Navigating the "Known:" The Socio-Cultural Development of American Muslim Adolescent Girls

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Using interviews from two case studies, this paper explores the bifurcated experiences of second-generation Muslim American adolescent girls in formative education settings, particularly middle and high school, in a post-9/11 America and how these experiences might shape their development as individuals. Specifically, I use an ecological framework to examine what particular vulnerabilities Muslim American girls face with regard to peers and parents and which, if any, coping mechanisms are activated or developed when dealing with these risks. I argue that Muslim American girls face socio-cultural risks unique to their social positioning not only as girls, Americans, and racial minorities, but also as Muslims, the latter element being a new phenomenon in the chronosystem of the U.S. The girls face the same challenges all adolescent minority American girls face, but with the added politically charged element of being a Muslim. The following overarching themes emerged from the interviews, highlighting a general pattern of social interaction and development: notions of difference, speaking about this difference, appearance, judgment, and not caring/ignoring this judgment. These elements collude in somewhat cyclical ways that eventually lead to a life stage outcome for the girls that includes finding stable support systems in like peers and discovering emergent cross-sectional identities.

Although there has been a plethora of research done on the culturally bifurcated experiences of many minority, immigrant, and multicultural youth populations regarding peer and parental interaction, acculturation, and development during the adolescent years, there is a dearth of research done on American Muslim youth and adults alike. Due to the increased attention the U.S. media has given this population in the decade following 9/11, both non-Muslim and Muslim Americans alike have been forced to grapple with the group's identity. This small-scale qualitative study explores the experiences of second-generation Muslim American adolescent girls and how these experiences might shape their perceptions and development as individuals. Specifically, topics of peer and parental interaction, beliefs about non-Muslim peers' perceptions, and perceptions of self are delved into through a gender-sensitive lens. The question explored is how American Muslim female adolescents negotiate the spaces within and between the two main socio-cultural groups they are members of—American and Muslim—and whether the individuals see these cultures in more conflicting or more fluid terms.

I hypothesize that the individual might arrive at a point in her identity formation process where neither her non-Muslim school peers nor her Muslim home social structure understand her experience entirely, leaving her in a situation where she must forge a new social identity that does not quite conform to either society's expectations. Furthermore, although this potential cross-cultural dissonance may be something experienced by many American Muslim girls, a further point of exploration was whether there is a continuum of

dissonance amongst individuals and whether this continuum is affected by the choice of the individual to wear some form of a hijab, a hypothesis elaborated below.

Though the long-term goals of this research involve tracking the life course and decisions of American Muslim women from adolescence through to adulthood (with a particular focus on decisions about and perceptions of marriage at that time), the current project focuses only on the adolescent period as this is the time frame in a young adult's life when self-identification, group-identification, appearance/attractiveness, and social acceptance are especially important (Qin, Way, and Rana 2008). The girls under consideration will be both those who wear and do not wear a hijab (ranging from just a head scarf to a full *burqa*.) This choice is being made due to the aforementioned adolescent sensitivity to physical appearance and my hypothesis that a more pronounced physical difference (i.e., in clothing) would result in a more notable peer reaction.

BACKGROUND

At this stage, although popular media might frequently encourage stereotyping of Muslims, it is unclear what the actual lived experiences of American Muslim girls themselves are; however, educated guesses can be made through a combination of literatures, including adolescent development, multicultural adaptation to the dominant culture, and, most recently, Islamophobia. This study attempts to bring all these literatures together in a conversation to help shed light on a group of people who have received increased sensationalized attention but little academic research attention.

While in the past five years some books and online attention has been given to the lived experiences of American Muslim girls and women, usually through their own initiatives, these sources of information remain narrative and casual and have not yet entered the academic discourse on development (altmuslimah.com; heartwomenandgirls.org; muslima.imow.org; Karim, 2009; Ebrahimji and Suratwala, 2011; Haddad, et al., 2006; Maznavi and Mattu, 2012). These first-hand sources all highlight the diversity of the Muslim American female experience, differing in race, culture, age, and professional and personal experience, a diversity that tends to be overlooked in the U.S. context due to media-informed stereotypes. This dismissal of drastic differences can lead to an inaccurate perception of Muslim Americans in the eyes of non-Muslim Americans, with the latter identifying the former as one enormous, homogenous group. Against an often politically charged backdrop, a more active and negative stereotyping can often follow.

