**Islamophobia and the Identity of the Muslim Child**

**Part 1: Introduction**

Discrimination towards Muslims is at a record high.[[1]](#footnote-1) In research that we conducted in early 2016, we discovered that 1 in 2 American Muslim children felt conflicted about being both Muslim and American. For Muslim kids growing up in the West, how will they feel like they belong?

According to a March 2015 poll, “more than half of Americans say they have unfavorable views of Islam, and six in 10 either aren’t interested or don’t know whether they want to learn more about the faith.”[[2]](#footnote-2) Attacks in Paris, Beirut, San Bernardino, and Orlando have increased the fear of terrorism by Muslims, and Republican Party presidential candidates continue to play on these fears and rally anti-Muslim sentiment for political gains.[[3]](#footnote-3) The numbers show that Islamophobia has a growing presence. Given the social and political climate, it is not surprising that American Muslims might struggle with their self-esteem and choose to hide away their faith. Furthermore, thousands of cases of hate crimes and instances of faith-based bullying have, at times, made it unsafe to be outwardly Muslim.[[4]](#footnote-4)

In the pages that follow, we present results from our original study,[[5]](#footnote-5) related secondary research, as well as recommendations based on this work. It is our hope that this whitepaper can be used in service of the American Muslim community.

**Part 2: Background**

**The problem: What is internalized oppression and why does it matter?**

“How does it feel to be a problem?” Bayoumi echoes W.E.B. Du Bois’ famous question.[[6]](#footnote-6) “Arabs and Muslim Americans are the new ‘problem’ of American society, but there have of course been others.”[[7]](#footnote-7) Muslims are not the first minority group to face marginalization and discrimination in the United States. Offenses against other communities have been well-documented in history. Being a “problem,” therefore, was an experience for some communities in America long before 9/11. The effects of an antagonistic sociocultural context on marginalized populations are often similar across groups.[[8]](#footnote-8) Issues of racism, discrimination, ostracism, exclusion, misrepresentation, and forced assimilation, along with responses to these issues, have become shared experiences.

One of the shared experiences is a negative perception of the self, due to others’ attitudes, words, and actions. In the context of race relations, psychiatrist Frantz Fanon first referred to this phenomenon as an “inferiority complex,” caused by feelings of inadequacy and dependency due to racism and dehumanization.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Educator Paulo Freire wrote about a similar notion of internalized oppression. In his renowned text, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire describes the oppressed as “having internalized the image of the oppressor and adopted his guidelines.”[[10]](#footnote-10) Gramsci’s[[11]](#footnote-11) concept of cultural hegemony is useful here to understand the way in which power functions and how it is maintained. Freire goes on to state, “Self-depreciation is another characteristic of the oppressed, which derives from their internalization of the opinion the oppressors hold of them...in the end they become convinced of their own unfitness.”[[12]](#footnote-12) Pheterson offers a similar description, saying:

“Internalized oppression is the incorporation and acceptance by individuals within an oppressed group of the prejudices against them within the dominant society...[It] is the mechanism within an oppressive system for perpetuating domination not only by external control, but also by building subservience into the minds of the oppressed groups.”[[13]](#footnote-13)

**Dolls Test**

One of the most striking works of research to document internalized oppression in the Black community is Clark and Clark’s (1947) pioneering study, “Dolls Test.” In the study, young Black children were prompted to identify which of two dolls placed in front of them, a Black doll or a White doll, they preferred over the other. They were tasked with a series of requests including, “Give me the doll that you like to play with. Give me the doll that is a nice doll. Give me the doll that looks bad. Give me the doll that is a nice color.” The last directive was, “Give me the doll that looks like you.”

Through the experiment, several statistically significant and troubling trends surfaced. The majority of the children preferred the White doll and rejected the Black doll, despite largely identifying themselves as Black. About two-thirds of the children associated the White doll with attributes like “best” and “nice,” while 59% of the children indicated that the Black doll “looks bad.” As a result, Clark and Clark were able to prove the existence of internalized oppression among children as young as three years old.

Due to the significance of the original study, the Dolls Test has been replicated several times subsequently (Davis, 2005; Billante & Hadad, 2010; Spencer & Horowitz, 1973). The experiment has been critiqued for its use of binary, forced-choice options. Subsequent replications have allowed a broader set of responses, including a range of degrees of Blackness.

