

THE EFFECT OF ACTIONS OF ISLAMIC RADICALS ON THE
SELF-CONCEPTULIZATION OF NORTH AMERICAN MUSLIMS

by

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“Before 9/11 the discrimination we faced was just racial because we weren’t white. Nobody was really very educated at all about our religion. They had no idea what a Muslim was or whatever. They just knew that we didn’t go to Church. They’d never be like, ‘Oh, you’re Muslim, you’re a terrorist’. That would never happen before 9/11” (Nagra, 2011, 432).

On September 11th 2001 the United States witnessed a devastating attack on American soil. Directly challenging American hegemony and national security, Islamic radicals hijacked and flew American planes into the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center and into the Pentagon, triggering the beginning of a post-9/11 world. The events of 9/11 changed the context for Muslim communities living in North America through post-9/11 public perceptions about Muslims and through official state responses taken by the governments of the United States and Canada, resulting in a new and challenging environment for North American Muslims. The post-9/11 period for Muslim communities in North America has been influenced by 9/11 and the actions of Islamic radicals through the creation of a new context that legitimizes and maintains the racial profiling of Muslim peoples by both citizens and governments. In response to 9/11 new legislations that “either directly sanction or propitiate the profiling” of Muslims were created while disregarding their citizenship status (Chen, 2010, 427). In addition, the racial profiling of Muslim peoples in the post 9/11 period created security concerns for Muslim populations in North America. The events of 9/11 impacted the lives of North American Muslims by allowing them to become susceptible to both violence and hate crimes. Among the incidents that Muslims faced in the period immediately ensuing 9/11 were incidents of verbal harassment, physical harassment and assault, attacks on their places worship and death threats (Bhabha, 2003, 13).

Due to the profound and immediate impact of 9/11 on the United States government and its citizens, responses to 9/11 were quickly taken. The United States government quickly responded by declaring a War on Terrorism. The purpose of the War on Terrorism was for the

United States to ensure domestic security, create new legislation that prevents terrorism and to emphasize its borders (Farson, 2006, 33). The Canadian government also decided to respond to the attacks on the United States through the creation of new legislation. In October 2001, the Canadian Parliament responded to 9/11 through the creation of new anti-terrorism legislation and Bill C-36 (Bahdi, 2003, 1). Later to be followed by the creation of other anti-terrorism legislations and bills. The Anti-Terrorism Act (Bill C-36) was one of Canada's first responses to the War against Terrorism. In the post 9/11 period such bills target and racially profile Arab and Muslims peoples. The dangers of such bills are that they may be used to violate the constitutional rights of Arab and Muslim citizens if they are suspected of being a threat to the security of the Canadian state. In the post 9/11 period North American Muslims became situated in a political climate which became ardently Islamophobic situating them within a precarious situation (Bhabha, 2003, 13).

Taking into consideration the challenges Muslim North Americans may face in the post 9/11 period this paper examines the results of my major research paper which was a requirement of my MA in the Canadian-American studies program at both Brock university and the State University of New York at Buffalo. The original paper examined how the actions of Islamic radical groups abroad shape the identities and sense of social inclusion of Canadian and American Muslims in the Niagara Region (Canada) and Buffalo New York. The paper was based on secondary academic sources and original research data drawn from a non-probability sample survey of Muslim university students in the Niagara Region of Ontario, Canada and from Buffalo, New York, as well as from semi-structured interviews with two Muslim clerics in these two communities. The research utilized a cross-border analysis approach to compare the views of Muslims on both sides of the Canadian-American border. The research provided members of Islamic communities living in Canada and the United States with the opportunity to describe their

challenges within their respective societies and is significant because the ways in which societies categorize individuals provides insight about social stratification and levels of integration (Allman 2012, 6). The comparative research design allowed for a unique exploration of the role of locality as a potential influence on the identity and sense of inclusion of Muslims living in North America.

This study used symbolic interactionism and Seymour Martin Lipset's mosaic and melting pot theories to examine how the actions of Islamic radicalism abroad effect the identity and social inclusion of Canadian and American Muslims. Symbolic interactionism is a sociological theory that focuses on the perspective of individual actors. The theory also focuses on "the nature of the situation in which collective action is constructed" (Ballis Lal 1995, 421). The theory attempts to empower the individual as it provides actors with the ability to illustrate their point of view by speaking for themselves. An important aspect of the theory is the understanding of the self. Symbolic interactionism theory understands the self as the way an individual has been treated and interacts with others in "the variety of situations he or she confronts" (Ballis Lal 1995, 423).