The newer body of research and analysis on Islamophobia—general suspicion or fear of Islam and Muslims—helps elucidate how these more aggressive stereotypes develop and what their effects can be for Muslim Americans. Not only do online and television media sources propagate the more dramatic, incendiary stories about Muslims and Islamic traditions, they also seem to display an active and "consistent disinterest in nonviolent Muslim perspectives" (Gottschalk and Greenberg, 2008, p.2). Haddad, et al. (2006) discuss how the lack of knowledge regarding the history and true significance of the tradition of the hijab in the "Western consciousness" leaves the general population susceptible to engage in gender-specific stereotyping of Muslims (since the hijab itself is gender-specific)

(p. 40). Perhaps surprisingly, Muslim women rather than men have more frequently been the targets of American prejudice against Muslims, as women in hijab are perceived as socio-cultural threats that the local "truly" American community must defend against, while Muslim men are seen as political threats that are the responsibility of the government (Hammer, 2013). Gottschalk and Greenberg (2008) analyze political cartoons derisive to Islam, arguing that the allowance of stereotyping in a humorous context is detrimental as it perpetuates and solidifies the stereotype. Louise Cainkar (2009) also raises the issue of stereotyping of Muslim Americans, exploring how being the recipient of sudden and directed hatred led these individuals to feel insecure, vulnerable, and unsafe in the country they viewed as their home. Ultimately, it is ironic that stereotyping leaves no room for individual differences, when these exact differences can frequently cause an added layer of complexity to the experience of defining oneself as a Muslim American woman.

Using Margaret Spencer's Phenomenological Variant of the Ecological Systems Theory (PVEST) as a lens, American Muslim adolescent development can be more easily understood as a complex interaction of multiple life factors and meaning-making, including personal coping mechanisms, perceived supports, and subsequent emergent identities. The foundational ideas of PVEST can and have been applied to many minority American groups, including African Americans in Spencer and Harpalani's "What Does 'Acting White' Really Mean?" (2006) Looking to the experiences of bi- and multi-cultural American minority adolescents are especially helpful when mapping out the potential direction of research exploration for Muslim American girls as some generalities might be made about overarching patterns of experience. A. Wade Boykin's "The Triple Quandary" (1986) discusses the tripartite experience of the average African American student, listing the mainstream, Black culture, and status as an oppressed minority as the three major realms of experience that must be navigated on a daily basis. Chinese American youth also face social challenges both in and outside of school, ranging from cultural and experiential gaps between themselves and their parents to bullying and "othering" from their non-Chinese peers in school (Qin, Way, and Mukherjee, 2008; Qin, Way, and Rana, 2008.) Finally, in Nadine Naber's (2012) *Arab America*, the author discusses the Arab Muslim American experience, describing how it is one constantly caught between two worlds: the Arab home and the American school. Just as Black students have to navigate three systems to somehow arrive at one coherent sense of self, it is predicted that Muslim Americans, too, have to maneuver within their Eastern lives, their Western lives, and whatever remains in between, the struggle for acceptance being equally strong in all three areas. Consequently, it is likely the net stress engagement also increases, as three rather than one social environment are presented to the individual.

This project therefore considered two major potential points of vulnerability with respect to these adolescent girls: primarily, the challenges of subtle or blatant prejudice, micro-aggressions, or distancing on the part of non-Muslim American peers (and possibly educators), and secondly, within-group challenges stemming from friction between different traditions and generations. Because of the limited research on this population, the questions asked were intentionally general and, in fact, had to be so in order to offer the first step into elucidating the processes of identity development in American Muslim women.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

The recruitment occurred generally through convenience sampling, with the first participant, Shireen, being recruited through a fortuitous cab ride in Chicago in which the driver volunteered his daughter for participation, and the second participant, Zahra, recruited because of my personal acquaintance with her mother. (Both participants' names have been changed to protect privacy.) Shireen lives in an outskirt suburb of Chicago, while Zahra lives in Los Angeles. Both participants were 13 years of age at the time of the interview, though Shireen was in seventh grade while Zahra was in eighth. Shireen follows Sunni Maliki Islam, while Zahra follows Shi'a Dawoodi Bohra Islam. Shireen's parents are from Palestine, while Zahra's parents are of Indian descent. Both participants were at least bilingual: Shireen can read, write, and speak in English and Arabic; Zahra can read, write, and speak English and *Lisaan-ud-Daawat* (an Arabic-Gujarati dialect), and can speak Hindi. Shireen does not wear any form of hijab when she attends her school during the week; Zahra does, in the form of a loose-fitting head scarf paired with shirts/blouses and pants.

