby facilitating effective intercultural communication and positive intergroup relations (Gudykunst & Nishida, 2001; Pettigrew, 1998; Pettigrew & Tropp,

2006). Casual contact, however, can lead to worsening of intergroup relations (Allport, 1954/1979). Ideally, then, contact situations should be structured to encourage and support the formation of close personal relationships.

Most of the exchange students in this study said that making friends in the U.S. was challenging. While they found American teens generally friendly, the students had difficulty getting past the casual “hellos” in the hallways at school. Some of the students took weeks, or even months, to form close friendships with other teenagers. However, by the end of the school year, all of the students had successfully formed friendships with other teens.

The exchange students’ friends were diverse, including Americans, exchange students and other teens with international backgrounds. Still, they described many of their friends as “American,” which in this case comprises the “other” group in the contact situation. Indeed, many of the students understood that making friends was an important part of the exchange program. Recall Aya’s comment when her friends discovered that she was Muslim, “That’s why we’re friends,” or Nisa’s insight that the YES program was all about “love and friendship.” Further evidence that the exchange students formed meaning friendships during the year was the fact that at the time of the interviews many of them talked about how difficult it would be to leave their friends. Firas, for instance, was very sad:

The hardest thing is to build your life here, to make your own friends, to make friendships, you know, and everything in one year. It was really hard to pass it, and then you have to leave all that you built. That is the sad thing.  
(Firas, Saudi Arabia)

The home-stay experience, which is a key part of most high school exchange programs and has been linked to overall satisfaction with the exchange experience

(Bachner & Zeutschel, 2009), also provides an important environment for developing close relationships in the host culture. This aspect of exchange has not been widely studied, but common sense dictates that close living arrangements present many opportunities for interaction – both positive and negative. The exchange students participated in all aspects of family life, from everyday chores to special outings. Moreover, there is a certain intimacy that arises from seeing each other first thing in the morning and last thing at night that simply cannot be replicated by contact in more public spaces. As discussed in Chapter 7, the students formed close relationships with their host families, and many of the students were quite sad about bidding goodbye to their American families.

Another observation on this topic is that the formation of close personal relationships takes time. As noted above, casual contact can sometimes result in worsening intergroup relations. Indeed, most of the negative encounters described by the students related to casual contact (such as Yara's shoe store experience or Yusef's argument with his host mother's brother). When the students talked about their friends and host families, however, they spoke very positively. Yet, making friends was a tremendously difficult task for most of the students, one which took many weeks or even months. And while I did not ask the students to identify exactly when they felt that they were "part of the family," it is likely that this, too, was a gradual process as the students and the host families came to know each other through everyday interactions. For instance, only when Amar forgot to call home one night did he find that his host parents would discipline him in the same way as his host sisters. Only when she forgot her lunch did Aya find that her host mother made a special trip to school to bring it to her. The

extended duration of the exchange program, then, provides a key ingredient for the development of personal relationships both at home and at school. Based on my observations and the students' experiences, I conclude that the YES program is structured to facilitate and encourage the development of close personal relationships, thus fulfilling a key condition of positive intergroup contact.

### Cooperation in Pursuit of Common Goals

Research on intergroup contact situations has repeatedly demonstrated that cooperative activities aimed at common goals can help to reduce prejudice and facilitate positive cross-group attitudes (Brewer & Gaertner, 2004). For the YES exchange program, this condition of intergroup contact is somewhat difficult to conceptualize since the duration of the exchange is long and not focused on one particular activity. The exchange students interact with many different people each day in pursuit of many different goals. Furthermore, it is difficult to make statements about common goals when we have only examined the experiences of the students, and not the experiences of those with whom they interact daily.

That said, however, it is not a stretch of the imagination to believe that the exchange students and their host families share a common goal of having a successful family-based experience. "Successful" is likely defined somewhat differently by students and host parents, but at the very minimum it would include living together as a family, sharing cultures and traditions with each other, and enjoying each other's company. The student and the host family agree to live together on a voluntary basis, and as such there would be little reason that either would not want to have a positive family experience. The students in this study provided many examples of positive interactions with their host

families. Indeed, many of the students said they were motivated to participate in the exchange because they wanted to share their culture and religion with Americans, as well as learn about life in the U.S. Likewise, a common motivation for hosting is to learn about another culture (Lee, Jaein 2007, Radomski, 2008). Within the family situation, then, sharing and learning about each others' cultures would tend to be cooperative, rather than competitive, in nature, thus fulfilling this aspect of the contact hypothesis.

If we examine this condition (cooperative activities in pursuit of common goals) within the context of the students' school life, it is more difficult to describe. Presumably there would be times during which they would have an opportunity to cooperate with their peers on academic projects, but there would also be times when they would be in competition with other students for grades or other honors at school. As discussed previously, the students discovered that an effective means of making friends was to join sports teams, school clubs, and other youth activities. Within such groups there are generally common goals that all members work towards – winning a sports competition, producing a school newspaper, or putting on a school play, for instance. Many of the students talked about forming friendships through such clubs and organized activities. In those cases, then, they had the opportunity to interact cooperatively with their peers in pursuit of common goals. On a more informal level, many of the students talked about engaging in other activities with their friends. Firas, for example, noted the importance of joining in everyday activities such as kayaking and swimming with friends. Lila enjoyed shopping and hanging out at the local mall with friends; Nisa joined in pick-up games of soccer at the neighborhood field. These informal activities provided the

students with opportunities for pursuing common goals such as adventure, recreation, enjoyment, and friendship with other teens.

In a big picture way, the exchange students and their American schools share the common goal of a successful school experience for the students. Generally, the exchange students want to be successful in school (and academically, they are required to maintain a C average in their classes). For the most part, teachers and school administrators have the same goal. High schools in the U.S. (public or private) are not required to grant free tuition to exchange students – but they usually do. They accept students into the schools primarily to help broaden the horizons of the other students and expose them to another culture. The exchange organizations advertise this benefit as “bringing the world to your school” (PAX, 2008). The American high schools, therefore, have a vested interest in making sure that the exchange students have successful experiences, both academically and socially at school. Evidence from this study also points to the support of teachers and school administrators. Students reported that their schools made accommodations for them to pray, teachers helped them with their homework and class assignments, coaches welcomed them onto their sports teams, and teachers made time for them to make cultural presentations in their classrooms. While a little more complicated than some of the other conditions of contact, this study does provide evidence that the condition of cooperative activities in pursuit of common goals is present and relevant for the YES students.

## ***2. General Proposition with Respect to Attitudes: Exchange Serves to Reduce Intergroup Prejudice and Modify Inaccurate Stereotypes***

Research in the field of intergroup relations has often focused on the role of prejudice and negative stereotypes in escalating or perpetuating discrimination and conflict (Allport, 1954/1979; Brewer, 2003; Brewer & Gaertner, 2004). Accordingly, contact which reduces prejudice and corrects inaccurate negative stereotypes should result in more positive intergroup relations. With respect to student exchange and attitude change over the course of the exchange period, the evidence is mixed (Altbach et al., 1985; Bachner, 1991b; Sowa, 2002; Stangor et al., 1996). One possible explanation for this rests in the difference between exchange and many other intergroup contact situations. Exchange is a voluntary activity, and exchange students often hold very positive, even romanticized, attitudes towards the host country prior to the exchange (Hammer & Hansel, 2005). Changes in attitude over the duration of the exchange, therefore, may reflect a more realistic or nuanced understanding of the culture, while still remaining largely positive (Hammer & Hansel, 2005; InterMedia, 2009; Stangor, et al., 1996).

### Context and Pre-Exchange Attitudes

The manner in which the students in this study described their motivations and interest in participation in the exchange program reflects a fairly positive attitude about the U.S. prior to the exchange. Remember that many of the participants described going to the U.S. as a dream, an honor, an achievement, or a special opportunity – all reflecting a positive attitude about participating in an exchange program to the U.S. In their generally favorable attitude towards the host country, the YES students do not differ

significantly from exchange students in other studies (e.g. Hammer & Hansel, 2005). However, the YES students differ dramatically from participants in some other youth programs aimed at peacebuilding, such as Seeds of Peace, in which participants hold very negative views of the other group, and there is a strong ingroup/outgroup schema at the start of the program (Maddy-Weitzman, 2005). I make this distinction because when gauging changes in attitudes as the result of the exchange experience, the starting point can make a significant difference (Hammer & Hansel, 2005).

While the YES students seemed to hold generally favorable attitudes towards the U.S., the YES program as a whole operates in a larger context of heightened tension between the U.S. and the Muslim world (which is precisely what the YES program was designed to counteract). It is no secret that Muslims in the U.S. have faced increased prejudice and discrimination since the terrorist attacks of 2001, and some of the students expected that they might encounter anti-Islamic attitudes or behaviors. In the students' descriptions of their interactions with peers and host families, however, anti-Islamic prejudice and discrimination were minimal. When the students did encounter negative attitudes (mainly references to being a terrorist), they responded with education and humor, treating the situation like part of their "job." Thus, I conclude that the exchange students in this study understood the tensions between the U.S. and the Muslim world (the overarching ingroup/outgroup schema) as part of the larger context, rather than as part of their own belief system.

### Modifying Inaccurate Stereotypes

Stereotypes, whether negative or positive, help us simplify the world by allowing us to make broad generalizations such that "all" people of one type are like "that."

