

Editors' Introduction: Pathways to Identity and Positive Development Among Muslim Youth in the West

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On September 11, 2001, the United States was attacked by unknown terrorists. When the characteristics of the 9/11 attackers were identified, one aspect of their background that was very clear: all were Muslims. Later on, when the perpetrators of recent bombings in Indonesia, Turkey, Spain, and England were identified, it was clear that they all also shared the same characteristic: all were followers of Islam. Currently, the most wanted terrorist in the world is a Muslim who claims to speak on behalf of Muslims everywhere. Because of these recent historical events, and because of the ongoing "war on terror," there is a great deal of tension between Muslims and members of other ethnic groups and/or religions in the West. As a consequence, there has been an alarming increase in discrimination against Muslims in the West, due to both their religious (i.e., Islam) and ethnic (Arab, Pakistani, and so on) backgrounds. For example, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (2002) reported dramatic increases in discrimination against Muslim Americans post 9/11.

Learning to navigate through this historical period is a challenge for everyone, but for young Muslims, this challenge holds particular developmental difficulties. To date, very little research has been conducted with this population. Despite the increased levels of public scrutiny, there have been very few empirically driven investigations focusing on the psychological effects on those who are at the receiving end of this process. What happens to the identity formation and psychological well-being of young people whose social group is prominently associated with terrorism? What are the social and psychological ramifications, when their strong bases of religious (e.g., Muslim) and national (e.g., American, Norwegian) identifications suddenly come into conflict? What are the developmental implications of growing up at a time when most of what you see about your social

group is negative? These are the concerns that this special issue on Muslim immigrants in the West is intended to explore.

Despite their historical relevance and increasing numbers, there is a lack of scholarly publications on Muslim youth. For example, according to PsycINFO, there are less than 100 studies on *Muslim, Arab, or Middle Eastern* children or adolescents living in Western countries *combined*. In a quick review of this literature, one could identify four general patterns. First, most of the studies on Muslim adolescents limit their focus to gender-related issues in general, and veiling in particular. Second, only a handful of studies were published since 2001, the year of the 9/11 attacks, most of which focus on Arab Americans. Third, the majority of the empirical studies rely heavily on solely qualitative methods that are either testimonial, presenting first-person narratives by Muslim youth, or theoretical, dealing with religious or political issues. These shortcomings in the literature underscore the grave absence of empirically driven work regarding Muslim youth. As a consequence, very little is known about Muslim adolescents living in the West. We do not know how these youth are negotiating the Western and Muslim aspects of their identity, or handling the tension between these two aspects of identity caused by current historical circumstances. Similarly, we do not know how this negotiation process affects their psychological and academic well-being.

Thus we believe there is an urgent need to conduct comprehensive and rigorous inquiry into how the current historical context is shaping Muslim youths' developmental process in general and psychological and academic well-being in particular. As the first special issue in the psychology focusing primarily on Muslim youth in the West, the five articles in this issue represent a first step in addressing this gap. These studies are not only relevant to those who are interested in Muslim youth but also to researchers of adolescence,

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identity, and acculturation issues as well as those who are interested in the health and well-being of marginalized youth in general whose identity is publicly contested.

Muslims in the World

According to the CIA Factbook, there are now 1.4 billion Muslims in the world. Despite the misconception in the West that most Muslims are Arab, the majority, about 80%, of Muslims are not Arab but, rather, live mostly in South Asia (30%), Sub-Saharan Africa (20%), and Central Asia. In addition to the predominantly Muslim countries, the numbers of Muslims are also growing in non Muslim countries, mostly in Europe, North America, and Australia. For example, about 10% of the French population is Muslim, representing the largest group of Muslims in the Western world. Although not as high, the number of Muslims in the United Kingdom, Germany, and other European countries also represent a major minority group in each country.

Muslim is the word given to those who belong to Islam, which, translated from Arabic, means “one who submits to God.” Muslims, like the other two Abrahamic religions, Christianity and Judaism, believe in a single god, or Allah, but they recognize Muhammad as the last prophet. They believe that their book, the Kuran or Quran, is the word of God as told to Muhammad during the period of 610 to 632 AD. Every Muslim adult is required to follow five principles: Faith in God and his messenger, prayer five times a day, giving a portion of income to the needy, fasting during Ramadan, the holy month of Islam, and pilgrimage once in a lifetime to see the birthplace of Islam in Mekke or Mecca. Muslims visit the Mosque for both daily prayers and Jum’ah, or Friday prayers, but this is not one of the five main principles. Other than these five principles, Islam also sets quite detailed standards for social life, dictating how Muslims should behave both in their private lives and social conduct. These instructions cover all aspects of life, ranging from how to take a shower, to how to invest their money, to what to wear. More relevant to our topic, Islam also sets very different standards for girls and boys, including the way they can dress, socialize, and interact with the other sex. Most devout Muslims try to follow these religious obligations, but as in every religion there is variation in practice even among the most devout.

