

## ***Commentary on the Special Issue of ADS*** **Muslim Youth in the West: “Collateral Damage”** **We Cannot Afford to Disregard**

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*At any given point in ontogenetic and historical time, neither individuals' attributes nor the features of their context alone are the leading predictors of their healthy development and adaptation. Instead, the relations between the individual and different levels of his/her ecology (such as family, peers, settings, cultural values, and media) are most important in understanding the character of human development and of the role of the ecology of human development in a person's life course (Lerner, Anderson, Balsano, Dowling, & Bobek, 2003). Environments that allow an imbalance between the individual and context by constraining and dictating the nature of individuals' interactions with the context tend to lead to developmentally inadequate person-context relations and, consequently, to dysfunctional relationships among citizens (Lerner, et al., 2003).*

This special issue of the *Applied Developmental Science (ADS)* journal assesses ways in which individual characteristics of Muslim youth in the West, contextual characteristics of their everyday ecology, and the relationship between the two might be either detracting or supporting positive developmental outcomes among youth post September 11, 2001. What does it mean for these young people to see that their social identity (defined to a great extent by their religion) is perceived and, at times, regarded as threat by their greater, non-Muslim community? How does a young Muslim person living in the West cope with the media representations of Islam (which are saturated with stories about ignoble actions of a group of Muslim extremists with whom the youth is neither associated nor whose actions the youth condones), or with the fact that his/her color of skin, head scarf, Arabic writing on a T-shirt or facial features are openly used as profiling tools in public places?

Discrimination in terms of *religious, ethnic, and physical profiling* experienced by Muslim youth in the West seems to be perceived by the general

public as an acceptable “collateral damage” of “war on terror” which is now global with the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and other security operations around the world. Left unchallenged, these acts of discrimination are often regarded as justifiable. More importantly, we have somehow (conveniently) freed ourselves from being held liable for any unfavorable developmental and social outcomes that result from this discrimination and from propagation of stereotypes associated with it. However, given ever greater numbers of Muslims in the West, the cost in human capital, individual and religious freedoms, and economic and political stability possibly resulting from this particular “collateral damage” is too high for any forward-looking, multiethnic society to disregard, especially societies anchored in democracy, civil rights and equity and freedom for all. Moreover, countries with a greater number of citizens with dual identities tend to experience “some degree of public anxiety, social tension and, at times, fear as the host community sees issues of citizenship, nationality, and national boundaries being challenged” (Tisakiri, 2005). As a result, intercultural, religious and political conflicts may arise. Compounding of such conflicts can, over time, reduce the supportiveness, involvement, and motivation with which non-Muslim members of a particular country interact with their Muslim population.

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In order to change the lens with which we view our responsibility toward immigrant and non-immigrant Muslim youth in the West, studies reported in this special issue of *ADS* provide some preliminary information necessary to initiate a dialogue between scientists, practitioners, and policy makers about developmental challenges that Muslim youth in the West face. How we respond to this call to action will have an important, measurable impact on public discourse and, ultimately, on Muslim immigrant youth's developmental trajectories.

We chose the concept of identity as a starting point in learning about experiences and development of young Muslim immigrant youth in the West. The purpose of identity analysis, as Hieronimi (2005) reminds us, is to help us understand different aspects of identity of groups and individuals and to educate ourselves about the role that identity plays in groups' and individuals' adaptation to societies within which they are imbedded. Hieronimi also cautions, however, that identifying any group in terms of one single characteristic (in this case, religion), irrespective of whether it is an accurate or fabricated identification, constitutes a form of oppression. As the papers presented in this special issue illustrate, Muslims in the West constitute a very diverse group of people who come in different races, ethnicities, and religious beliefs.

### **Identity as an Important Developmental Task**

During the course of high school and college years youth actively seek to understand the nature and importance of their role in the society and, in the process, they search for tools that will aid them in using what they know about their environment to mold their own identities. As they do so, youth question the extent of their agency and the responsibilities that they have toward people and institutions surrounding them. Youth also begin to question their own preparedness to commit to and/or challenge the values and ideologies defined for them by their context. In the process, all youth experience varied degrees of identity coherence and identity confusion, from which a sound sense of identity, i.e., identity synthesis, is expected to emerge as predominant (Erikson, 1968). However, while during this process of identity exploration youth are quite flexible in what they choose to try out and possibly incorporate into their identity, poorly structured sense of identity can make a young person quite vulnerable to contextual influences.