Stereotypes break down when one begins to see variability within the stereotyped group. Although the exchange students reported fairly positive attitudes about the U.S. prior to the exchange, they also held a number of stereotypes about the U.S., mostly garnered through movies and other mass media. Through everyday interactions with friends and host families over the course of the year, the students' understanding of the U.S. became deeper and more nuanced, rendering many of their previously held stereotypes inaccurate. As described in Chapter 10, the students discovered that not all Americans are rich, not all American communities are violent and dangerous places, not all American teens are "mean," and not all American parents let their children run wild. The exchange experience, then, was instrumental in helping the students modify their inaccurate stereotypes of the U.S. Furthermore, many of the students suggested that there are "good" and "bad" people in any culture or religion, demonstrating an understanding of commonalities across cultures, as well as variability within cultures.

This study examines only the experiences of the exchange students, not host families, friends or others with whom they came in contact. Yet, a big part of the students' experiences was their perceived impact on the attitudes of others. Essentially, they understood that changing attitudes and correcting negative stereotypes was their "job" while in the U.S., as well as when they returned to their home countries. While we cannot assess the attitude change of others, we can look at what the students said about how they tried to change others' attitudes about Islam, what they thought they accomplished, and their plans for continuing their ambassadorial role in the future.

Chapter 9 is devoted to the first topic – how the students attempted, through education and humor, to help Americans better understand their home countries, cultures,

and religion. In Chapter 10, I presented the students' understanding of the goals of the program and their opinion on the program's effectiveness. Overwhelmingly, the students thought the program was "working," and felt that they were able to correct negative stereotypes and improve attitudes towards Islam and their home countries. Mainly, the students cited individualization and forming personal relationships as the key to changing attitudes. In Chapter 10, we also saw how the students intended to continue to change attitudes in their home countries. Helping to change attitudes and correct stereotypes addresses the larger context of the exchange. Without evidence from those with whom the students came into contact, it is not possible to gauge changes in prejudice or stereotypes, but we certainly see that the students worked hard during the exchange year to change attitudes, felt that they had been successful in doing so, and planned to continue to do so in the future.

### A Look at Models of Intergroup Contact

According to social identity theory (Tajfel, 1981) people tend to view the world in terms of groups they belong to (ingroups), and groups they do not belong to (outgroups). Group membership has a powerful influence on individuals' attitudes and behaviors, often resulting in bias towards the ingroup and discrimination or prejudice towards the outgroup (Brewer, 1996). Intergroup contact, if properly structured (drawing on elements of the contact hypothesis discussed above), can often ease tensions and cause rethinking of stereotypes and attitudes towards outgroups. One of the primary issues related to intergroup contact, however, is the extent to which contact between individual members of different groups generalizes to more positive attitudes towards the respective

outgroups as a whole. As discussed in Chapter 2, researchers have developed various models of contact designed to maximize generalization to outgroups.

A key element of each of these models is the salience of the group identity within the contact situation. The primary models of intergroup contact include decategorization (individualization or personalization), subcategorization (mutual differentiation), and recategorization (common ingroup identity) (Brewer, 1996; Gaertner & Dovidio, 2000; Hewstone & Brown, 1986). Other approaches involve dual identities (combining subcategorization and recategorization) and cross-cutting identities (overlapping subcategories) (Brewer, 1996; Gaertner, et al., 1996). In his reformulated contact theory model, Pettigrew (1998, see Figure 2) theorized that the optimal situation for reducing prejudice involves contact which provides opportunities for decategorization, subcategorization, and recategorization sequentially over an extended period of time.

Looking at the experiences of the exchange students in this study, we see that all of these models of contact come into play over the course of the exchange experience. Bachner and Zeuschel (2009) conclude that exchange is a “multivariate and complex reality” involving “a complex matrix of activities and circumstances” (p. 64). This reality is evident when we examine intergroup contact situations over the course of the exchange year. First, in line with a decategorization model, the students frequently referred to the importance of getting to know others as individuals – and others getting to know them as individuals. The students invested quite a bit of time and effort into making friends and forming personal relationships across categories of religion and nationality. At the beginning of the school year, few of their peers even knew that the exchange students were Muslim. Once they did know, many of the students stated that

their friends cared little about their religion or their nationality. Ahmed remarked, “Maybe they treated me in a different way for other reasons, but not for religion – maybe just the fact that they didn’t like me, for example, or a situation happened at school in class or something.” Nura’s comment that it was important to have a “fun” personality and Firas’ emphasis on joining in activities to show “I’m like you guys” also demonstrate the students’ focus on individualization. Overall, in many, if not most, of the contact situations described to me, religion and nationality took a back seat to individual personalities.

At other times, such as when they made their cultural presentations, the students talked openly about their countries, cultures, and religion. In line with a subcategorization model, the cultural presentations constituted a contact situation in which the students were clearly identified as members of an outgroup (in relation to their audiences). Which outgroup was made most salient (nationality or religion), however, probably depended on the content and context of their presentations (as described in Chapter 9). Another contact situation in which group salience was heightened was when the students reacted to being called a terrorist, or to other negative remarks about religion or nationality. While not as common as interactions based on individualization, the students reported numerous times when their nationality or religion was front and center to the interaction. Most of the student experiences described in Chapter 9, whether formal presentations or everyday conversations, align with subcategorization model.

The third model, recategorization and identification with a superordinate common group, is more difficult to discern, although many students found commonalities (described in Chapter 10) and often minimized cultural and religious differences. For

some students, the Abrahamic religions formed a larger common identity. Israa, for example, told her Christian friend, “We are part of a grand religion and our prophets are the same.” Others, such as Nisa, talked about humanity as a common group.

More relevant to the students as they progressed through the school year is the concept of multiple and overlapping identities. While the students would always be outsiders to some groups (they would never be Christians, for instance), they clearly became insiders in other groups. For the most part, the students became “insiders” to their host families – they were part of the family. They also formed many close friendships and, therefore, became insiders to friendship groups. The students felt accepted at school, and as a result, their schools became another of their ingroup identities. They joined clubs and activities at school and in the community, making them insiders to those groups also. To the extent that they were accepted into these American groups, they shared common ingroup identities with people who, in the larger context of American and Islamic relations, were part of the outgroup.

It is difficult to gauge the frequency of the different types of contact throughout the exchange year. However, from the students’ comments it appears that individualization (deategorization) was prominent throughout the exchange, and probably overall the most frequent interaction situation. Interactions involving high group salience (subcategorization) were less frequent, but present from the early days. Interactions based on a common ingroup (recategorization) or cross-cutting identities were more frequent as the exchange progressed, and as the students became part of their host families, friendship groups, schools, and clubs.

Both the duration and the structure of the exchange experience are important factors to consider here. Pettigrew (1998) emphasized the duration of contact in order to allow time for cross-group friendships to develop. In one-time contact situations, an outgroup individual who does not fit with the stereotype of a particular group may be seen as atypical, and the stereotype about the group may remain intact (Hewstone & Brown, 1986). The relatively long duration of the YES program allows time for building personal relationships, interacting on the basis of salient categories, and developing common ingroups. In addition to the program duration, the structure of the YES program – including the immersion into host families and schools, the requirement for culture-sharing presentations, and the overarching goal of promoting understanding between the U.S. and the Muslim world – helps to ensure that interactions of all three types (deategorization, subcategorization, and recategorization) will take place during the exchange.

The experience of the students in this study suggests a more complex and dynamic model of intergroup interaction than those presented in the literature review. A diagram of the students' actual intergroup contact (which I attempted to construct, but abandoned due to its complexity and my elementary computer skills) would probably be a multi-dimensional figure, with time being one of the dimensions. It would be significantly messier than Pettigrew's (1998) model because all types of contact would be scattered unevenly throughout the exchange (with multiple interactions on any given day), rather than occurring more or less sequentially. Facilitating contact conditions (described above), as well as individual personality traits, attitudes, and affect, also impact outcomes of interaction throughout the exchange. Moreover, contact situations

appear to be rather fluid, meaning that interaction that begins on a personal level may become more of an intergroup interaction, and then return to an individual level. For instance, recall how during a conversation about music, Wafa reminded her friend that she was Muslim, bringing the group identities (Muslim/Christian) to the forefront of the conversation. Nura's comments to her friends who were making negative remarks about Asians, and Aya's dialogue with her friends about wearing the hijab, present further examples of students' ability to move back and forth between individualization and group salience within one contact situation. In sum, although the processes are complex, the results of this study support the proposition that exchange helps to break down ingroup/outgroup schema in ways that tend to reduce prejudice and correct inaccurate stereotypes.

### ***3. General Proposition with Respect to Affect and Disposition: Exchange Increases Liking and Respect for Outgroups.***

As discussed in Chapter 2, the impact of exchange has often been measured in terms of the exchange students' self-reported personal changes, and occasionally as compared to peer groups (e.g. Bachner & Zeutschel, 2009; Hammer & Hansel, 2005) or as collaborated by host families (Hammer & Hansel, 2005). Bachner (1991b) proposed that the exchange experience induces personal changes in affect and disposition which are likely to increase liking and respect for outgroups, and thus improve intergroup relations.

## Personal Growth

In many studies exchange has been reported to increase participants' self-esteem and self-confidence (Bachner and Zeutschel, 2009; Dwyer & Peters, 2004; Van Hoof & Verbeeten, 2005). In turn, higher levels of self-esteem and self-confidence have been linked to benevolence, reduced hostility, and more positive feelings towards outgroups (Bachner, 1991b). The exchange students in this study reported significant gains in self-confidence, responsibility, independence, and friendliness. Together, these attributes can be referred to as self-efficacy (Bachner & Zeutschel, 2009; Bandura, 1994). As I described in Chapter 10, all of the students talked about how much they had grown and changed over the exchange year. The students felt confident in embarking on new experiences, overcoming challenges, and adapting to new situations. In short, they felt grown-up and ready to face the future.