Seymour Martin Lipset's mosaic and melting pot theories argues that the Canadian state provides "diverse ethnic groups" with the right to cultural preservation in the form of the cultural mosaic, in contrast to the emphasis in the United States on assimilation "into the melting pot" (Lipset 1990, 172). For Lipset these approaches are historically entrenched in the founding ideologies of both countries and are demonstrated through American universalism and Canadian particularism. In this regard, the United States aims to incorporate "diverse groups into a culturally unified whole," while Canadian particularism preserves the loyalties of subnational groups, and preserves "the strength of provinces vis-à-vis the federal government" (Lipset 1990, 172).

My expectation was that the actions of Islamic radicals will have impact on the self-conceptualization of North American Muslims as they disassociate themselves from such groups

who claim to be acting in the name of their religion. I expected that Muslims' identities and feelings of inclusion would vary depending on their residence in either Canada or the United States and based this expectation on the two countries' stance on Multiculturalism and the fact that American Muslims reside in the nation that was the target of 9/11.

The research illustrated and compared the differences between the responses of thirty Canadian and American Muslim students who participated in the study and conveyed the perspectives of the two Muslim clerics. The study was conducted through the participation of respondents in semi-structured interviews and in questionnaires to test and compare the perceptions of Muslims university students in the Niagara Region (Canada) and Buffalo, New York.

The research proposed two main hypotheses. The first hypothesis, derived from the theory of symbolic interactionism, allowed me to hypothesize that actions taken by Islamic radicals abroad pose concerns for North American Muslims, leads them to believe that their safety and security may be threatened, encourages them to positively represent their religion through their speech and actions, and to fully maintain agency over their self-conceptualization and how they should be defined. The second hypothesis was deduced from Seymour Martin Lipset's mosaic and melting pot theories. Using Lipset's mosaic and melting pot theories I hypothesized that due to Canadian Multiculturalism, Canadian Muslims will perceive that they face concerns to a lesser extent than American Muslims, that they will perceive that they live in a safer, more secure, and pluralistic society than American Muslims, that they will perceive that negative actions of Islamic radicalism do not have a great effect on their social inclusion, and finally, that they will maintain positive perceptions about the current state of Muslims in Canada. The findings of my research suggest that while both Canadian and American Muslims participants negatively view the effects

of the actions of Islamic radicals in the post 9/11 period, Americans Muslims maintained higher levels of agreement that the actions of Islamic radicalism have serious ramifications.

In general, the research indicated that Muslim participants maintained different meanings of what it means to be Muslim in North America. For Canadian Muslim participants, the research indicated that being a Canadian Muslim is to be part of the inclusiveness and accepting nature of the Canadian state. It is to maintain perceptions of the presence of diversity and pluralism and to positively believe that such concepts are part of the Canadian state. In contrast, for American Muslim participants, meanings of being Muslim in the United States seem to be based on a past/present approach. American Muslim participants seem to perceive the post 9/11 period as being a change from the past and as a key factor in their self-identification in which what it means to be Muslim is shaped by their lived experience in the United States opposed to the nature of the state.

Firstly, 62.50% of American participants agreed that it was difficult being Muslim in the post 9/11 period in contrast to 31.25% Canadian participants. The difference in responses between the two groups maybe caused by the different notions of what it means to be a Muslim in the post 9/11 period. Compared to 62% of Canadian participants who maintained neutrality in their beliefs regarding whether Muslims in their country face prejudice and racism, 50% of American participants strongly agreed that prejudice and racism were present in their country.

The research illustrated that North American Muslims' concerns about their misrepresentation is a current issue in both the United States and Canada. The study has shown that 81.25% of American respondents strongly agreed that Islamic radicalism poses concerns that Muslims in the United States will be negatively viewed by fellow Americans. This concern was expressed by 50% of Canadian respondents, which indicates that American Muslim participants

maintain higher levels of belief in comparison to Canadian Muslims participants that the actions of Islamic radicalism negatively effect how they are viewed in society. The scrutiny faced by Muslims in the United States is a concern due to the misrepresentation of their religion, which the study demonstrated causes sadness and worry. The study demonstrated that these concerns are the result of Muslims' feelings that the actions that are perpetrated by Islamic radicals have no connection to Islam. In this regard, the countering of such misrepresentations through positive images produced by Muslims allows for the understanding of not only the Muslim American experience but also how North American Muslims may create new meanings which better define them as a population within American society. In doing so North American Muslims move towards achieving full agency over how they choose to be portrayed and clearly defining who they are through positive speech and action.