Methods

I conducted semi-structured interviews preceded by a brief written questionnaire with the two participants. Each interview was about 40 minutes; Shireen was interviewed in-person at a Starbucks coffee shop, and Zahra was interviewed through a Skype video call. Shireen was asked to take the written questionnaire in person at the café, directly preceding the interview; Zahra was asked to respond to the questions in the original Word document and then email it back to me before the interview. I transcribed the interviews into separate Word documents after both interviews had been completed, and saved both the audio files and the written transcripts according to participant ID number in my laptop. The interview transcripts were then coded for themes and analyzed through a PVEST perspective, discussed below. A study protocol was developed and submitted to the University of Chicago Institutional Review Board, and research activities were conducted only after the IRB approval was obtained.

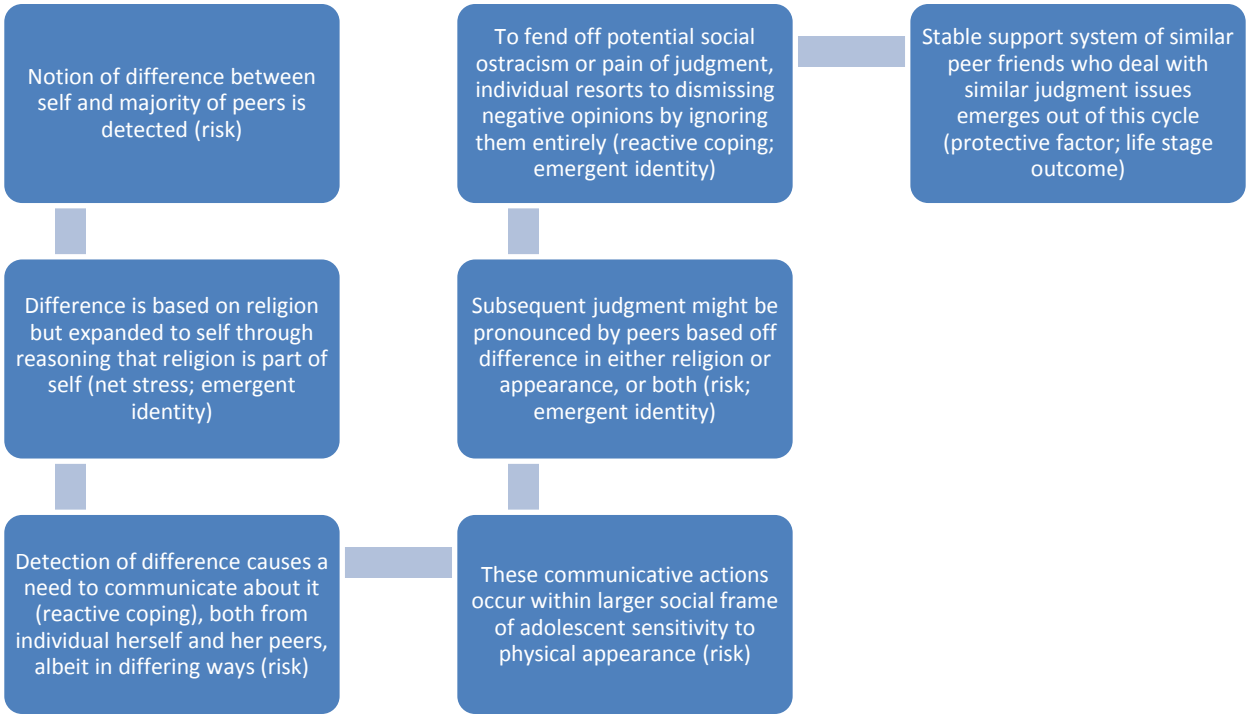
I am aware that my personal identification as an American Muslim woman may have influenced the interpretation and analysis of the interviews. However, I believe this to be an asset to my research goals rather than a hindrance, as my very general identification with the group I studied allowed me a certain insider knowledge that both aided in asking probing questions as well as maintained a sensitivity to cultural issues that someone who does not identify with the group may not have been aware of. In fact, I suspect my general outward appearance as "Muslim" due to the *rida* I wear (a specific type of Indian hijab) helped the adolescent girls feel more comfortable and open in speaking with me. At the same time, despite my general religious identification with the group, I do not share most other facets of identity with the participants, as they differed from me in age and in many cultural and ethnic aspects. I believe this placed me in the somewhat difficult to accomplish research position of being both inside and outside of the research.