Bachner (1991b) suggests the concept of "extensivity" relates to the ability to extend compassion and empathy to others beyond one's immediate ingroups. Further, he posits that "exchange, inasmuch as it affords the opportunity to become an insider in another culture, develops one's empathetic capacity via participation" (p. 162). This concept also involves respect and appreciation for other cultures. In Chapter 10, I discussed evidence of the students' development of empathy during the exchange year. These experiences range from students' concern for the time and effort required by their host parents to transport them to the mosque, to an increased understanding of Americans' feelings about the terrorist attacks of 9/11. Moreover, the students in this study demonstrated an increased understanding of other cultures, religions, and peoples.

Tolerance and world-mindedness are also key components of Bachner's (1991b) framework for connecting youth exchange and peace. Tolerance involves openness and flexibility – the willingness to accept others as they are. Tolerant, open-minded, and flexible individuals can help diffuse tense situations through mediation and the consideration of alternative solutions (Bachner, 1991b). World-mindedness refers to a generalized understanding of other cultures and countries, as well as a belief in the interconnectedness of the world.

In Chapter 10, I discussed tolerance and world-mindedness under the heading of “Broadening Horizons.” Many of the students talked about how, as a result of the exchange experience, they are now more open-minded and tolerant. The immersion aspect of exchange gave the students an opportunity to form personal relationships and learn about the host culture as an insider. Many of the students remarked on the importance of relating to people as human beings and not judging people on the basis of their religion or culture. They also talked about gaining an appreciation and understanding of other cultures, including, but not limited to, U.S. culture (recall that many of the students had close friends from other countries). Furthermore, the students emphasized the importance of getting to know others based on their individual characteristics, such as personality and values, rather than their affiliation with other groups. To the extent that increased self-efficacy, empathy, tolerance, and world-mindedness are linked to increased liking and respect for outgroups, this study lends support to this proposition.

## Liking and Respect

This study also provides strong evidence that the students were able to develop strong and meaningful bonds across cultural and religious boundaries. The development of relationships with host family and friends is addressed above, as well as in Chapters 7 and 8. It is not possible to say to what extent the students “increased” their liking for the outgroup (Americans), particularly since they had rather positive attitudes towards Americans at the start of the exchange. However, it is clear that they did form many close personal relationships with Americans (and other nationalities) during the exchange. Many used the word “love” to describe how they felt about their host families and friends. The students also made plans to keep in touch and maintain those relationships into the future, a sign of how important the relationships were to them.

Bachner (1991b) posits that exchange increases respect for the outgroup. As discussed above and in the earlier chapters, the exchange students talked quite a bit about mutual respect. They felt that host families, friends, and school officials respected them and their religion; in turn, they respected others. Again, it is not possible to say to what extent the level of respect increased as a result of the exchange experience. However, the students’ comments about being more tolerant, open-minded, and empathetic would seem to point to the development of a deeper and more complex understanding of what it means to respect and to be respected. It is one thing to talk about respecting members of an outgroup with whom you never come into contact; it is much more meaningful to talk about respecting the outgroup when you live as a minority among them. The exchange experience, then, provides the opportunity to develop a deeper understanding of respect, as well as to demonstrate that respect through everyday interactions with members of the

outgroup. Overall, this study firmly supports the proposition that exchange results in changes in affect leading to increased liking and respect for others.

#### ***4. General Proposition with Respect to Skills and Behaviors: Exchange Enhances Intercultural Competence and Fosters Mediating Behaviors***

Much of the research on exchange has focused on student satisfaction and self-reported changes in attitudes. Fewer studies have examined the skills and behaviors that young people develop as a result of the exchange experience. However, there has been some research in this area. A number of studies have reported increased language abilities (Bachner & Zeutschel, 2009; Hansel, 1986; Hansel & Chen, 2008; InterMedia, 2009), cross-cultural communication skills (InterMedia, 2009; Williams, 2005); and cultural competence (Hammer & Hansel, 2005). Some studies have reported enhanced critical thinking and problem-solving skills as a result of the exchange experience (Bachner & Zeutschel, 2009; Hansel, 1986). InterMedia (2009) found that YES students self-reported a strong increase in leadership skills.

Researchers have also found that exchange students reported a role as bridges or “cultural mediators,” facilitating contact and communication between their home and host cultures (Bachner & Zeutschel, 2009; Hammer & Hansel, 2005; InterMedia, 2009). In his framework for understanding the contribution of youth exchange to conflict reduction, Bachner (1991b) focuses on two areas of skills enhanced by exchange – language fluency and cultural mediation. In this section, I will address these two skill areas, as well as leadership development.

## Language Skills

Exchange often enhances language skills, resulting in reduced anxiety about cross-cultural interactions, providing a basis for a deeper understanding of culture, and facilitating the formation of meaningful cross-cultural relationships (Bachner, 1991b). Furthermore, some research has shown that confidence in speaking a language, rather than actual fluency, is linked to successful cross-cultural adjustment (Swagler & Ellis, 2003).<sup>96</sup> A number of the students in this study mentioned improving their English skills as a motivation for participating in the exchange. Some students, including Firas, recognized the importance of learning English for future careers: “All my jobs depend about a second language.” Nura thought learning another language was important to improving cross-cultural communication and promoting peaceful relations in the world. During the interviews, some of the students commented that their English had improved over the year. For example, Rani felt that she did not “suck at English anymore,” and was confident that she could become an English teacher in India.

It is hard to judge how much the students’ English improved over the course of the school year, particularly when the students did not start out with the same level of fluency.<sup>97</sup> However, during the interviews I observed that all of the students were quite comfortable and confident in speaking English. For the most part, they spoke quickly and with few hesitations. Even when they groped for an English word, they did not

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<sup>96</sup> Swagler and Ellis (2003) found that language was a key factor in the cross-cultural adjustment of Taiwanese graduate students in the U.S. However, it was *confidence* in speaking English, not *ability* to speak English that was shown to be most important. In other words, students who were confident that they could communicate effectively in English had fewer problems in adjusting to the new culture than those who were less confident, regardless of their actual facility in the language.

<sup>97</sup> Some of the YES students attended schools in their home countries in which English was the language of instruction. Other students had much more limited exposure to English prior to arrival in the U.S.

appear anxious or uncomfortable. In addition, all of the students in this study successfully completed the exchange year, suggesting that their English competency was at a level which enabled them to function effectively in the home, in the classroom, and in daily activities in their American communities (going to the bank, shopping, etc.). It is likely, then, that most if not all of the students improved their English skills, as well as gained confidence in speaking English, during the school year.

What was also evident from the interviews was that there were varying levels of English proficiency among the students at the end of the school year. Much of this variation can probably be attributed to differences in fluency levels at the start of the exchange. The girls who wore the hijab, for instance, as a group seemed to have less fluency in English than other students, even when compared to others from the same country. This difference may be explained by the fact that many of these girls attended Islamic boarding schools in their home countries, in which English instruction was less common than in other schools.

Some research has also indicated the importance of the home-stay experience in language acquisition (Hammer & Hansel, 2005; Schmidt-Rinehart & Knight 2004), and for at least one student, Nura, the host family experience may have been a factor in gaining English fluency. Nura was the only participant in this study who lived with a host family who did not speak English at home. Compared to the other two Indonesian students living in her community (neither of whom wore the hijab), Nura's spoken English was noticeably less fluent. Language is one of those skills that dramatically improves with use, and because Nura's host family did not speak English at home, she simply did not get as much practice as the other students. However, although Nura's

English was not as strong as that of her peers, she undoubtedly gained more fluency in a third language (Spanish) than her peers. Nura's experience points to an important connection between host family placement and language learning. Nura was not the only student, however, who mentioned studying another language besides English during the exchange year. A number of the other students also reported taking foreign language classes, mostly Spanish or German, at school. At least one student (Wafa), hoped to have a career involving foreign travel and more language learning.

### Leadership Development

Leadership development is an integral part of the YES program. The YES program helps students develop leadership skills during the exchange year with the expectation that they will take on leadership roles in their home countries after the exchange (Persiko, 2007). The thinking behind the link between exchange, leadership development, and peace is that exchange helps to foster cooperative and open-minded attitudes. Accordingly "former exchangees who assume leadership positions would theoretically have less propensity to value and use violence as a means for resolving conflict" (Bachner, 1991b, p. 168).

In Chapter 10, I discussed the fact that many of the students seemed to have difficulty articulating how or what program activities contributed to their leadership development. Of the three main program activities that YES students are required to participate in – cultural presentations, community service, and leadership development – the area of leadership seemed to be the least clear to the students. Still, although many of the students did not seem to have a good grasp of leadership-related program activities, most felt that they had gained leadership skills during the exchange year. Through the

cultural presentation they became more confident and comfortable speaking in front of groups. The students also cited being more open-minded, able to relate to different kinds of people, and having a better understanding other cultures. In line with the goals of the program, many of the students planned to use their leadership skills at home, including to develop, or contribute to, programs that would improve the lives of others. One student, Amar, envisioned himself as the future president of Ghana, and remarked that as a result of his exchange experience he would never “break the peace.” Overall, the results of this study lend evidence to the proposition that exchange develops leadership skills which may lead to a more peaceful world. However, it is worth noting that for students in this study, leadership development was not a very tangible program component.

### Cultural Mediation

Exchange fosters an understanding and appreciation of both host and home cultures, which in turn, may enhance cultural mediation skills – the ability to serve as a bridge between two cultures. Stephen Bochner (1981) defines the mediating person as “an individual who serves as a link between two or more cultures and social systems. The essence of the mediating function is to shape the exchanges between the participating societies, so that the contact will benefit both cultures, on terms that are consistent with their respective value systems” (p. 3). Mediating or bridging between cultures facilitates cross-cultural understanding and, as a result, more peaceful relationships.

