Self-Identification Patterns of American-Muslim in Post 9/11 America

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Abstract

The United States, during the Presidency of George W. Bush, launched a seven-and-a-half-year "War on Terror", aimed at fighting terrorism. The "War on Terror", though ostensibly aimed at international targets, may have had a negative impact on Muslims living in America. The War on Terror has the very real potential of creating adversarial relationships between citizens of varying ethnicities. Domestic anti-terrorism activities may serve to cause Muslim Americans to feel marginalized and disenfranchised. It is not uncommon for the patriotism and citizenship of Muslim Americans to be questioned by other Americans, not because of criminal activity, but because of their immigration status, ethnic background, and religion. Therefore, this study will begin to examine how the patterns of self-identification of American-Muslims have been positively or negatively affected by the events of September 11, 2001. This exploratory study will consist of focus groups, segregated by gender, of American-Muslims aged 18-25 years old. Focus group participants will be asked about their experiences and the direct impact of September 11, 2001 on their lives, choice of college major, and choice of future career paths.

Introduction

This exploratory study will investigate the self-identification patterns of American-Muslims and how they are negotiating their dual nationalistic and religious identities in post 9/11 America. The goal is to discover how young adult American-Muslims formed their identities.

Another goal of this exploratory study is to begin to discover how the self-identification patterns of American-Muslims is influenced by interactions with others. The concept of racial microaggressions, which is defined by researchers Sue, Capodilupo, Torino, Bucceri, Holder, Nadal and Esquilin (2007) as "…Brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of color", will also be explored. Racial aggression has three forms: microassault, microinsults, and microinvalidation.

At the conclusion of this exploratory study, we hope to begin to develop a framework to begin to better understand the associations between racial microaggression and links to imagined communities and how they affect the

American–Muslims as they forge their own self-identification patterns. Imagined communities are defined as the communities to which individuals feel most aligned with, i.e. the sub-culture that one may belong to. Affiliation with imagined communities, a sub-culture, can be both fluid and static in nature based upon how assimilated an individual becomes within a particular sub-culture versus the dominate culture's community. For the children of immigrants, ethnic or racial minority groups, and or members of religious minority groups conflicts between subculture identity and dominant cultural identities are not new. What is new is how American–Muslims are able to merge their identities.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to learn how Muslim Americans currently feel about being "American" compared to how they did prior to the launch of the "War on Terror" as pursued by President George W. Bush. Study participants will be asked how they identified themselves in 1999, 2001, and 2008. We want to determine whether or not self-identification has changed and why. For example, did a study participant self-identify in 1999 as American, in 2001 as Egyptian–American, and in 2008 as Egyptian.

Study participants will be between the ages of 18-25 years old because on September 11, 2001 they were between the ages of 10-17 years old, and in the midst of forming their own identity. According to Psychosocialist Erik Erikson, there are eight stages of psychosocial development, each of which is necessary for the development of and maturation of the personality and psychological skills. Erikson theorized that adolescents aged (roughly) 12-18 years old must form their own identity, separate from their parents or primary care-providers, or risk role confusion. Erikson labeled adolescents as "successful" if they developed a whole self-identity and unsuccessful if they did not.

Definition of Terms

For the purposes of this exploratory research study the terms: "War on Terror", terrorists, Muslim, Islam, ethnicity/ethnic group will be narrowly defined. The "*War on Terror*" is a broad and vague term used by former President George W. Bush to define America's military action after the events of September 11, 2001. Georgetown University Historian Bruce Hoffman (2006) has stated that "It's a war [the War on Terror] without boundaries. It's a war directed against multiple enemies, not just one adversary." (National Public Radio broadcast, 2006). Likewise, former Speaker of the House, Newt Gingrich (R-GA), has stated that, "The multiple adversary make [the] war on terror hard to define." (2006).

According the UN Security Council Resolution 1373, *terrorists* are persons who participate in terrorism. Terrorism is defined as unlawful acts of violence designed to instill fear, perpetuated for ideological purposes, deliberately aimed towards non-military targets.

The terms Muslim and Islam are often used interchangeably by media outlets. But, *Islam* is the religion of those who believe that Muhammed was the last prophet sent by God to mankind, who recited the Holy Qur'an to his followers. *Muslims* are adherents of the religion of Islam.

Ethnic is defined in the Merriam Webster on-line dictionary as of or relating to large groups of people classed according to common racial, national, tribal, religious, linguistic, or cultural origin or background; b**:** being a member of a specified ethnic group. According to the on-line Encyclopedia Britannica, *ethnicity* from the anthropological viewpoint is defined as the identification of a group based on a perceived cultural distinctiveness that makes the group into a "people." This distinctiveness is believed to be expressed in language, music, values, art, styles, family life, religion, ritual, food, naming, public life, and material culture.

Research Questions/Hypotheses

1. How did focus group participants self-identify in 1999, 2001, and 2008? Has there been a significant change over the past eight years?
2. Do American-Muslims feel more or less American today than they did prior to the initiation of the "War on Terror"? Has the "War on Terror" had a negative impact on focus group participants? Choice of undergraduate major and/or career?
3. Do study participants feel especially marginalized by the American government?
4. Have study participants considered changing their name or dress and appearance to make themselves seem more acceptable to other Americans?