Another important aspect of Islam is how one becomes Muslim. Unlike many other religions, Islam does not require any ceremony for conversion; becoming Muslim is a very simple and private

act: A person is considered Muslim when he or she, regardless of their race, ethnicity or gender, recite in Arabic that *Allah is the only god and Prophet Muhammad is his messenger*. Once a person recites these words, then he or she becomes Muslim.

Other than the general avenues where culture is transformed from generation to generation, Muslims all over the world also attend Mosques or Masjids, and many also attend a variety of religious schools that are designed to teach principles of Islam and are available for all age groups, from pre-kindergarten to post-high school. Although there is no uniform curriculum for Islamic schools, there are some commonalities; they follow religious education and in most cases use Arabic language instruction, in addition to the general curriculum. Some schools offer unisex or gender-segregated classrooms. Whether Muslim youth attend any such formal, religious school setting will undoubtedly have implications for their identity development. Whether youth attend these schools may expand or limit their ability to socialize with the other sex and with people from other religions and ethnic backgrounds.

Not only are Muslims diverse in terms of ethnicity, they are also diverse in terms of religious practice. The vast majority of Muslims belong to one of four Sunni sects (Maliki, Shafi’I, Hanafi, Hanbali), while a much smaller group (about 17%) belong to Shiite sects (Jaffari, Ismailiyah, Alevi, etc.). The relations between the two groups have been hostile since the times of the post-Muhammad era, when various Muslim groups fought for power, which ended in bloody murdering of Muhammad’s two grandchildren. Unlike the Sunnis, who are much more traditionalist in terms of following the word of the Quran, Shi’as give more weight to the role of Imams, or religious scholars, who can interpret the Quran for current needs. When in the West, Sunnis and Shias are grouped together as “Muslims,” but often, in their countries of origin, they share a history of hostility which at times leads to inter-group violence, as is seen in Iraq today. These differences, and the historical roots of animosity between the two groups is difficult to understand in the West, partly because once abroad they are forced under the same tent. Therefore many Americans and Europeans tend to assume “they” are all the same.

Muslims in the West

Muslims in Western countries represent both a minority group, and, in most cases, a relatively new immigrant group. They come from more than 100 different countries, representing an ethnic and

racial diversity that go well beyond Arabs. Although the labels "Muslim" and "Arab" are often used interchangeably to refer to the same group of people in the public discourse, they signify two distinct characteristics of a person; the former referring to one's religion and the latter referring to one's ethnicity. Not all Arabs are Muslim and not all Muslims are Arab. For example, only one out of four Arab Americans are Muslim and the rest are Christian. Like other new immigrant groups, youth represent a much larger portion of this population compared to the national average. Thus, the articles in this special issue focus on Muslim as a racial, ethnic and religious minority group and as a relatively new immigrant population that struggles with the issue of acculturation.

The main objective of this special issue is to begin an informed, scholarly and public discussion on immigrant Muslim youth living in Western countries. In this introductory issue, we present studies that are varied in terms of geography, methods, and developmental issues. In terms of geography, three of the five studies focus on Muslim American youth (Sirin & Fine, this issue; Zaal, Salah, & Fine, this issue; Britto & Amer, this issue) while the remaining focus on immigrant youth from Muslim countries living in Finland, Germany, Norway, Sweden, and the Netherlands (Oppedal & Røysamb, this issue; Vedder, Sam, & Liebkind, this issue). The studies are also quite diverse in terms of methodology that varies from large scale surveys with thousands of participants (e.g., Oppedal & Røysamb; Vedder et al.) to in-depth qualitative inquires (Zaal et al.) to innovative mixed method investigations (Sirin & Fine). The studies also focus on different age cohorts, ranging from early teens to emerging adults, but more

importantly they represent a wide range of developmental issues, including identity negotiation, gender development, family context, acculturative practices, and mental health outcomes. In short, this volume introduces with depth and complexity a population of youth whose identity continues to be publicly scrutinized in recent years. We hope that the studies in this special will inspire others who can further this important line of inquiry based on theoretical and methodological innovations presented in this issue.

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