Our study draws on the Dolls Test as inspiration, seeking to assess religious—rather than racial—identification and preference. Race and religion differ in that religion is not always externally visible. Therefore, the methodology of this study was substantially modified. Yet Clark and Clark’s (1947) hypothesis that children, even at a young age, internalize negative beliefs about their minority identities, remains at the root of this research.

**Identity development and the impact of social context**

Due to Islamophobic discourse, the media focus on conflict, world events, cultural practices of Muslims, and hate rhetoric acts to create negative perceptions of Muslims. Individuals begin to accept problematic assumptions, myths, and beliefs introduced by the dominant culture about all Muslims. While this is harmful in that it alienates Muslims in the eyes of non-Muslims, it is also damaging within the Muslim community. A culture of anti-Muslim sentiment can further distance Muslims from their religious identities, even as the Muslim label remains affixed to them. American Muslims themselves may begin to internalize negative attitudes and develop low self-esteem.[[14]](#footnote-14) Growing up in such a climate, Muslim children often struggle to have confidence and manifest pride in their faith.

Fundamental to building confidence in identity is a solid foundation. Psychologists refer to this foundation as a self-concept or, in other words, a clear self-image and strong values. But this self-concept is not formed in isolation; it is a socially-mediated process.

Given the significance of context, the environment in which American Muslim identities and communities are constructed must be examined. Many of these contexts exist on a large scale level, affected by forces of globalization, transnationalism, diaspora, hybridity, and intersectionality. Development of the self is then a “pastiche process of stitching together an identity like trying on clothes, becoming your own hybrid, blending, shaping, and putting together something that’s a range of cultures.”[[15]](#footnote-15) This can be difficult when identities are conflicted. As Clifford writes, in a world that is “increasingly connected, though not unified,” we are “condemned to oscillate between two metanarratives: one of homogenization, the other of emergence; one of loss, the other of invention.”[[16]](#footnote-16)

Identity “must always be mixed, relational, and inventive.”[[17]](#footnote-17) If identity is in large part culture and in large part social cognition, then identity itself is primarily social. Explaining “who I am” may be primarily relevant in relation to others. Lave affirms that “being human is a relational matter, generated in social living, historically, in social formations whose participants engage with each other as a condition and precondition for their existence.”[[18]](#footnote-18) Being or existing is as critical as belonging. We should strive, El-Haj asserts, “to directly engage questions of identity and belonging and to consider how these influence individuals’ capacity for substantive inclusion in society.”[[19]](#footnote-19) In a world in which othering is a source of conflict, questions of identity and belonging are central.

There are numerous forces that affect Muslims in Western contexts, particularly the long history of Orientalism[[20]](#footnote-20) and its modern form, Islamophobia. “‘Cultural’ difference is no longer a stable, exotic otherness; self-other relations are matters of power and rhetoric rather than of essence.”[[21]](#footnote-21) Thus, recognizing differences can morph into otherization, providing a gateway to further marginalization. Yet encounters with difference can also be moments of articulation. Development, Hemphill and Blakely argue, “involves boundary crossing movements, often emerging from contradictions or historically evolving tensions: ‘contradictions are the driving force of transformation.’”[[22]](#footnote-22) The American Muslim is thus in a state of flux, in a simultaneous process of being, becoming, and belonging.

**Part 3: Our study**

**Research Questions**

The overarching research question that guides this study is: “What is the religious identification of American Muslim children, and what are their sentiments about being both American and Muslim?”

Specifically, the following questions are explored:

Do the children associate with being American and Muslim?

What are the effects of factors such as race, ethnicity, and gender?

Does the type of school children attend (Islamic/non-Islamic) affect self-concept and confidence?

Is there a presence or absence of self-esteem and internalized oppression?

**Study Design**

This study is a qualitative case study of a set of sites. The study took place from January – April, 2016, at six different school sites, two full-time Islamic schools and four weekend Islamic schools located in California. With the exception of two of the weekend Islamic schools that were held in mosques/community centers, the other locations were fully-equipped educational institutions with full-time administrative staff and teachers.