The role of cultural mediator or “bridge builder” is essentially what the YES program is all about. Although program documents tend to use the term “young ambassador,” the goals and expectations involve bridging cultures and promoting cross-cultural understanding, both in the U.S. and in the students’ home countries. Chapter 9 is

devoted to the students' experiences as young ambassadors in the U.S. The students took this "job" very seriously, and engaged in both formal presentations and everyday conversations to help Americans better understand their religion and cultures. In Chapter 10, I discussed the students' intentions for facilitating a better understanding of the U.S. on the part of people in their home countries.

International exchange does not necessarily build cultural mediation skills. Bachner (1991b) suggests that important conditions include motivations and expectations, as well as training and legitimacy. The results of this study indicate that all of these conditions are present in the YES program. Many of the students reported being motivated to participate in the exchange by a desire to improve Americans' understanding of Islam, to facilitate cross-cultural understanding, and to contribute to world peace. The program goals and activities are aimed at improving relations and cross-cultural understanding between the U.S. and the Muslim world. Furthermore, the YES students are expected to perform this mediating role, and the program is structured to provide training and support to the students as they carry out their ambassadorial duties. For the most part, students developed their cultural mediation skills through an experiential "learn by doing" process. And, as discussed in Chapter 9, each of the students fulfilled the duties of being a young ambassador in their own way throughout the school year.

***5. General Proposition with Respect to Multiplier Effects: Exchange Develops International Networks, Leaders, and Political-Economic Systems***

The fifth proposition for linking international educational exchange and conflict reduction concerns the multiplier effects of exchange. This proposition focuses primarily

on the post-exchange impact. Some studies have shown a link between exchange and later educational and career choices, as well as participation in volunteer activities (Boyd, 2001; Hansel, 2008; InterMedia, 2009). There is also evidence that exchange students tend to stay in touch with, and have favorable attitudes towards, their host cultures (Bachner & Zeutschel, 2009; Hansel & Chen, 2008; InterMedia, 2009). In what the Bachner and Zeutschel (1994) call the “ripple effect,” exchange alumni reported having had an impact on other people’s actions or ways of thinking, often long after the exchange.

To the extent that exchangees become leaders in their home countries, they may influence others in the direction of cooperation, tolerance, and nonviolence. In addition, exchange students often make friends with other exchange or international students, further broadening their international networks. As Bachner (1991b) suggests, international networks of people committed to mutual understanding, tolerance, and peace could be a powerful tool for conflict reduction and peacebuilding.

Even though the student interviews for this study were conducted prior to the end of the exchange year, the students did talk about their post-exchange plans. As I described in Chapter 10, the students made plans to continue the relationships with host families and friends (largely through use of the Internet) after their return to their home countries. In addition to their American host families and friends, the students also formed close friendships with other international and exchange students, with whom they also planned to keep in touch after the exchange. Some of the students planned to go into international affairs, or at least work internationally after college. There is evidence,

then, that the students in this study hoped to develop and maintain international networks after the exchange.

Although the students did not mention joining an alumni group, I know from my work as a local coordinator, as well as from general program information, that the YES program places a strong emphasis on the development of alumni networks. The U.S. Department of State maintains a special website for alumni of its exchange programs. Alumni news and activities are also featured on the YES program website and in other publications. It is likely that many of the students in this study will participate to some extent in these alumni networks.

All of the students intended to share what they learned about the U.S. with people in their home countries. As discussed in Chapter 10, they hoped to correct inaccurate stereotypes about Americans and promote mutual understanding. In light of the very high percentage of former YES students who said they carried out this cultural bridge-building function in their home countries (InterMedia, 2009), it is quite probable that the students in this study will follow through on their intentions in this regard. Ahmed's comments sum up his vision of how international exchange can contribute to peace for years to come:

So people will start sharing the information and their views about it, and then it will spread out somehow. As soon as the year passed on people [exchange students] will come here, and go back and talk about it. And they'll keep doing that and it will go on and on until we finally have peace in the world.  
(Ahmed, Egypt)

Another aspect of the multiplier concept of exchange involves leadership and how leaders influence others. I discussed leadership development in Chapter 10, as well as in the section above, so I will not repeat that discussion here. I will, however, note that the

students in this study reported enhanced leadership skills and many expected to become leaders in their home countries. Empowered by their increased confidence and leadership skills, as well as inspired by their community service experiences in the U.S., many of the students talked about their intentions to develop social or educational programs that would benefit people in their home countries.

### *Summary*

This study lends substantial evidence to the five propositions put forth by David Bachner (1991b) regarding the role of international educational exchange in conflict reduction. These propositions will hold true to varying degrees for each individual exchange student in different circumstances throughout the school year. The students brought with them their unique individual backgrounds and personalities, which undoubtedly influenced how they gave meaning to their exchange experiences. Moreover, each of the students had different experiences with host families and friends during the exchange year. As a result of the wide range of experiences, not all of the students “fit” the model to the same extent. Students who felt most accepted by their host families, for example, probably perceived a greater degree of equal status than those who did not always feel as if they belonged in the family. Students who had more difficulty forming close friendships at school may have felt less like insiders to American society and culture. Clearly, some students expended more time and effort than others in educating Americans about their religion and home cultures, and presumably some will contribute more than others to the multiplier effects of exchange after they return home. These are only a few examples of individual variations in the experiences of the study participants. In the aggregate, however, the evidence from this study lends support to the

propositions that exchange fosters constructive intergroup contact; reduces intergroup prejudice and modifies inaccurate stereotypes; increases liking and respect for outgroups; enhances intercultural competence and mediating behaviors; and develops international networks and leaders which multiply the effects of exchange.

### **Youth Exchange and Peace Education – A Good Fit?**

Youth exchange involves “students” as primary actors, creating a natural link to the field of education. As Maria Montessori suggested, “Establishing a lasting peace is the work of education” (cited in Harris & Morrison, 2003, p. 48). It is a commonly-held assumption that exchange programs foster cross-cultural understanding, cooperation, and peace between nations (Bachner, 1991a, 1991b). To what extent, then, can we characterize youth exchange programs (and the YES program in particular) as peace education?

In Chapter 2, I discussed various concepts of peace and peace education; unfortunately, there is no simple, agreed-upon definition of peace education (Bar-Tal, 2002; Salomon, 2002). For this discussion, therefore, I have selected some of the major concepts that have been identified by scholars and practitioners in the field of peace education: goals; knowledge; attitudes; skills in conflict mediation and resolution; love and compassion; social responsibility and social justice; experiential learning; and focus on issues.

## ***Goals***

Bar-Tal (2002) recognizes a diversity of efforts, but maintains that peace education programs share a common goal of “fostering changes that will make the world a better, more humane place” (p. 28). Peace education programs seek to

. . . diminish, or even to eradicate, a variety of human ills ranging from injustice, inequality, prejudice, and intolerance to abuse of human rights, environmental destruction, violent conflict, war, and other evils in order to create a world of justice, equality, tolerance, human rights, environmental quality, peace, and other positive features. (p.28)

Although the YES program does not address all of the areas cited above (environmental destruction, for instance), the program aims to reduce prejudice, promote mutual understanding, and make the world a better, more humane place.<sup>98</sup> The overall purpose of the YES program, as well as the specific program goals (presented in Chapter 3), align nicely with this broad description of peace education programs.

## ***Knowledge***

Betty Reardon’s (2000) definition of peace education includes “transmitting knowledge about the requirement of, the obstacles to, and the possibilities for achieving and maintaining peace” (p. 4). Ian Harris (2004) maintains that peace education involves conveying knowledge about the roots of violence, as well as peaceful alternatives to violence. From my interviews with the exchange students, the agenda for the arrival orientation (AFS YES Consortium, 2008), and my experience as a local coordinator, I conclude that the YES program does not focus on transmitting knowledge about the roots of violence or the building blocks of peace. The program conveys knowledge about

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<sup>98</sup> Although environmental sustainability is not a stated goal of the YES program, environmentally focused activities are not beyond the scope of exchange programs. For example, in 2008 PAX launched its “PAX

American culture and lifestyle, cross-cultural adjustment, and the students' role as young ambassadors, but does not directly address issues of war and peace.

### *Attitudes*

Promoting tolerance and open-mindedness, as well as reducing prejudice, are often cited as key elements of peace education programs (Bar-Tal, 2002; Harris and Morrison, 2003; McCarthy, 2002). A culture of peace embraces tolerance, respect, multiculturalism, and nonviolence (UNESCO, 2008). In Chapter 10, I discussed the students' comments about becoming more open-minded and tolerant. The students also felt that they had broadened their horizons, and were now more able to see the world from the perspectives of others. Through their exchange experiences, the students modified many of their incorrect stereotypes about Americans and life in the U.S. They also talked about the importance of seeing people as individuals, rather than judging others on the basis of common stereotypes:

When I came here, I started to realize it, and when I've known these Jewish people and talk to them and reading different books and doing research, my point of view started to change a little bit. We just can't say, we hate Jewish or we don't like Christians or we don't like Muslims. If you don't like one person this doesn't mean that you hate the whole nationality or religion – it's just about that person. (Ahmed, Egypt)

In short, the evidence from this study points to positive attitude change, and is therefore in line with this component of peace education programs.

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Goes Green” campaign to encourage exchange students and their host families to become more active in protecting the environment (PAX website, 2009).

### ***Skills in Conflict Mediation and Conflict Resolution***

Reardon (2000) states that peace education includes “training in skills for interpreting the knowledge [about peace], and the development of reflective and participatory capacities for applying the knowledge to overcoming problems and achieving possibilities” (p. 4). Harris (2004) maintains that peace education builds skills to handle conflict nonviolently. Conflict mediation or conflict resolution programs often develop skills in active listening, effective communication, needs identification, and cooperative and creative problem solving (Davies and Kaufman, 2002).