Youth's understanding of actions and events they witness in their environment is based on the

ideological guides that surround them and that are provided to them by their context (Erikson, 1968). These ideological guides help youth to evaluate and judge what is going on around them. During the course of using ideological guides provided by their environment, youth are drawn to values that have some historical permanence and relevance because it is these particular values that may be the most reliable tools enabling them to transcend self, find a socially prescribed role, develop to their full potential and become contributing members of their society. Development of one's identity, therefore, hinges on social relationships that youth experience through interactions with their environment.

While identity development is a process that every individual must construct and experience for herself/himself, the formation and, ultimately, structure of one's identity, are, as the studies in this special issue of the *ADS* journal echo, defined by individual's characteristics, historical time, cultural heritage (with its norms, values, and beliefs), religion, cultural, social, economic, and political overlap and differences between one's culture of origin and his/her present, macro-level cultural setting, and by dynamic, bi-directional relationships between all these components. Furthermore, there are individual differences in identity formation. For some youth, identity development represents a more challenging process than it does for other youth. For example, minority immigrant youth (such is the case with Muslim youth in the West) represent segments of the population whose overall identity is likely to be molded by their multi-cultural identities and affiliations, their possible dual citizenships, and the extent to which they feel discriminated against and socially marginalized.

### **Assessing the Collateral Damage**

Through the use of scales, focus groups, interviews, and identity maps, researchers in this issue of *ADS* have employed theoretical concepts such as acculturation, ethnic/national orientation, self-efficacy, and hyphenated selves as very useful tools in analyzing different factors that contribute to identities of Muslim youth living in the Western Europe and the United States. The most prominent theme across the studies reported in this issue is the presence of dynamic, bidirectional relationships between characteristics of immigrant Muslim youth and the multiple levels of organization that comprise their everyday ecology.

In Opedal and Røysamb's (this issue) study conducted in Oslo, Norway 4640 15-year-olds, who are ethnic Norwegians, and 1666 15-year-old

immigrant youth, who live in Oslo but who originated from countries with predominantly Muslim population (such as Morocco, Turkey, Somalia, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran, and Iraq) were assessed for the presence of internalizing problem behaviors (i.e., anxiety and depression) and their psychosocial, risk and resources, correlates.

Muslim immigrant youth and ethnic Norwegian youth in Oppedal and Røysamb's (this issue) study did not differ significantly in their levels of internalizing problem behaviors. However, when comparing immigrant youth from non-Western countries, youth from countries with predominantly Muslim population (i.e., Muslim youth) exhibited fewer internalizing problems. In addition, Muslim immigrant youth also reported more ethnic group competence, less conflict with parents, and more parental monitoring, as well as less host (Norwegian) culture competence, more difficulties with their school work, and greater levels of ethnic identity crisis (Oppedal & Røysamb, this issue). Oppedal and Røysamb also found significant correlations between internalizing symptoms and several psychosocial protective and risk factors in Muslim immigrant youth. Self-efficacy, parental monitoring, class support, and ethnic competence were negatively related to internalizing symptoms in youth, whereas parental conflict, school problems, and ethnic identity crisis were positively related to internalizing symptoms. Host culture competence was found to be significantly related to internalizing symptoms only in one group of immigrant Muslim youth—Turkish adolescents—in whose case higher levels of host culture competence were found to be related to higher levels of internalizing symptoms. The authors suggested that this positive relation might, in part, be due to the nature of youth's interaction with their environment, that is, to youth's "openness towards contact with host groups that is frustrated by exclusion and discrimination by host peers" (Oppedal & Røysamb, this issue).

Turkish youth in the West were focus of Vedder, Sam, and Liebkind's study (this issue). The authors explored identity of immigrant Muslim youth by assessing ethnic and national (country-of-settlement/host country) orientation of 736 Turkish adolescents living in five countries of North-Western Europe (i.e., Finland, Germany, Norway, Sweden, and the Netherlands). The study revealed that Turkish youth's country of residence was related to their ethnic orientation. While, as a group, Turkish youth reported higher levels of ethnic than of national orientation, Turkish youth living in Finland had the weakest ethnic orientation (and strongest national orientation), and were less likely than Turkish youth from the other

four countries to interact with their ethnic peers and to speak Turkish.