**Sample**

The participants for this study were 48 American Muslim children between the ages of 5-9 years old. There was a balanced representation of male and female participants, and the sample represented various racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds. A range of socio-economic status was also present, but no data were collected from participants or their parents regarding this. While the majority of participants were born in the United States (42 of 48), they indicated that their parents came from other countries. The ethnic diversity demonstrated by the sample included South Asians, Arabs, Pacific Islanders, Africans, and bicultural children of parents who were from the Philippines, Mexico, El Salvador, Costa Rica, Mauritius, Kenya, and Germany. Seven of the participants had one US-born parent and one participant had both a US-born mother and father.

**Instrumentation**

Three instruments were used in this study: an arts-based performance task, a verbal survey, and an interview protocol. Through this multimodal approach, the researcher was able to gather more robust data that represented participants’ identities. Each instrument was developed by the researcher after benchmarking comparable studies in order to ensure the activities were age-appropriate and reliable.

Though the Doll Study referenced previously inspired this research, the methodology used by Clark and Clark (1947) was modified considerably for several reasons. First, the current study seeks to investigate religious, rather than racial, identification and preference. Because religion is not always visible externally, it was not possible to use dolls to signify people of different faiths in an appropriately representative and authentic way. Additionally, the intersectionality of dolls could have posed a problem, as it would have been difficult to assess identification and preference based solely on religion, without interference from confounding factors such as race and gender. Second, the Doll Study has been critiqued for its use of forced-choice, binary options. In matters of identity, there is usually a spectrum of perspectives of self. Third, the use of dolls might not be considered a gender-neutral tool, particularly among children of various ethnic and cultural backgrounds. For these reasons, three original instruments were designed to conduct the research.

**Arts-based Performance Task.** Due to the exploratory nature of the study and my interest in capturing participants' interpretations and conceptualizations of American and Muslim identity, the first instrument employed was an arts-based performance task. After giving students blank white paper and a standard 64-count set of Crayola crayons, I prompted them to create two representations. On one side, they were asked to “draw a Muslim,” and on the other, they were asked to “draw an American.” If the students had difficulty with the prompt, they were asked to draw whatever they felt like drawing to show what a Muslim looks like and what an American looks like. No further instructions were given. I did not observe the students directly during the performance task, but was present in the room to supervise them.

Upon completion of the arts-based performance task, students were asked “Can you tell me about your drawings?” and questions were posed regarding details in the illustrations in order to better understand the intention and thought process behind the representations. These post-task conversations were audio recorded for further analysis.

**Verbal Survey and Interview Protocol.** These two instruments were generated based on existing literature of the influence of cognitive development on response quality.[[23]](#footnote-23) First, we created a verbal survey, which was a list of statements used to assess children’s level of understanding of their own identities. After the list of statements was created, it was shared with and vetted by a focus group of six Muslim American parents with children between 6-9 years of age. Two of the parents were educators as well.

The interview protocol was created to supplement the quantitative verbal survey with qualitative responses. Positioned as open follow-up questions, these questions that asked students to explain their answers could then lead to more nuanced understandings. The verbal surveys and interviews generally took between 8-10 minutes each, and were audio recorded for codification and further analysis.

In total, over 500 minutes of audio recorded data were transcribed and coded. For the arts-based performance task, 96 individual drawings were created (two per participant), which were analyzed thematically in conjunction with the verbal surveys and interviews. All participants were given pseudonyms across all data types to protect the privacy of the children.

**Part 4: Findings**

Based on analysis of triangulated results from the three instruments, the following findings were discovered.

**Strong religious self-identification:** Participants all identified as Muslim and nearly all of them (over 90%) expressed highly positive attitudes toward Islam and Muslims. Data were collected from those children who attended an Islamic institution, whether it was a full-time or a weekend school. As a result, these were participants who actively engaged with their faith communities on a consistent basis. This privileging of Muslim identity was evident in the illustrations as well. Several children drew non-Muslim Americans in a negative light because they engage in behavior deemed non-Islamic or less than desirable (e.g. playing impermissible music, eating junk food and dreaming of Christmas, singing and hula-hooping, saying profane words).

**Lack of compatibility between American and Muslim identities:** Nearly 50% of children disagreed with the statement “I love Americans.” Less than half agreed with the statement “I am an American” while a quarter of respondents qualified it and a quarter disagreed. Factors such as ethnicity and attending full-time Islamic school were shown to impact this sense of compatibility.