Review of Literature

Identity Formation

According to Psychosocialist Erik Erikson, there are eight stages of psychosocial development, each of which is necessary for the development of and maturation of the personality and psychological skills. Erikson theorized that adolescents aged (roughly) 12-18 years old must form their own identity, separate from their parents or primary care-providers, or risk role confusion. Erikson labeled adolescents as "successful" if they developed a whole self-identity and unsuccessful if they did not. Successful adolescents were able to establish an intact self-persona and are capable of maturing social interactions. Unsuccessful adolescents falter and find it difficult to establish mature social interactions.

Members of ethnic minority groups are successful at forming their identities when they are made aware of native customs and mores. Sirin and Fine's (2007) research on immigrant youth shows that the successful integration of both one's own culture and the dominant culture leads to successful adolescent identity development. Successful integration can, however, become stymied by political events beyond the immediate control of both dominate and sub-culture group members. For example,

in the aftermath of the events of September 11, 2001 many American–Muslim youth and their families have reported being the victims of blatant discrimination and harassment in public school settings, public parks, places of employment, etc. This sort of overt discrimination that can negatively scare adolescents and cause a significant retardation in the more normal process of psychosocial development; especially, if individuals prove to be less resilient. The lower levels of resiliency can cause the youth to falter and make poor life course decision and become involved in negative health behaviors, which can cause major setbacks in the adolescent's ability to become a successful, productive member of society.

Symbolic prejudice

Professors Smith and Mackie (year) define "symbolic prejudice" as institutionally accepted "hated for out groups that arises, together with the exaltation of in–group symbols, in response to perceived threat. This definition of symbolic prejudice is appropriate because in the aftermath of September 11, 2001, many American–Muslims have experienced negative backlash. The more threatened some members of the dominant culture felt as a result of the terrorist attacks upon America the more likely they were, are, to lash out and attack an American-Muslim. This near-constant threat of attack is not the proper environment in which adolescents can successfully explore their personality traits and form an intact self–identity.

Self-categorization

Self-categorization is the process of seeing oneself as a member of a social group or imagined community. How adolescents view themselves and their status within their social group varies depending upon whether or not their group is a member of the dominate culture or a sub-culture group.

Research conducted by (….) on Hispanic-American youth demonstrate that when youth are acculturated only within their sub-culture and have limited contact with the dominate culture they are less successful overall. These youth also have more difficulty merging their Hispanic and American identities.

Researchers Sin and Fine (2007) stated that, "…when a culture is under siege, it becomes particularly prominent for those who live for those who live within the diaspora, like immigrant Muslims in the US."

Social Mobility

Social mobility is defined by Smith and Mackie (2000) as the strategy of individual escape, either physical or psychological, from a stigmatized group. (See figure 1) Social mobility can also be defined in terms of an individual's "social capital" which is the value one places in his or her social networking.

The better defined one's social network is within their own group the more capable one may be at making links to the dominant culture. Once secure links to the dominant culture the more able one is to devise a plan to escape the confines of their own social group.

Figure 1

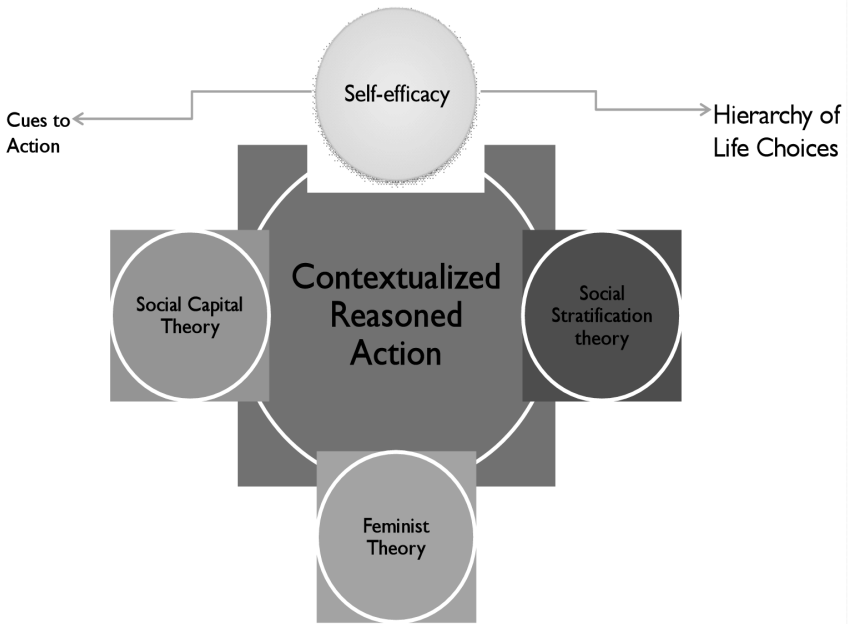| Identity integration	
Assimilation	Marginalization
Separation	Biculturation

Theoretical Framework

Social Identity Theory is the theory that people's motivation to derive positive self-esteem from their group membership is one driving force behind in-group bias. Application of this theoretical framework serves to explain how identification with a specific group can be a source of pride for people. The social identity is the foundation upon which individuals will interact with members if their own social group as well as members of other social groups. Adolescents are capable of initially identifying socially acceptable roles based upon how their society is stratified and how gender roles are demonstrated by their elders. From within this framework adolescents form their own distinct identities.