Vedder, Sam, and Liebkind (this issue) found that a strong association with other members of one's ethnic group (i.e., other Turks) and strong bicultural orientation can serve as important assets in Turkish adolescents' psycho-social adaptation to their host country, with higher bicultural and higher ethnic orientation being more likely to lead to positive adaptation. On the other side, Turkish youth's psycho-social adaptation suffered in the light of youth's experiences with perceived discrimination. Not surprisingly, youth's acculturation preference, experiences with perceived discrimination, and adaptation in the country of settlement were significantly more likely to be positive for Turkish youth living in countries with greater population diversity.

Although the presence of bicultural orientation matters in youth's successful adaptation to life in their country of settlement, the extent of one's bicultural orientation seems to matter even more. In Britto and Amer's study (this issue), 150 Muslim youth of Arab descent (ages 18 through 25) were surveyed for the presence of cultural identity patterns, operationalized in terms of three distinct cultural identity groups—High Bicultural, Moderate Bicultural, and High Arab Cultural. Youth who exhibited the Moderate Bicultural pattern emerged as the most likely to experience lower levels of family support and higher levels of acculturative stress. Furthermore, youth in the High Bicultural group were more likely to have extended family in the U.S. The authors hypothesize that presence of the extended family could be an asset to youth as they seek to preserve their ethnic identity while exploring the mainstream American culture and seeking means to incorporate parts of that mainstream culture into their multiple (Muslim-Arab-American) identities.

The complexity of the relationships between Muslim youth of immigrant origin and their Western contexts was perhaps most vividly captured by findings of Sirin and Fine (this issue) and Zaal, Salah, and Fine (this issue). In Sirin and Fine, the presence of hyphenated selves in the post-9/11 period was assessed in 70 12- to 18-year-old Muslim youth in the United States. Using both quantitative and qualitative methods, the authors found that young Muslims in their sample actively negotiated their dual (Muslim and American) identities, but also that young Muslim men and women differed in their own experience of the challenges (such as discrimination) that burden the process of their identity negotiation. Irrespective of the level of discrimination that they might have experienced, young



mirrored the economic changes of their setting, i.e., their new republics. The cohort from Estonia exhibited socioeconomic prosperity, whereas the socioeconomic trajectories of youth from Belarus took a downward path.

The extent to which a historical event impacts an individual depends, according to Elder (1998), on the timing of the event and the change that the event elicits, that is, when the event occurs during the course of the individual's development. Events of September 11th and similar, terrorist attacks that took place thereafter, caught most Muslim youth unprepared and, for young people, at the time when they were the most vulnerable—that is, just as they embarked on the path of developing their sense of identity. Many of these youth are still struggling to integrate those past and similar current events into their multiple identities in a way that would allow them to preserve their hyphenated selves and yet keep them flexible enough. While we should be genuinely concerned for all of these youth (because the journey ahead of them is a challenging one) and must seek to protect those individual and contextual assets that are crucial in their adaptation, we must be more vocal of advocates especially for youth who are not experiencing a goodness-of-fit with their environment and whose positive development is most at risk.

### Conclusions

For immigrant and non-immigrant groups for which religion plays an integral part of their every day life, we ought to think of religious affiliation, religious beliefs, and actual religious behaviors as representing crucial components and possible assets in individuals' development. Hence, we ought to measure such individual characteristics not simply as a single factor (e.g., religious affiliation), but also as a process (e.g., religiosity). Six years post 9/11 we are past the point of reaching consensus on whether religion, as a crucial component of Muslim youth's micro- and macro-systems, is in some way moderating youth's experiences of and response to their environment. Rather, there is now a need to focus on assessing *the extent* to which the youth's religious practices, actual and self-perceived beliefs and behaviors, as well as various family and community resources, might serve as assets in the youth's healthy, positive development in the post 9/11 world.