**Self-esteem & internalized oppression:** Over a third of respondents said that they do not want everyone to know that they are Muslim. Fifteen percent said that sometimes they pretend not to be Muslim or that they wish they could hide being Muslim. Whether or not the child’s mother wears hijab was shown to be statistically significant in its effect on confidence in being outwardly Muslim. Attending full-time Islamic school was also an important factor. There is evidence to suggest that Islamic schools contribute to American Muslim identity development in constructive ways, namely in building self-confidence and community.

**Physicality:** Given the racial and ethnic diversity represented in the sample, the “Muslimness” (i.e. physical appearance) of the participants was an important factor of analysis. While ethnicity did affect some responses, race did not surface as much in the verbal survey and interview. However, it did become apparent in the arts-based performance task. Several of the participants indicated a racial difference between their Muslim and American characters. That said, most of the pairs of drawings were balanced in terms of the size of the characters and the level of detail provided. In seven of the pairs of drawings, it was difficult to distinguish which of each pair was intended to be the Muslim and which was intended to be the American. Sixteen of the pairs portrayed both the American and the Muslim in an even-handed way, with only slight differences such as a hijab to indicate a Muslim woman. This highlighted an interesting point. In the verbal survey and interview exercises, notions of “the American” and “the Muslim” were abstract and conceptual. In the arts-based performance task, participants were asked to demonstrate and articulate what these terms meant. When asked to create these human characters, it became more difficult to communicate a substantial inherent difference between a Muslim and an American, especially because these categories are, in reality, not mutually exclusive.

Despite the diversity represented in the study, common occurrences of anti-Muslim sentiment resonated with the children collectively. Even if the participants did not experience Islamophobia firsthand, they were keenly aware and fearful that they could be targeted at some point in the future.

In-depth analysis of particular factors:

Islamic schools:

When asked to respond to the statement “Muslims are good people,” children who attend Islamic school qualified their response more often than children who attend non-Islamic school, who tended to agree. Adam, age 7, said, “[Muslims are] half bad, half good...because half of them kill. They’re fighting with each other. Muslims are fighting Muslims.”

Sahel, age 7, said, “they [Muslims] used to be good people. Now I don’t see the same.”

Researcher: Why not?

Sahel: “‘Cause I don’t see the same behavior as old times.”

Researcher: What were the old times and what are the new times?

Sahel: “...They used to be doing good things, but now I don’t see any- them doing good things anymore, only like bad things.”

Researcher: What kind of bad things do they do?

Sahel: “Uhh killing.”

Sabrina, age 8, said, “Well some Muslims are not [good people]. Some Muslims like do praise Allah [God] but some of them like they don’t really listen. Sometimes they’re mean, sometimes they’re even murderers. Because we are human like other people. We can all- some of us can be bad…My dad tells me that some people, some Muslims can be bad and some are good.”

Overall, children who attend non-Islamic schools tended to articulate attitudes that were more binary than children who attend Islamic schools. The majority of participants who responded “false” when given the statements “Muslims are Americans” and “I am an American” were children who attended non-Islamic schools. Ayaan, an 8-year-old boy said, “Muslims can’t be Americans because...if you’re like American, you do different things than Muslims do.” Iman, age 7, said, “they [Americans] don’t fast and stuff and they don’t pray...so we’re not like Americans.”

This “us versus them” perspective was therefore more distinctive amongst children who regularly interacted with non-Muslims. It was also compounded by the confusion children expressed about having a separate and, in their minds, potentially incompatible, religious and national identity. To manage this confusion, there is evidence to suggest that American Muslim children who attend non-Islamic schools compartmentalize aspects of their identities.

The study shows that Islamic schools likely contribute positively to American Muslim identity development by building self-confidence and community. Children often expressed that they felt comfortable in these environments and were able to reconcile their various identities. For example, Yusuf, age 8, who attends Islamic school said, “I’m a Muslim slash American.” However, it is possible that a lack of regular and frequent interaction with non-Muslims results in a false sense of compatibility. These findings point to opportunities parents and educators have to support American-Muslim integration.