In the section above, I discussed how the exchange students developed skills in bridging cultures. Skills in mediating across cultures, facilitating cross-cultural communication and promoting cross-cultural understanding are relevant and useful skills for mediating or resolving conflict. However, cultural mediation and conflict mediation are not one in the same. I saw no real evidence that the exchange students in his study had developed any particular knowledge or skills related to conflict mediation (such as the ability to identify the underlying needs and interests of the parties in conflict). Undoubtedly, the students’ cultural mediation skills, as well as their leadership skills, could be instrumental in helping to solve conflicts. Also, through program information and the efforts of local coordinators, the YES program helps the exchange students build skills in working out disagreements or problems, particularly those related to living with a host family. From my observations, however, I conclude that the development of skills related directly to conflict mediation is not a focus area of the YES program.

### ***Love and Compassion***

At the very heart of peace education is a commitment to promoting peace through building bonds of love and compassion (Lin, 2006). Understanding the world from the viewpoint of others can help to develop compassion, empathy, and love (Lin, 2006; Ross & Lou, 2008). The ability get beyond racial, cultural, and ethnic divisions and to care about others as fellow human beings is essential to creating a more peaceful world. A large part of this study concerns the development of personal relationships between the exchange students and their host families and peers. Just one example is Wafa's comment about her host family:

I really love my host family. They are like a real family for me . . . Like, she is like a mom for me. Everyday she would kiss me and hug me when I was going to bed and when I was going to school. So we have a close relationship. That's nice. I know that I'll always have a family here too. (Wafa, Turkey)

In addition to forming close personal ties, the students also demonstrated empathy for others (discussed in Chapter 10). Furthermore, as described above, the structure of the YES program encourages the development of personal bonds between the exchange students and those in the host culture. The results of this study, then, lend support for the idea that youth exchange programs promote love and compassion, key components of peace education.

### ***Social Responsibility and Social Justice***

Many peace education programs seek to instill students with a sense of social responsibility and social justice (Amster, 2006; Bar-Tal, 2002; Harris & Morrison, 2003; McCarthy, 2002; Reardon, 2000). The YES program differs from many youth exchange programs in that students are required to participate in service activities in their schools

or communities during the exchange year. These service activities, which the students overwhelmingly described as positive, introduced the students to many social issues and to people with whom they might not otherwise have come into contact. It was also an empowering experience for some, as they learned that they could make a difference in someone's life (recall Aya's discovery that she could tutor a special needs child). The service learning component helped the students understand issues of social justice and social responsibility. As discussed in Chapter 10, their service activities also inspired some of the students to think about how they could make a difference in their home countries. Nura summed it up nicely in her statement:

Now, like the PAX program taught me a lot of things. Now before I go to sleep I always think about that. I sleep like on a really nice bed and there's a lot of people starving and hungry out there, you know what I mean? So, PAX really opened my mind. Seriously – about everything. Before I don't really care what happened in the world and with my country. Now, it's just . . . I don't know, it just came to my mind and I start thinking about that and like, yeah, I have to do something for these people. (Nura, Indonesia)

Through the community service requirement, the YES program does seem to build an awareness of social justice issues, as well as a sense of social responsibility on the part of the exchange students.

### ***Experiential Learning***

Experiential learning and critical thinking are important components of many peace education programs (Amster, 2006; Harris, 2004; McCarthy, 2002). Exchange programs are, by definition, experiential in nature, and the YES program is no exception. The YES program does not “tell” the exchange students what they should think about Americans or American culture. To the contrary, the students are encouraged to experience life in the U.S. first-hand, and to form their own opinions and attitudes.

For maximum “learning” to take place, however, the experiences must be part of a process which includes reflection, conceptualization, and application (Kolb, 1984; McCaffery, 1986). The YES program provides structure for the experiential learning process through the orientation and training sessions, the guidance of local coordinators, and other program materials. The program structure is aimed at helping the students maximize their culture learning and personal development during the exchange year. The evidence from this study suggests that the program is quite successful as an experiential process of culture learning and personal development. It is important to remember, however, that in this case the experiential learning process is aimed at culture learning, rather than at education for peace.

### ***Focus on Issues***

One of the discussions surrounding intergroup contact involves the extent to which the issues behind the conflict, including the broader social and political context, should be made salient. Just as some experts have pointed out the inadequacy of multicultural education efforts that ignore underlying issues of injustice and inequality (Gordon, 2004; McCrimmon, 2004), others maintain that intergroup relations cannot be meaningfully improved through contact which does not address issues at the root of the conflict (Galtung & Tschudi, 2002; Glazier, 2003; Maoz, 2002). In their discussion of education post 9/11, Ginsberg and Megahed (2003) suggest that educators should be “encouraged to think critically about topics like ‘terrorism’ and Islam, so that they can help their students learn about and analyze the related issues” (p. 208).

The YES program was designed as a response to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. A key part of the program is the expectation that the exchange

students will act as young ambassadors representing Islam and their countries to Americans (AFS YES Consortium, 2008). Clearly, the exchange students in this study took their role as young ambassadors very seriously. Many addressed issues of Islam and terrorism, particularly in everyday conversations with their host families and friends. The extent to which they talked about terrorism, 9/11, and U.S. relations with the Muslim world in their more formal presentations, however, was varied. Some of the students said that they understood that their presentations were supposed to focus mainly on their countries and cultures. Others said they were not really prepared to talk about 9/11 or terrorism. Only one student, Ahmed, was concerned about the lack of discussion around 9/11 in the orientation sessions. Although most of the students did not perceive a lack of focus on the issues surrounding 9/11 and terrorism, my observations at the arrival orientation for the 2008 cohort of YES students confirms Ahmed's statement. I conclude, therefore, that although the YES program is focused on improving relations between the U.S. and the Muslim world post-9/11, the program includes limited discussion and exploration of these contextual issues.

### ***Summary***

Based on the findings from this study, it is clear that youth exchange, and the YES program in particular, is congruent with many of the key elements of peace education programs. First, the YES program goals align nicely with the goals of peace education programs. The YES program is also designed, and appears to result in, changes in attitudes consistent with the aims of peace education programs. Based on the experiences of the students in this study, I also conclude that the YES program builds personal relationships resulting in love and compassion, important concepts in peace

education. Through the service learning requirement of the YES program, the exchange students learn about social justice and gain a sense of social responsibility. Finally, the YES program, like most youth exchange, utilizes experiential learning processes.

The fit between the YES program and peace education, however, is not a perfect one. The program and the experiential learning processes are focused on culture learning and understanding through relationship building. Little or no attention is paid to developing knowledge about the root causes of violence or the alternatives for peace. In the same vein, the exchange students arguably gain skills in cultural mediation, but not necessarily in conflict mediation – a skill more directly linked to peace education. Finally, although the overall goal of the program is to promote positive intergroup relations post 9/11, there is limited focus on the issues related to 9/11 and ensuing tensions between the U.S. and the Muslim world.

In sum, the YES program fits quite well with some of the commonly cited components of peace education programs, and less well with others. Peace education programs are diverse, and there is no single, definitive way to “do” peace education. On the basis of the above analysis, then, I suggest that the YES program could be considered a peace education program. In turn, the field of peace education provides a new lens for examining youth exchange programs. In the next chapter, I will discuss some of the possibilities for strengthening the connection between youth exchange and peace education.

## Chapter 12: Conclusion

The YES program was created as a positive response to the tragic events of September 11, 2001. Its goal of increasing mutual understanding and respect between the U.S. and the Muslim world is increasingly urgent in our fragile and strife-torn world. And yet, as Bachner (1988) has pointed out, the assumption that exchange programs contribute to global understanding and world peace is based largely on a common assumption, the *Good Effects Premise*, rather than research-based evidence. This study examines the connection between youth exchange and peacebuilding, and represents one effort to better understand what lies behind the Good Effects Premise.

This chapter begins with a review of the study and primary findings. Next, I briefly discuss the contribution of this study to the broader base of knowledge. I then make several suggestions for strengthening the peacebuilding capacity of the YES program, followed by a discussion of topics for future research. I conclude this chapter and the dissertation with some thoughts on the role of youth exchange in building a more peaceful world.

### *Review of Study and Findings*

To begin this study, I explored the literature on peace and peace education, intergroup relations, and student exchange. I presented a brief background on the Youth Exchange and Study (YES) program, as well as a discussion of the broader context of the exchange. This study was guided by the following research questions:

- How do Muslim high school exchange students make meaning of their exchange experience in the U.S.?

- In what ways does youth exchange contribute to peacebuilding post 9/11?

I addressed these questions through a qualitative, interview-based study, utilizing in-depth interviews with twenty-one Muslim high school exchange students participating in the YES program. Chapters 6 through 10 focused directly on the experiences of the students during their exchange year.

First, I presented some background about the students, their natural families, and the students' motivations for participating in the exchange. The students gave many reasons for wanting to be exchange students, including promoting mutual understanding between the people in their home countries and in the U.S. Next, I looked at the students' experiences with their host families. Most of the students described feeling accepted into their host families, especially when they perceived equal treatment with their host siblings. A few students described times in which they felt like outsiders to their host families. The situations usually involved being treated differently from host siblings or encountering cultural differences in family life. Sharing cultural traditions and learning about each others' religions, however, were described by the students as very positive aspects of the exchange experience.

Chapter 8 was devoted to a discussion of the students' experiences at school. For the most part, the students felt accepted into their schools and respected by their peers and teachers. They were surprised to find that American teenagers knew little about their home countries, or about Islam. For a variety of reasons, the exchange students were often not seen as Muslims by their peers. All of the students, however, eventually became identified as "exchange students," an identity which seemed to give them a positive role, and perhaps a special status, in their schools. Across the board, the students

said that making friends was challenging. For some it was the most difficult task of the year. By the end of the school year, however, all of the exchange students had successfully formed close friendships with other students in their schools. Their friends included Americans and teenagers from other countries, as well as other exchange students.