The study demonstrated that 50% of Canadian participants strongly agreed that the actions of Islamic radicalism encourage them to positively represent Islam in contrast to 37.50% of American respondents. Although Americans respondents believed that the misrepresentation of Muslims was a serious problem in their country to a greater extent then Canadian respondents, the study demonstrated that in comparison to Canadian participants American participants were not as inclined to focus on the representation of Islam. In this regard, American Muslims in the study have higher levels of agreement that there are serious ramifications resulting from the actions of Islamic radicals while Canadian Muslims in the study have higher levels of belief that Muslims should engage in countering negative representations of Islam and Muslims caused by the actions of Islamic radicalism. The reason why American Muslims participants may feel less urgency to positively represent their faith, even though the research indicates that in comparison to Canadian participants they feel less welcome, less safe, and less included in their society, may be due to their

desire to first and foremost ensure their safety and security. It may be that American Muslim participants believe that the current period faced by Muslims in the United States is one which hinders their self preservation causing them to abstain from defending Islam due to the fear that they will be targets of violence. Three specific incidents assist in understanding why American Muslims may fear being attacked. The first example is that of the Chapel Hill Shootings and the killing of three young Muslims in their home. In February 2015 “23-year-old Deah Shaddy Barakat, his wife Yusor Mohammad Abu-Salha 21, and her sister, Razan Mohamed Abu-Salha, 19” were shot and killed in their home in North Carolina (Withnall, 2015). The second example is that of a 68-year-old Muslim man who was also killed in his home. In February 2016 Abdul Jamil Kamawal was “killed at the family property” in Portland and died “at the scene from head injuries” (Woolington, 2016). Finally, the third example is that of a New York Imam (cleric) and his assistant who were shot in the back of the head while exiting the Mosque after prayer. In August 2016 “Imam, Alauddin Akonjee, 55 and his assistant, Thara Miah, 64,” are believed to have been followed by a gunman and each shot in the back of the head, according to investigators and police officials (Rojas et. all., 2016). These three examples share something in common. Aside from fact that all the attacks resulted in the death of the victims, the Muslim communities in the United States viewed these incidents as hate crimes although investigators had not concluded such motives. Although authorities have not officially labelled such crimes as hate crimes members of the American Muslim community perceive that the sole purpose of such attacks is because the victims were Muslim. This perception may negatively effect the feelings of safety and security for Muslim Americans and allow them to focus on the self-preservation opposed to addressing misrepresentation about Muslims and Islam. Mosharraft Hossain a mourner at Imam Akonjee’s funeral informed of how he does not feel safe anymore as he states “all of this hatred being

propagated, especially by Donald Trump, it puts us at risk. People sometimes pass me on the street and call me Bin Laden. I just try to keep my head down and keep walking” (Rojas et. all., 2016). Hossain’s statement indicates that Muslims Americans may feel less urgency in defending Islam due to prioritizing their safety and security as their main concern during the current post 9/11 period.

The study also demonstrated that 93.75% of Canadian participants believe that they face less challenges than American Muslims and 62.50% of American participants believe that they face more challenges than Canadian Muslims. The study demonstrated what I believe to be expected from a mosaic and melting pot framework. If Muslims in Canada view the Canadian state as multicultural and as preserving their ethnocultural rights, they may maintain the perception that they face less challenges in Canada than American Muslims face in the United States. If assimilation hinders Muslims in the post 9/11 period and causes them to be scrutinized for maintaining their identity, then the perception that American Muslims face greater challenges than Canadian Muslims maybe prove to be true. The study demonstrated participants’ belief that anti-Islamic rhetoric in the United States strengthened the perception that Muslims in Canada face lesser challenges than Muslims in the United States.

While the study compared the perceptions of Muslim participants on both sides of the Canadian-American border it informed of the important realities in understanding the lived experiences of North American Muslims. The study demonstrated whether Canadian and American Muslims feel safe and secure within their nations and demonstrated that at times participants were neutral in expressing their feelings as North American Muslims. 43.75% of Canadian participants demonstrated that they agree with the statement “Canadian Muslims feel safe and secure” while the 43.75% American participants remained neutral regarding the statement

“American Muslims feel safe and secure followed by 37.50% who disagreed with the statement. The study argued that this difference may be in response to the fact that pluralism is championed in Canada which may allow Canadian Muslims to maintain positive perceptions of safety and security due to the rights that preserve their ethnocultural and ethnoreligious freedoms as demonstrated in the Canadian framework. In this regard, Canada’s pluralist, inclusive and multicultural framework may work to strengthen Canadian Muslims’ feelings of security.