Friends

Children who generally attend non-Islamic schools, report less agreement with the statement “I love talking to my friends about Islam.” Incidentally, they also usually have mothers who do not wear hijab. Zach, age 8, said, “I don’t talk about it [Islam].” Aaliya, age 8, said, “I don’t know…it’s kind of embarrassing.”

Afshan, age 7, said, “I don’t really do that [talk to my friends about Islam], because it’s not really a religious school.” Sofia, age 6, said, “My other school [public school] I don’t like to – well I do the same as my mom. I tell people that I’m a Muslim in the mosque, but I only tell my best friend- I’ve known her since I was a baby, her name is Simone, and I only told her I’m a Muslim. I only told her.” Asiyah, age 8, said, “sometimes I feel like I don’t want to talk about it because they just embarrass me and tell other people...I’m really shy at school.”

From these statements, we can see the impact of the social context on how children think about themselves. Additionally, we can see the influence of parents on how one should comport oneself.

Disassociating American identity

When given the statement, “Sometimes I pretend not to be American,” twenty of the respondents (42%) agreed. Lina, age 8, said, “If like I’m with my American friends, I’ll be ok with saying that [I am American], and then if I’m with my Muslim friends, I’m still ok with it but like I don’t really bring it out that I am, you know?” Muneeza, age 6, said, “because if I do it [pretend to be American] outside, then they’ll [my parents] think I’m glad that I was not a Muslim.” Hassan, age 8, said, “Always. Because it said, remember it said sometimes you pretend not to be a Muslim- no. I’m always a Muslim- I always act as a Muslim.”

In response to the statement, “I love Americans,” some children felt the need to reassert their Muslim identity. Yusuf, age 8, said, “some Americans...because we’re Muslims and Muslims are not Americans.” Other children did not fully agree with the statement due to conflict between “Americans” and Muslims. Armaan, age 9, said, “well it depends who they are...like Donald Trump, no...Obama, yeah.” Salma, age 8, said, “not Donald Trump. If they’re nice and they do like people like me, I like them. But if they’re like Donald Trump, I don’t like them.” Serena, age 9, said, “Some…because some Americans...like they don’t like Muslims and they say ‘oh, you can’t eat here, you can’t do things here because you’re not American. You’re Muslim, and you’re terrorists.’ They say that maybe. That never happened to me, but it happened to people.”

**Part 5: Discussion and recommendations**

American Muslim children are struggling with a sense of belonging. Despite the young ages represented in our research, these children have already been exposed to complex issues such as inflammatory political rhetoric, disputed foreign relations, hate crimes, discrimination, alienation, and exclusion, in addition to everyday instances of taunting and bullying. In short, they are affected by the Islamophobic society in which they live.

Children are aware of their differences. American Muslim children must learn at a young age to navigate and negotiate different social worlds, some in which they can be fully Muslim, others in which it is advantageous to champion an American, transnational, or cultural identity. As American Muslims, there are varying degrees of social acceptability, and one learns to be adaptable or to live in the ambiguity of the space in between.

**Recommendations**

**Educators at Islamic schools.** Perhaps the greatest implication for Islamic schools based on this research is the importance of fostering not only strong Muslim identity, but also strong American identity. Islamic schools are uniquely positioned to lead the way in forging American Muslim identity. One of the ways to potentially bridge the gap is to develop partnerships with non-Islamic schools, or find alternative ways to encourage interactions between Muslim and non-Muslim students.

**Further research.** This study opens many possibilities for further research. The American Muslim community has not been fully studied, and recent events such as the 2016 presidential election campaign rhetoric continue to shape the American Muslim experience. There is an opportunity for a larger study that can capture trends and needs in order to affect change. The implications of such work can transform not only the lives of American Muslims, but those of other marginalized communities as well.

**Part 6: Application**

Introduction: Chalk-talk activity

* 1. Questions
		1. What motivates you to teach?
		2. Why is Islamic school important?
		3. What challenges do you face as a teacher?
	2. Debrief
		1. Go through each question, and ask: what common themes emerged?
			1. Teaching is not just a job; it’s a responsibility to the community
			2. In an environment of Islamophobia, Islamic school plays an important role in children’s socialization and identity development
			3. Are the challenges brought up here shared challenges? How can we address them >> peer support

[Modules 1, 2, and 3 outlined in separate document]

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7. Bayoumi, 2008, p. 2 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
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10. 1970, p. 47 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
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