Contextualized reasoned Action is a concept suggested by the student researcher to explain how American-Muslim adolescents may decide to undertake the incremental changes that are necessary to overcome barriers like: social prejudice, social immobility, and the limitations of self-categorization. (See Figure 2) Key to this theoretical model is the innate resiliency of people to seek change, improvement and empowerment in deference to institutional obstacles. Self-efficacy is paramount in this framework because the individual must on some level have received a "cue to action" or some other motivating factor that signals the absolute need to change. The individual must arrange his life choices in descending order of importance and believe that the ability and power to achieve his or her life goals is realistic. In the case of the American-Muslim adolescent, some of their ability to form secure networks within their own ethnic group is hampered by mistrust associated with the aftermath of the terrorists' attacks on September 11, 2001 and subsequent domestic police action and detainment of American-Muslims. Both Social Stratification and Feminist Theory speak to a sense of empower and ambition to rise above their current situation. Together all of these theories culminate in the individual actively selecting one mode of change over all others through which to positively change their lives. For example, one may select attaining higher education, political activism,

or social isolation as how they will interact with dominant culture. According to Britto (2008), and Britton and Amer (2007) when subcultures are under attack the group members are more likely to become more vocally or visually nationalistic in nature. So, the desired change is compartmentalized and undertaken incrementally; within context A, a certain change is desired, while within context B another change is desired.

Figure 2

Contextualized Reasoned Action ©

Self-efficacy

Cues to Action

Hierarchy of Life Choices

Social Capital Theory

Contextualized Reasoned Action

Social Stratification theory

Feminist Theory

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Methods

Sample

The participants for this exploratory study were Muslim students attending the University of Maryland at College Park. Segregated focus groups, one for males and one for females, aged 18-25 years were held at The Adele Stamp (student) Union on the campus of the University of Maryland. The primary criterion for participant selection is that each volunteer had to be a Muslim, between the ages of 18-25 years, and willing to have their voice recorded during the each focus group session.

Procedures

The initial focus group did not yield valuable information because of low volunteer participation. Therefore, a second focus group is being organized for which study participants are to be solicited via list serves from University of Maryland affiliated on-campus Muslim Student Association and the Muslim Women of Maryland student organizations. Members of these groups were invited to participate in segregated focus groups via an announcement on the groups' list serves. The separate moderators will be chosen for each segregated focus group. The moderator for the women's focus groups will be the student researcher. The moderators for the men's focus group will be two American-Muslim Army veterans. The two focus groups will be held on the same day at two different locations within The Adele Stamp (student) Union on the University of Maryland campus. Each focus group participant will be required to sign an IRB approved consent form prior to entering the room where the focus group sessions are to be conducted. Each focus group session will produce an audio recording(s). Each audio recording will be transcribed by the student investigator, coded and analyzed with the SPSS software.

Measures

The audio recordings of the focus group sessions will be analyzed by the student researcher to determine if there are recurrent themes As this exploratory study continues, an acculturation survey based upon the Acculturation, Habits, and Interests Multicultural Scale for Adolescents (AHIMSA) first developed by Unger, Gallaher, Shakib, Ritt-Olson, Palmer and Johnson (2002) will be developed. The survey will be tailored to identify the acculturation patterns of American-Muslims. The researchers will examine how acculturation positively or negatively affects identity formation in American-Muslim adolescents.

Discussion

This exploratory study is the first of its kind to study how American-Muslims adolescents and young adults have been affected by the events of September 11, 2001. This study, upon its conclusion will be the first study to involve participants who actually live in an area that was attacked by the terrorists. The suspicion is that since previous studies involving adolescents who were toddlers and elementary school-aged children at the time of the terrorists' attack and did not live in an area which was under attack, demonstrated shifts in identity formation; therefore, analyzing young adults who were adolescents on September 11, 2001 should reveal more shifts in more normal patterns of identity formation.

Limitations

The primary limitation of this exploratory study was the time limitation of the five weeks of the McNair Scholars Summer Research Institute. Due to the limitations imposed by the program, researchers were unable to advertise extensively, and have more than one segregated focus group. This project will be undertaken during the upcoming Fall semester at the University of Maryland's College Park campus. During the Fall semester the researchers will conduct two gender segregated focus group sessions and the on-line acculturation survey.

Directions for Future Research

At the conclusion of this exploratory study, the researchers hope to encourage more social scientists to study the affects of the aftermath of the events of September 11, 2001 on American-Muslims, not as suspected terrorists but as fellow Americans devastated by the terror inflicted upon all Americans. The hope is to forge a new dialogue about American-Muslims as a vibrant sub-cultural group that has the potential to see its rate of mental illness, depression, suicide attempts, and rate of negative health behaviors increase due to the direct ill-effects if institutional social prejudice, and social immobility.

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