The study examined whether Canadian Muslim participants perceived that the actions of Islamic radicals have little effect on their social inclusion and demonstrated that while taking into consideration the effect of the actions of Islamic radicals as well as the “prejudice and the systematic racism” against Muslims that may result from such actions and may lead to their exclusion in society, Muslim self-exclusion may be the biggest barrier in regard to their social inclusion (M. Najmudin, September 18, 2016). An example the research provides is being around alcohol which is prohibited in Islam. In this regard, practicing Muslims may feel uncomfortable being around alcohol and thus choose to self-exclude in which they would demonstrate unwillingness to partake in certain actions that maybe part of mainstream culture. It is this form of self-exclusion that may hinder Muslim social inclusion the most opposed to the effects of the actions of Islamic radicals. In this regard, the study indicated that in the event that there are no effects of the actions of Islamic radicals on Canadian Muslims, and no issues of misinterpretation that hinder Muslim progress in society Muslims may still not fully be included in society due to their own choice of self-exclusion.

The final part of the study’s hypothesis explored the expectation that Canadian Muslims will maintain positive perceptions about the current state of Muslims in Canada. The study demonstrated that 62.50% percent of Canadian participants believed the overall state of Muslims

in Canada to be positive, in contrast to 50% of American participants who believed the overall state of Muslims in the United States to be negative. Canadian participants may hold the belief that their nation is an inclusive and pluralist nation resulting in positive feelings towards the state of Muslims in Canada. American participants' negative perception on the state of Muslims in the United States may be influenced by the lack of a framework that preserves the rights of ethnocultural and ethnoreligious groups causing Muslims to be susceptible to such scrutiny as witnessed in the political rhetoric and anti-Islamic sentiments of the 2016 American presidential election.

Overall, the study demonstrated the ways in which North Americans identify in the post 9/11 period and the ways in which Canadian and Muslim Americans participants may differ in what it means to be a Muslim in the post 9/11 period. This study encouraged participants to evaluate their perceptions on the effects of the actions of Islamic radicals on the self-conceptualization of the identity and social inclusion of North American Muslims. The differences in the perception of Muslim participants on the overall state of Muslims in Canada and the United States indicates that fostering an atmosphere that counters Islamophobia and anti-Islamic rhetoric is crucial to the perceptions of Muslims' feelings of safety and security. Such awareness will assist in demonstrating that an inclusive and harmonious society in which policies and laws that maintain the preservation of rights for ethnocultural and ethnoreligious groups is not impractical. Rather, such a framework is crucial in order to ensure that all citizens within the state maintain strong feelings of acceptance and belonging resulting in a healthier and more fulfilling life for all citizens of the state.

Regarding future steps the study recommended that governments should take more responsibility in encouraging the production of effort against Islamophobia in order to help provide

greater feelings of Muslim belonging. Schools as institutions for learning and understanding should incorporate studies that allow students to learn and understand the experiences of Muslims and other populations in society who may face challenges which hinder their ability to fully maintain feelings of belonging. Since schools are venues for socialization processes, such institutions should work to encourage better understanding of all populations within society to create awareness of the issues populations face and to ensure that marginalized groups may easily integrate into society. As well, it is the responsibility of all members of society to ensure that they are aware of the issues that effect their society and to work towards providing solutions that assist in fixing the problems that negatively effect their fellow citizens.

Since the study was concluded in late December 2016 many events may have effected the lived experiences of North American Muslims. Such events may include but are not limited to the polices of President Donald Trump, the Quebec City Mosque Shooting, and the controversy around Motion 103 proposed by Member of Parliament Iqra Khalid. Although the study is not representative of the experience of North American Muslims as a whole, which may differ depending on place and context the study assist in understanding the different experiences that may be lived depending on what side of the border one lives on. Understanding the views of Muslims on both sides of the border provides us with better insight on where Muslims stand regarding their lived experiences and is significant because the ultimate goal of research is to assist in providing a better understanding of the situations individuals face on a daily basis.

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