Theoretical Analysis

The theoretical framework used for coding and interpretation of the themes of the interviews is the ecological theory, PVEST. Participant responses and interview themes will be organized according to PVEST's five main factors: vulnerability (a combination of risk factors and protective coping mechanisms), net stress engagement, reactive coping methods, stable coping responses and emergent identities, and life stage outcomes. PVEST posits that "it is not merely the experience but one's perception of experiences in different cultural contexts that influences how one perceives oneself" (Spencer, Dupree, and Hartmann 1997, p. 817). An individual's meaning-making of the self and the world is a collaborative process with her socio-cultural environment in which the level of vulnerability gauges the level of net stress engagement. This engagement, in turn, determines reactive coping mechanisms the individual uses to deal with risk factors. If proven successful across various contexts, these reactive coping strategies become stable ones; so stable, in fact, that they meld with the individual's emerging identity to become a permanent fixture in it (Spencer, Dupree, and Hartmann, 1997).

FINDINGS

Although Shireen and Zahra differ in many aspects of their experiences, there were five overarching themes that emerged after a close reading of both interview transcripts was done: notions of difference, the act (or lack thereof) of speaking about these differences, appearance, judgment, and not caring or ignoring. Although there are exceptions that I will discuss in more detail below, the general interaction of these themes occurs in the following manner:



One enormous advantage in analyzing human experience that ecological models offer is the recognition of the multiple and repeated interactions of different life factors. As such, while I am proposing the above model as a general map of inner and outer interactions the two adolescents are facing in the current course of their identity development, it is not meant to be a linear narrative. Just as PVEST is a cyclical pattern of development (see Appendix), there are a number times when the five themes mentioned do not interact in the neat ways I have outlined; however, they do still directly interact.

Notions of Difference

Difference generally has two facets in the girls' experiences. For Zahra, difference can be either positive or negative depending on the context. Difference is frequently "cool" when it offers opportunities to learn or make connections between seemingly disparate pieces of knowledge. For example, when describing the makeup of the student population at her school, she says, "It's really different there. . . Like, we have Native Americans and people from Africa and Europe and all these other places. . . You learn, like, so, like you learn different things about other people, too. . . It's cool." Similarly, in other instances she describes the connections she makes on her own during the process of learning; specifically, in both history class and her religious school.

If one branch of difference is that of "cool" connective learning opportunities, the other is one of awkwardness and abnormalities; this latter branch is the one Shireen finds herself on most frequently. Just as "cool" is a keyword for (some of) Zahra's difference experiences, "weird" is the keyword for Shireen's. When recalling her experiences with her Christian-majority peers at school, Shireen uses the word "weird" eight times. Most of the times she

uses it, though, it is as a quote said by her peers; that is, "weird" is the way her peers describe *her*. Here is one example of a conversation she re-enacted between herself and a schoolmate:

> *Shireen: [while describing her experience immediately after Easter this year]*
> *"Hey, what'd you get for Easter?"*
> *"I don't celebrate Easter."*
> *"What, that's weird."*
> *"No, it's not."*
> *"Yeah, it is."*
> *"What'd you get for Christmas?"*
> *"Uhhh, nothing." [both S and T laugh]*
> *"That's weird."*
> *It's just the same repetitive story, over and over.*

Although Shireen's negative experiences regarding difference seem to outweigh those of Zahra's, the latter still does experience them. Most notably, when there is ignorance surrounding difference, Zahra feels uncomfortable and "awkward." A non-Muslim friend of hers asks her and another Muslim female student why they are dressed differently if they are both Muslims. According to Zahra, both Muslim girls in this situation felt awkward because of the assumption that was made viewing Islam as a homogenous religion rather than an overarching ideology that houses multiple traditions and beliefs. On multiple other occasions as well, Zahra notes the importance of asking rather than assuming, especially in the context of her religion.

While difference is not always negative (at least in Zahra's experience), when it is positive (i.e., "cool"), it is contingent on the girl's own ability to absorb or analyze information; she is the controlling agent. However, difference does seem to be largely negative when viewed in the external social arena for both Zahra and Shrieen. Accordingly, I posit that difference—and the assumptions and "weirdness" embedded therein—is a risk factor the girls have to develop coping mechanisms for.