One thing that was striking about the way the students described their exchange experience was how seldom they talked about encountering prejudice or discrimination. Many of the students assured me that their friends and host families “never” displayed any prejudice towards them. Some students described times when they encountered negative attitudes or prejudice in situations of casual contact, but not involving those with whom they had formed more personal relationships. That said, however, almost all of the students could recount times when they, or a fellow exchange student, were called a “terrorist” or associated in some way with being a terrorist. Interestingly, for the most part, the students did not seem to perceive these situations as involving prejudice. Instead, they seemed to take it in stride as part of their “job” as young ambassadors to dispel the stereotype of “Muslims as terrorists.” Generally, the students responded to these situations with education and humor, tools which they used often to help others understand that they were just “normal teens,” and not terrorists.

In Chapter 9, I explored the students’ roles as young ambassadors. As a requirement of the YES program, the students made presentations about their countries and cultures to U.S. audiences, primarily at their schools. Most of the students focused their presentations on everyday life in their home countries. Some of the students, particularly the girls who wore the hijab, talked often about religion. During their formal

presentations, however, few addressed issues of 9/11, terrorism, or the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The exchange students also shared information about their countries, cultures, and religion through everyday conversations with peers, teachers, and others in the community. They were much more likely in these non-formal situations, to address issues of 9/11, terrorism, and relations between the U.S. and the Muslim world.

In Chapter 10, I presented the exchange students' thoughts on how they had grown and changed over the exchange year. The students described the exchange year as a unique and life-changing experience. The students reported being more mature, friendly, independent, responsible, and self-confident. They also talked about how they had broadened their horizons, corrected negative stereotypes, discovered commonalities and developed empathy for others. Many of the students felt that they had grown and changed over the year in ways that would help them become better leaders.

At the time of the interviews, all of the students were preparing to go home in a few weeks or a few days. As they reflected back on their exchange year in the U.S., they also looked forward to being reunited with family and friends at home. Many of the students expressed concerns about how they would "fit in" at home, given their tremendous personal growth over the year. At the same time, however, the students were confident that they could (and would) continue their ambassadorial role at home – this time by helping people in their home countries better understand Americans and life in the U.S. They felt that they would be credible and believable sources of information about the U.S., and hoped that they would be able to influence friends, families, and others in their communities.

In the last chapter, I discussed Bachner's (1991b) framework for understanding the role of international exchange in conflict reduction. Although Bachner's five propositions hold true to a varying degree for each individual student, in general the evidence from this study lends support to the ideas that exchange fosters constructive intergroup interaction; reduces intergroup prejudice and modifies inaccurate stereotypes; increases liking and respect for outgroups; enhances intercultural competence and mediating behaviors; and develops leaders and international networks, which multiply the positive effects of exchange.

The YES program also incorporates many of the concepts deemed to be important to peace education programs. The goals of the program align very well with the goals of peace education programs. The program encourages the development of close personal relationships, resulting in friendships and close ties with host families. The students also reported positive changes in attitudes, a greater sense of social responsibility, increased tolerance for others, and a deeper understanding of the host culture – all important outcomes of peace education programs. The YES program does not, however, focus on teaching students about peace or developing conflict mediation skills, and seems to give limited attention to broader contextual issues. Accordingly, the YES program is not an exact fit with some of the core concepts of peace education.

### ***So What?***

At the end of any research study, one may legitimately ask, "So what?" What has this study contributed to our knowledge and understanding of the world in which we live? While it may be "common sense" that exchange programs constitute a positive force for peacebuilding, up to this point we have very little evidence to support that claim. We

also know little about the broader political and social context of exchange, and how that relates to student experiences. Furthermore, the bulk of research on exchange has focused on college-age students and relied primarily on surveys, rather than in-depth qualitative methods. In this study, I have attempted to fill some of these gaps in the research by focusing on high school exchange students in the context of relations between the U.S. and the Muslim world. I used in-depth, qualitative interviews to try to understand how the students made meaning of their exchange experience in the U.S. I then returned to the literature to examine the links between youth exchange and peacebuilding in light of the students' experiences.

As a result of this study, we now have a deeper understanding of what it is like to be a Muslim teenager living with an American host family and attending an American high school. We understand a little more about the challenges of being part of a family in a new culture and making friends in a new school. We heard from the students about their understanding of their role as young ambassadors, and the responsibilities inherent in that role. We saw how the students shared their cultures and religion with their host families and friends, and how they responded when faced with taunts of being a terrorist. Through the voices of the students, we also heard a strong commitment to promoting goodwill between nations, as well as a sense of optimism about a more peaceful future. In short, we know more about how Muslim teenagers make meaning of their exchange experience in the U.S. in our post 9/11 world.

As described in detail in Chapter 11, this study provides some insights on the connections between youth exchange and peacebuilding. Using Bachner' (1991b) framework, this study lends evidence to the propositions that exchange fosters changes in

attitudes, affect, skills, and behaviors, which in turn contribute to a more peaceful world. This study also sheds some light on how youth exchange, and the YES program in particular, aligns with some of the key components of peace education efforts. As educators, policymakers, and concerned citizens we have a responsibility to try to understand how youth exchange is connected to peacebuilding. Only then can we make informed policy decisions and consciously structure exchange programs to foster intercultural understanding and build the foundation for a more peaceful world. The “so what?” is that we now understand a little more about the connection between youth exchange and peacebuilding, and can use that understanding to develop policies, manage programs, and design future research focused on creating a more peaceful world.

### ***Program Suggestions***

As Bachner (1991b) points out, “Exchange has the advantage of being programmatically manipulatable to result in favorable contact” and “the stakes for doing so are considerable” (p. 172). The results of this study lend substantial evidence to the proposition that the YES program makes a positive contribution towards peacebuilding. The YES program appears to be doing many things “right” in the realm of promoting peace. Other youth exchange programs may want to take a leaf from the YES program book in this regard. However, this study has also shed some light on possibilities and opportunities for programmatic changes that could strengthen the connections between youth exchange and peacebuilding.

The ideas that I present below are based on the comments of the students in this study, my observations, and my experiences as a local coordinator. I reiterate that this study is in no way an evaluation of the YES program. I did not focus on the

programmatic aspects of the exchange, nor did I delve deeply into the training and support mechanisms. Yet, I believe the evidence from this study points to possibilities for positive programmatic changes. There are undoubtedly many good reasons why these ideas have not been implemented to date (including time and money), but perhaps one reason is simply that no one has considered such changes. Taking that as the starting point, I hope that others will evaluate these suggestions, weigh the costs and benefits, and consider the possibilities for strengthening the effectiveness of the YES program (and potentially other exchange programs) as a tool for building peace.

In that spirit, I make the following suggestions, each of which I will discuss in turn, to help focus and strengthen the capacity of the YES program to promote peace:

- Focus on peace education
- Connect leadership and peacebuilding
- Address the broader context issues
- Train and support local coordinators in peace education
- Expand the YES Abroad program

#### Focus on Peace Education

Although the YES program is designed to promote mutual understanding and respect between the U.S. and the Muslim world, there appears to be little or no focus on actually teaching peace. In an article about international education, Jenkins and Skelly (2004) remark that “there seems to be a disconnect between carefully and intentionally matching the words in mission statements to the kind of education students receive” (p. 8). The YES program seems to suffer from this disconnect. As Bachner (1991a) noted, the contribution that exchange programs make to peace would be much greater if they

were “purposely conceived and structured to achieve such results” (p. 1). I believe that the YES program would be significantly strengthened by a conscious and focused effort on peace education.

Peace education should be a theme throughout the exchange year, beginning in orientation sessions and including training for local coordinators, as well as regular skill-building workshops for the students. There is no need to reinvent the wheel in order to accomplish this objective, as there are many readily available peace education resources that could be adapted for use with exchange students.<sup>99</sup> In any case, the program should convey knowledge and understanding about peace, the nature of peace, and the root causes of violence. Students need time to understand and process these concepts in terms of their own lives, which is why it is important to continue the educational efforts throughout the school year. In addition, alumni activities should continue to reinforce the students’ efforts at peacebuilding.

An important component of peace education is building skills to peacefully resolve conflicts. The YES program orientations attempt to develop some important skills (such as listening skills), but there is a need to strengthen and focus the skills-building related to conflict mediation and resolution. For example, the YES program should help students develop skills in active listening, identifying underlying needs and interests, developing peaceful alternatives, and mediating between groups or individuals in conflict. Again, skills-building should begin during orientation sessions and be reinforced throughout the exchange year.

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<sup>99</sup> Examples of resources include the following: Classroom Connections (2002), Davies and Kaufman (2002), Hague Appeal for Peace (2009), U.S. Institute of Peace (n.d.), and Wells (2003).

Another idea for building conflict management skills would be to bring YES students together with American students in their communities to develop and practice these skills. During their sojourn in the U.S., the students' skills in conflict management would empower them to deal positively with difficult situations in their host families, at school, or in the community. In the long-term these skills will serve them well in leadership roles, in which they can make positive and deliberate contributions to peace. In sum, a focus on peace education and conflict mediation would provide the exchange students with useful skills for both the short and long-term, and at the same time strengthen the program's overall contribution to peacebuilding.

#### Connect Leadership and Peacebuilding

The leadership component of the YES program is based on the premise that the students will use their newly developed cross-cultural skills in positions of influence later in their lives. Leaders who demonstrate understanding and respect for other peoples and cultures are more likely to try to resolve conflicts peacefully. In this study, however, I found that leadership was rather an elusive concept for most of the students. Although many said they thought they had developed leadership skills during the exchange year, few (including the students in my cluster) could really articulate exactly what they learned about leadership or how they would apply their learnings at home. Many of the students described post-exchange plans that would involve taking on leadership roles, but it is significant that those comments were not made during our discussions of leadership.