As we think of Muslim youth and challenges that they are facing in the light of post 9/11 surveillance and discrimination, it is important that we keep in mind that the collateral damage we spoke of earlier in this commentary touches also

youth who are not Muslim. Individuals who are of Catholic, Christian, Jewish, or of other religious affiliation but happen to be of South Asian, Middle-Eastern and/or Arabic origin are most likely to experience some of the same discrimination as a result of racial and ethnic profiling. Given these circumstances, those of us who are developmental and social scientists have to ask how are these youth coping with such experiences and, equally important, how these experiences might be shaping perceived and actual beliefs and behaviors of non-Muslim youth from South Asian and Middle-Eastern countries toward Islam as a religion and Muslim youth and their families as its physical carriers.

In order to learn the way and the extent to which the aftermath of the September 11th and events that followed might be impinging on both Muslim and non-Muslim youth's behavior and development, we must first seek to identify the nature of Muslim and non-Muslim youth's adjustment strategies following such stressful historical events. This special issue of *ADS* has offered some initial findings in this direction. Second, we must identify the mechanisms that play role in Muslim and non-Muslim youth's selection and expression of their coping and adjustment strategies. Third, we must learn how youth's choice of coping strategy may be impacted by cultural, social, economic and political demands within their everyday ecology and at different points in time. Fourth, we must learn how Muslim and non-Muslim youth's coping strategies might be impacting their actual beliefs and behaviors toward each other. And lastly, though perhaps most importantly, we must seek to understand the process-person-context-time (PPCT; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998) relations that promote development of stereotypes and discrimination against Muslim youth so that we can provide more effective tools for both youth and adults to challenge those relations and to seek to diminish them.

One way of challenging socially destructive stereotypes is by providing programs and supporting initiatives that offer Muslim and "Muslim-labeled" youth a safe space to learn and share their opinions on what is going on in the world and how certain events in the world are impacting social policies in their respective countries of residence and their attempts to attain and sustain multiple identities. Such programs, however, must have a design that is culturally sensitive, recognizes group and individual differences in adjustment strategies among Muslim and "Muslim-labeled" youth, and addresses challenges that characterize youth's experiences with discrimination across diverse settings. An exemplar of just such a program for

Muslim youth exists in Britain and it is called Musl!mYouth.Net.

Launched in October 2004, Musl!mYouth.Net acknowledges context-based challenges faced by youth of Muslim affiliation in Britain. The program uses Internet as a medium through which to “raise awareness of different social problems affecting young Muslims and the cultural and religious conflicts these issues sometimes raise, [and to] encourage young people to build peer-support networks and access services which will help them overcome their difficulties and concerns” (Musl!mYouth.Net website, retrieved 2007). The web site provides proactive, positive suggestions on how to respond to overt and covert discrimination and bullying, encourages youth to open themselves up to multicultural experiences and to learn from those experiences, and keeps youth civically informed. Musl!mYouth.Net is an extension of the Muslim Youth Helpline (MYH), a registered non-profit organization dedicated to providing youth with faith- and culturally-sensitive, free and confidential counseling via phone, internet, and, in the greater London area, even face-to-face meetings. MYH’s work is endorsed by the European Youth Portal, an initiative of the European Commission for young people between 15 and 25 years of age.

The value of programs such as Musl!mYouth.Net is that they teach Muslim youth to understand their experiences within a socio-historical context of which they are part and to use that understanding to inform their own identities. Moreover, the use of Internet allows such programs to reach Muslim youth across the globe and creates opportunities for exchange of experiences and ideas, which has, at least, a three-fold result: (1) It tears down walls that isolate youth; (2) It gives youth a voice and a chance to impact public discourse on issues of importance to them; and (3) It supports positive developmental choices and, thereby, positively impacts youth’s developmental trajectories.

As developmental and social scientists, we have a responsibility to continue to educate ourselves, other researchers, practitioners, and policy makers about the best means available to protect and promote healthy development among all youth, but especially among youth whose potential for future positive contributions to their own development and, consequently, to civil society is most in danger of being wasted (Lerner et al., 2003). There is a great historical need and an opportunity to work with Muslim youth in the West in their identity exploration and positive development by

identifying and capitalizing on youth’s strengths, strengths of their families, and strengths of their communities. Our hope is that through such collaboration across boundaries, conditions will be created that will support positive developmental trajectories and thriving among Muslim youth in the West—a segment of youth population bravely withstanding the weight of the “collateral damage” imposed on them by the war on terrorism.

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