Speaking about Difference

Consequently, both girls' common acts of explanation regarding their (religious) difference becomes a reactive coping mechanism to the risk of having their identities assumed and thereby misrepresented or misunderstood; the risk of being considered *too* different. Explanations are used as a way to allay confusion on the part of their non-Muslim peers, a confusion that often leads to the othered status of "weird." However, the situation is not as clean as we might hope. The coping mechanism of explanation does not always reduce the risk of otherness; in fact, as we saw in Shireen's case, explaining that she is Muslim and does not celebrate Christian holidays seemed to increase her "weirdness." Even so, the girls persist. When I asked her if most people at her school knew which religion she followed, Shireen said, "I talk about it a lot." Later in the conversation, though, when I asked her whether most of the Christian students at her school were cognizant that there were also Muslim students at the school, halfway through her response she said, "'Cause I don't talk about religion; like, I try to avoid it because I'm all like just in case I say something and, like,

it hurts the other person." Then again, within the same response, she closes by saying, ". . . but I feel like I tell, I tell a lot of people that I am Muslim." Through just these few examples, it is already striking how divided Shireen seems to be on the subject of explanation. There seems to be an awareness of needing to explain, but at the same time, not overstepping the bounds of what and how to explain so as to maintain social relationships.

Zahra, too, finds herself in the position of explainer quite frequently. While some episodes of explanation do pivot around peer social terms (such as the example we saw earlier between herself, her Muslim friend, and her non-Muslim friend), Zahra's explaining position also seems to have a tension of teacher versus student. In contrast to her positive learning experiences in the context of difference, her experiences of explanation often land her in positions of teaching—sometimes quite literally, taking over the role of the teacher in the classroom—that she seems ambivalent about. While she "prefer[s] that someone would, like, ask instead of assuming" things about Islam, she also frankly says that "it feels easier to be around people that's like, from our [religious] community than other people because then you have to explain stuff to them that, like, happens."

While speaking in a balanced—or perhaps censored?—way about and of Islam and Muslimhood is likely a (complex) reactive coping strategy to the risk of being considered too much of a misconstrued Other, Zahra and Shireen are not always the ones speaking, adding yet another layer of intricacy to the interactions. Both girls recount instances in which non-Muslim peers verbally impose assumptions—and therefore identities—onto them. Shireen says, "Like, they just automatically ask, like, 'Whatchu get for Christmas?' And I don't celebrate Christmas, but they just automatically ask." Similarly, Zahra says with respect to the scarf she wears to school everyday, "Um, some people asked, 'Why are you wearing that?' And, like, most people don't let me answer. They always want to answer the question for me. Like, 'It's her religion, DUH.'" A more abrasive instance of non-Muslim peers defining her Muslim identity for her occurred last year on 9/11, when someone said loudly of her to a group, "'Oh, stay out of her way, she's gonna bomb us or something.'" Zahra continues to document her reaction to this comment: "I was kinda, like, pissed off at them. I was like, you don't have any right to say that; that's rude, you don't know anything about me or my religion." When I asked her if she had actually said this aloud to her peer, she said no. Though she says she would have liked to share these thoughts, she instead simply "gave them this look."

Appearance

Even though all Zahra did in response to the prejudiced comment made towards her was give what she perceived to be a communicative look, in the adolescent context of sensitivity to physical appearances, this did seem to be enough; the teasers "kinda looked away and felt bad about it." At the same time, though, the comment was made (in her understanding) directly as a result of the head scarf she was wearing. Although some "accept it, they don't say anything," others are "rude and will say stuff." Additionally, the awkward moment of difference for Zahra between herself and her (differently) Muslim friend also revolved around appearances—the difference between degrees of "covering up" one's body. In these instances, her appearance does become a risk factor for her that she has to cope with. However, despite these two negative experiences, Zahra seems to have a generally positive

view of her scarf and her subsequent physical appearance and identity, noting how non-Muslims have called her and her female family members "cute" or "pretty." Despite the fact that some people may call it a "thing on [her] head," Zahra takes pride in her scarf and likes that "it's become a part of [her.]"