Leadership skills may be used either to promote cooperation and understanding or to promote intergroup tension and violence. With respect to leadership, the question we need to ask is, "leadership for what?" I suggest therefore, that a focus on "Leadership for

Peace,” would give purpose and meaning to the development of leadership skills. Examining the lives and works of those who promote peace in their home cultures would be an excellent starting point for the exchange students to learn about leadership for peace. From there, students could look at other local and national leaders, and identify characteristics and attributes that differentiate leaders who work for peace from other types of leaders. A conscious effort to build peace requires that we not lose sight of the purpose of leadership.

#### Address the Broader Context Issues

As a peace education program, the YES program would be more effective if the issues surrounding 9/11 – which provided the impetus for the program – were addressed more directly. Although only one student identified this lack of focus on contextual issues as problematic, many of the students seemed to avoid addressing these issues in their formal presentations. The literature on peace education and intergroup contact is not conclusive on this topic, but most researchers seem to lean towards openly addressing broader conflict issues (Galtung & Tachudi, 2002; Glazier, 2003; Maoz, 2002).

For the YES program, I recommend that orientation sessions include more information about the events of September 11, 2001 as well as current issues in the relations between the U.S. and the Muslim world. The exchange students need time and space to explore their own thoughts and feelings on these subjects. The orientation should also prepare the students to address these issues with American audiences. They should be encouraged to include issues surrounding 9/11 and the subsequent tensions between the U.S. and the Muslim world, in their formal presentations. Indeed, the students should feel comfortable and confident making presentations that focus on more

than geography, food, and festivals. As with the focus on peace education and leadership for peace, addressing these broader context issues will require continued support throughout the school year, both to answer the students' questions and to assist them in understanding and processing their experiences.

### Train and Support Local Coordinators in Peace Education

Similar to other exchange programs, the YES program is, in essence, an experiential learning process. However, experiences alone are not enough to maximize learning. Other essential components of the experiential learning cycle include reflection, conceptualization, and application (Kolb, 1984; McCaffery, 1986). These processes require intervention at key times during the learning process. The YES program, like most youth exchange programs, relies heavily on local coordinators to help exchange students work out problems and “process” their everyday experiences throughout the school year. My work as a local coordinator was focused on planning activities, solving problems, helping the students understand the culture, and assisting the students in meeting the program requirements. This was in accordance with my job description.

However, implementation of the program ideas suggested above – focusing on peace education, connecting leadership to peacebuilding, and addressing the broader context issues – will require trained local coordinators who can provide effective learning support to the students throughout the school year. The processing of experiences must be focused as much as possible on the goal of peacebuilding. For instance, with respect to the community service requirement of the program, local coordinators should help students understand the concept of social justice, and how serving people in need is

connected to building a more peaceful world. Local coordinators could also help students solve problems and build skills through an organized program of conflict management and mediation. In addition, they could assist students in identifying local leaders who could serve as role models of “leaders for peace.” Local coordinators could also plan peace-related activities involving exchange students and their host families, friends, and other members of the local community, further expanding the impact of the exchange program. I am fully aware of the hurdles (particularly economic) that would have to be overcome in order to develop a cadre of local coordinators trained in peace education. However, there is little doubt that local coordinators will require substantial training and ongoing support if they are to effectively facilitate an experiential learning process focused on the core concepts of peace education.

#### Expand the YES Abroad Program

Under the “YES Abroad” program, the first American students began their exchange year in August 2009 in several YES participant countries. Compared with the current number of incoming YES students (over 850), the number of American participants going abroad (49) is quite low (U.S. Department of State website, 2009). Although I recognize that there are security issues in many of the YES participant countries, an expansion of the overseas program is an important step towards peacebuilding. A two-way exchange, with U.S. students spending a school year in countries with significant Muslim populations, will go a long way towards lending credibility to the program goal of fostering *mutual* understanding and respect. Recall Wafa’s disappointment that her friend’s father would not give his approval for her to visit Wafa in Turkey. Many of the other students said that they hoped their friends and host

families would come visit them, although few seemed to hold out much hope of that actually happening. They seemed to have more faith in their own return to the U.S. to visit or to attend college. An expansion of the YES Abroad program will help to make Americans more comfortable with the idea of traveling to, and living in, Muslim countries. As well, a more balanced two-way exchange will demonstrate the U.S. commitment to promoting respect and mutual understanding across cultural and religious borders.

### ***Directions for Future Research***

Youth exchange has been part of the educational landscape in the U.S. and other countries for more than fifty years. Many youth exchange programs were developed on the common assumption that exchange contributes to a more peaceful world. Still, we know surprisingly little about youth exchange, and even less about how exchange is connected to peacebuilding. This study sheds some light on how youth exchange can contribute to a more peaceful world, but there are still many questions to be answered. Upon reflection on the results of this study, as well as my experiences as a local coordinator, I offer a number of suggestions for future research.

Some of the recommendations below are related specifically to the YES program, but given the dearth of research on youth exchange in general, most would also be relevant to other programs. As previously noted, much of the research on exchange has relied heavily on survey techniques. There is a general need for more in-depth, qualitative research aimed at developing a deeper understanding of the experiences of exchange students and those whose lives they touch. This recommendation, to utilize

more in-depth, qualitative methods, pertains to all of the following suggestions for future research.

- There is a need for more research on host families. The exchange students are only part of the equation. What are the experiences of host families? What are the challenges and benefits of hosting? How are host families (including host siblings) changed by the experience? How do host families understand their experiences in terms of creating a more peaceful world? The host family data that I collected for this study would be a start, but given the paucity of research on host families, the field is wide open for additional efforts.
- Social categorization theory states that people see the world in terms of ingroups and outgroups. In this study, I found these concepts to be relevant to how the students viewed their world, particularly the extent to which the students felt that they were (or were not) “part of” their host families and friendship groups. While there has been plenty of research conducted with respect to various ingroups and outgroups, little research has focused on exchange students. Further research into how exchange students (and their host families) understand their world in terms of social group membership would help us learn more about the nature of these intergroup relationships.
- Case studies examining the experiences of both the exchange students and their host parents (and possibly their local coordinators) would be quite interesting, and could provide some insights into how the interpersonal dynamics of exchange affect outcomes.

For example, a case study involving Rani and her host family would demonstrate that the host parents perceived many of the situations described by Rani in quite different terms. Although I did not conduct a thorough analysis of the host parent interview, I can state that Rani's host parents did not reflect quite so favorably on the exchange year, and were not interested in hosting a Muslim student the following year. Case studies of exchange students and their host families would present a fuller picture and provide insights into the relationship between exchange students and their host families.

- Similarly, there is a need for research related to others with whom the exchange students develop relationships – primarily friends, peers, and teachers at school. There is evidence that the development of personal relationships is important in promoting positive intergroup contact. How does knowing an exchange student (in this case, a Muslim exchange student) impact one's attitudes about other countries, cultures, and religions? At school, how can we gauge impacts on the student body as a whole, particularly in schools that host exchange students year after year?
- The majority of participants in this study were women, and as a result, it was difficult to make statements about how gender might play a role in the exchange experience. Certainly, the young women who wore the hijab were more easily identified as Muslims. As I discussed in Chapter 9, the hijabi seemed to field more questions, especially in their everyday lives, about Islam and the role of women in their societies, than the other participants. More research should be conducted, however, to identify how men and women differ in their understanding of the exchange experience.

- Local coordinators play a critical role in youth exchange, and yet I have not seen any research examining their experiences. Considering the importance of the local coordinators in the experiential learning process, it is important to understand more about them. Who are they? Why do they take on this (mostly volunteer) job? How do they see their role? What do they see as the constraints and benefits to the job? What do they see happening as far as building relationships between exchange students, host families, schools, and local communities? What can be done to better train and support local coordinators, especially with respect to peace education?
- It strikes me that by sending their sons and daughters (some only 15 years old) to the U.S. on this exchange, the students' natural parents placed a tremendous amount of trust in the YES program. To what extent do the natural parents subscribe to the goal of improving relations between the U.S. and the Muslim world? How has the exchange experience changed their attitudes and beliefs? How could we reach out to the students' parents and families, and include them more fully in the peacebuilding process?
- How do exchange students influence others in their home countries during and after the exchange? Who do they influence and in what ways? What are the "ripple effects" of exchange, and how best can positive impacts be encouraged and supported through alumni activities?

- Not all YES students are Muslim, and many countries participating in the YES program experience tensions or violence between religious groups within their own borders. How does the YES program, then, impact exchange students of different faiths from the same country? For example, how do Hindu and Muslim students from India relate to each other, and what is their relationship when they return to India? Similarly, what happens between Muslim and Christian exchange students from the Philippines? Can exchange students be a force for interfaith peace within their own countries?
- Are there differences in how Muslim exchange students from different countries experience the exchange? In this study, I did not see any differences in the experiences of the students that could be attributed to country or culture of origin. However, this was a very small study, and most of the participants were from Indonesia. Since Islam is closely tied to culture and practiced differently around the world, other studies may show that culture and nationality make a significant difference in the exchange experience.
- The YES Abroad program was launched in 2009. As the program unfolds, it will be important to follow the experiences of the American students who are spending their exchange year in countries with large Muslim populations. Most likely, these students will be asked to complete surveys about their experiences, but I would encourage more in-depth methods of investigation into both the exchange and alumni experiences.

- How do governments of participating countries view the YES program? What do they see as the benefits for their own citizens? What are the disincentives? What are their experiences with the YES Abroad program?
- In the broader context of international politics and policies, what is the role of the YES program? As described in Chapter 3, the YES program was developed post 9/11 and promoted as a contributor to the national security of the U.S. What are the underlying power and control issues of the exchange, and how do they impact the program outcomes? For example, what does it mean for exchange students from a poor country to accept U.S. government money? What are the implications for the governments of those countries? Are practices in student selection and orientation serving to reinforce existing power structures? How do alumni activities factor into global power systems? These issues are beyond the scope of the current study, but certainly important to ask if we truly seek a more peaceful and just world.
- The YES program makes special outreach efforts to students with disabilities. Some YES students are hearing or visually impaired. As I noted in Chapter 4, Amar used crutches to get around. He also thought that at home in Ghana, he may become a “voice for disabled rise.” In 2005, I had a student in my cluster who used a wheelchair. She is currently enrolled in college as a special education major, hoping to become a teacher of children with disabilities. In my observation, the exchange program provided both challenges and opportunities for these students. While their disabilities made some aspects of the exchange much more difficult than for other students, they also had an

opportunity to meet people from other countries with similar disabilities, as well as to understand how disabilities are viewed in another culture. It would be very interesting to learn how students with disabilities make meaning of the exchange experience. Are their experiences significantly different from those of students without disabilities? How does the international exchange experience impact their future college and career choices? How does it impact the likelihood that they will become leaders in their communities?

- The YES program is a competitive, merit-based program. Many more students apply for the program than receive scholarships. Which student selection factors, then, are most important to the goal of promoting cross-cultural understanding and building peace? How can students be selected to maximize their contributions to peacebuilding?

- I recommended that the YES program connect the leadership activities to peacebuilding, in effect creating a “Leaders for Peace” focus. Yet, the relationship between peacebuilding and leadership is still open for research. What are the most important leadership characteristics for those committed to peacebuilding? How do we foster those attitudes, skills, and behaviors within a larger framework of peacebuilding?

- Finally, what knowledge and skills do the students think they need to be more effective at promoting cross-cultural understanding and building peace? If I were to repeat this study, I would certainly ask that question. However, given the overarching goals of the YES program, it would also be an appropriate question to ask all of the students during their orientation programs and at various times throughout the exchange

year. Just asking the question would refocus their attention on the purpose of the exchange, and would very likely result in some solid program recommendations.

### ***Concluding Remarks***

Relations between the U.S. and the Muslim world have changed little in the nearly two years since I began this study. Current news is focused on a Muslim terrorist's attempt to blow up a Detroit-bound airplane on Christmas Day. This news comes on the heels of the shootings at Fort Hood in November 2009, in which an Army psychiatrist killed thirteen people and wounded thirty others. Once again, American Muslims experienced a backlash of fear, hatred, and prejudice. Prior to the shootings, the perpetrator, an American-born Muslim who reportedly was upset about the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, was a regular attendee at a mosque in Maryland. It is the same mosque attended by the exchange students in my cluster – and the same mosque that welcomed me and other non-Muslim host parents to Iftar dinners, community events, and special programs. I know that these few extremists who commit acts of terrorism in the name of Islam do not represent the vast majority of Muslims in the world. However, their actions continue to tar the image of Islam and reinforce the Western stereotype of “Muslims as Terrorists.” Unfortunately, most Americans do not have the opportunity to interact on a personal basis with Muslims who could counteract this negative stereotype with a more positive image.

I have tried to capture in this study what it is like to be a Muslim exchange student in the U.S. during these tense times. In many ways the exchange students are teens, “just like” teens from anywhere, and just like my own teenagers. This is how they want to be seen – as teenagers, as individuals, as fellow human beings. In my work as a

local coordinator, I have at times been frustrated by some of the students' behaviors, but more often I've been impressed with their maturity, and touched by their kindness and compassion. It has been an honor to work with these young adults; their belief in a better, more peaceful world is inspiring. I have confidence that many of them will take on leadership roles in their home countries, but I suspect that even those who do not will work for peace in their own ways.

This study has provided some insights into the connections between youth exchange and peacebuilding. Through the stories and thoughts of the exchange students, we now know a little more about how youth exchange can be a positive force for peace. We must continue to explore this connection, while at the same time working to strengthen the peacebuilding capacity of youth exchange programs. It is easy to become disheartened by daily news reports of violence and hatred in the world. One thing that gives me hope, however, is the exchange students – their optimism, their enthusiasm, and their commitment to creating a more peaceful future. Indeed, perhaps it is this spirit that truly underpins our assumptions about the good effects of international exchange.

### Appendix 1: Student Participants

Student Pseudonyms	M/F	Home Country	U.S. Placement	Notes
Ahmed	M	Egypt	suburban	
Amar	M	Ghana	suburban	
Anggita	F	Indonesia	rural/town	host family
Aya	F	Philippines	suburban	cluster, host family
Dana	F	Indonesia	town	hijab, orientation
Emad	M	Saudi Arabia	small town	orientation
Ermy	F	Indonesia	town	hijab, orientation
Firas	M	Saudi Arabia	rural	host family
Ismeena	F	Egypt	small city	host family
Israa	F	Indonesia	small town	hijab, orientation
Kalia*	F	Indonesia	small city	hijab, orientation
Khalil	M	Turkey	suburban	
Lila	F	Saudi Arabia	suburban	cluster, host family
Mifta	F	Indonesia	town	host family
Nisa	F	Indonesia	suburban	cluster
Nura	F	Indonesia	town	
Rani	F	India	rural/town	host family
Sitti	F	Thailand	town	hijab, orientation
Wafa	F	Turkey	rural/small town	
Yara	F	Thailand	small town	hijab, orientation
Yusef	M	Saudi Arabia	suburban	orientation

Appendix 1 (continued)

**Notes:**

Cluster ..... YES Students in my cluster

Hijab ..... Girls who wore the hijab

Host family ... I interviewed one or both host parents of these students

Orientation ... Students interviewed at the pre-departure orientation  
(all group interviews)

\* Kalia was called away about 20 minutes into the group interview at the pre-departure conference, and did not return to the interview.

**Definitions of U.S. placements:**

Rural            sparsely populated area

Small town    population below 10,000

Town            population 10,000 to 25,000

Small city    population 25,000 to 50,000

City            population above 50,000

Suburban     outskirts of a large city

## **Appendix 2: Letter of Introduction**

Dear YES Exchange Student:

Greetings. I would like to introduce myself to you. I am a PAX local coordinator in Maryland. I am also a graduate student at the University of Maryland, studying International Education Policy.

As part of my research at the University of Maryland, I am exploring the connection between youth exchange and peace in our post 9/11 world. In connection with this research, I would like to interview you about your experiences as a YES exchange student. Your local coordinator, \_\_\_\_\_, has kindly offered to help me arrange interviews in your area.

The purpose of the interview is to better understand your experiences as an exchange student, particularly as a Muslim teenager in the U.S. During the interview, I will ask questions about different topics, including your expectations for the exchange, the difficulties you have faced, and the things you have liked best about the exchange. The interview will last approximately one hour. I would like to audiotape the interview so that I have a record to refer back to later. I will keep all of the interview recordings and transcripts confidential, and your name will not be used in any reports or documents related to this research.

Thank you very much for your help. Please feel free to call or email me with any questions or concerns. I look forward to meeting you soon.

Sincerely,

Carol A. Radomski  
Ph.D. Candidate, University of Maryland

Phone:

Email:

### **Appendix 3: Interview Guide**

*Note - This is a general guide. The questions were not always asked in this particular order, and not all students were asked all questions (usually due to time constraints).*

1. Introductions / Purpose of Research / Signing Student Assent Forms
2. Tell me a little bit about yourself and your family at home.
3. What made you want to be an exchange student?
4. How did your parents feel about your decision to be an exchange student?
5. Before you came to the U.S., what did you think it would be like? What did you think about Americans? Where did you get your information about the U.S.?
6. What surprised you when you first arrived here? What was exactly as you expected it to be?
7. Tell me about your host family. What is it like living with an American family?
8. Tell me about your friends in your community. How was making friends here in the U.S. (easy, difficult, etc)?
9. What are some of the best things about being an exchange student?
10. What are some of the hardest things for you about being an exchange student?
11. Now, I'd like to ask you some questions about religion, if that is okay. How do you/did you practice your religion in the U.S.? At home? At school?
12. What is it like being a Muslim with your host family? At your school? Your community? What was easy? What was difficult?
13. How have you shared your religion with others? What do you think others learned about Islam?
14. How did you learn about other religions – Christianity or Judaism? What did you learn about them? How do you feel about other religions?
15. As you know, this is a post-9/11 program – tell me your thoughts about 9/11. What did you learn about 9/11 in your program orientation?
16. What kinds of culture sharing activities did you do this year? How did they go? What questions did people ask? What do you think is most important for Americans to learn about your culture and religion? What have you learned through making these presentations? Were there any surprises?

17. Describe your community service activities. What was it like doing community service? What have you learned? Do you think you might use this experience when you go home? How?
18. Tell me about your leadership activities this year. What have you learned about leadership this year? How do you think you might use that information or skill at home?
19. How do you think you have changed this year?
20. Have your attitudes and beliefs about Americans changed? If so, how?
21. Has your interest in or understanding of world events changed? How?
22. How would you describe the goals of the YES program?
23. Do you think the program is meeting its goals? Why or why not?
24. Tell me some of your most memorable experiences here in the U.S.
25. What do you think it will be like going home?
26. What will you tell your family and friends about your experiences here?
27. What do you plan to do after you graduate? How has your experience here influenced your decisions about what you will do at home?
28. Is there anything else you would like to share with me about your experiences here as an exchange student?

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