Shireen's experiences with appearance are not quite as self-affirming, and it becomes a much stronger risk factor for her, not unlike many other adolescent girls, Muslim or otherwise. One of the very first ideas Shireen introduces in the interview is a dichotomy she views between "nice people" and "mean people," "people" referring to the students in her middle school. What is the main differentiating factor between these two groups? "Making fun" of people based on "what clothes everyone wears" and being "very picky" about "what they look like." When I asked for specific examples of what might qualify as "mean," Shireen said, "Uh, a girl might be wearing a shirt that might not be so pretty. They'll make fun of her and laugh." Her consciousness of what the "mean people" might say becomes even clearer when she recalls a fifth-grade experience of show-and-tell in which she donned a hijab for her classmates to see: "And I put it on for the class to see [laughs], and everyone was like, Ooh, that's cool! Like, everyone was cool about it, and I was like, yeah, that's cool. That's how. . . but now, middle school, everyone's more like, Oh, you wear *that*, that's weird. That's how it is." Although when I directly asked her about it, Shireen cited wanting to get "used to" the hijab before wearing it—she does want to wear it eventually—it seems plausible from this quote that another reason she may be choosing not to wear it right now is because of the intense, aesthetically-sensitive environment she is a part of at school.

Hinging on appearance, the sub-themes of *looking* and *staring* also appear repeatedly, though more frequently in Shireen's experience than Zahra's. Giving people "dirty looks" and "staring" are often associated with discussions of appearance for Shireen. While Zahra may have given her classmates "a look" in response to the 9/11 comment, she did so as a reactive coping strategy. The "looks" Shireen describes come from the outside, either from the "mean people" at school or strangers in response to her mother, who wears a hijab, and they are always aggressive or antagonistic. "People" at school—who Shireen defines at the beginning of her interview as "a lot of girls"—look at girls' clothing, hair, and general style to gauge whether or not they need to make fun of them. Outside of school, "people stare at [Shireen's mother] for wearing the hijab." Shireen's explanation for the stares was two-pronged: one, that people stare because they are unfamiliar with the garb; and two, because they might associate her with terrorism.

The differences in experiences regarding appearance between Zahra and Shireen make appearance a much more severe and gendered risk for the latter than the former. Both girls discuss non-Muslim strangers' interactions with their mothers, but Zahra's experience was definitively more positive than Shireen's. Zahra's experiences at school, too, are more positive, and though she does not explicitly refer to the gender of most of the individuals in her stories, she does mention at least one male peer, something Shireen does not do: "It's, like, this kid at my school, he wears a yarmulke." I believe this inclusion of gender diversity (in addition to the sartorial diversity implied here), though a seemingly minute detail, is actually telling of a much larger and more important detail: the difference in the student

bodies of the two schools the girls attend. While Zahra very excitedly discusses the "differences" in her school and how one can learn from them, Shireen is acutely aware of the homogeneity in the student body at her school. It seems to be the case that simply *seeing* diversity in the school environment leads to less surprise at physical difference, less focus on appearance, and more acceptance of varied life approaches. In this case, we can see how easily the same factor—student body makeup—can be either an exacerbated risk (appearance as risk made worse by everyone striving for the same standards) or a potential tool for coping against a risk (appearance as weakened risk since it is clear that everyone is not and will not be the same.)

Judgment

My discussion of judgment as a risk factor will be brief, as most of the discussion regarding the two factors being judged—appearance and religious difference—have already been talked about in detail above. Although Zahra experienced judgment—or pre-judgment, rather—in the 9/11 comment and discussions at school that assumed certain things about all Muslims, in general, she seems to feel quite free of negative judgment for her appearance and religion. She says she is not concerned that "people are gonna judge [her]" for being Muslim or wearing a head scarf," and that she's "not afraid of being who [she is] when [she's] going to school." Once again, Shireen's experience defines judgment as a risk factor in a much more pronounced way. She repeatedly notes how her school environment is "increasingly judgmental"—specifically, "You're judged on what you *wear*, you're judged on what religion you are." This judgment leads to social breaks for Shireen, defining her peer-friend relationships: "'Cause you gotta know they're not gonna be good friends if they're just judging you like that.'"

Not Caring/Ignoring

For Shireen, this final theme grows out of opposition to the theme of judgment. One of the most disappointing shifts between elementary and middle schools has been the increased "caring" for appearance. She fondly recalls her elementary years: "Nobody cares! It's like you're kids, you're friends. No one hates each other, there's no drama, there's nothing like that." Now, not caring/ignoring is used both as a way to define herself as different from the "mean people" by "not caring" about or judging appearances, but, more importantly, as one of the most consistent ways of dealing with the risk of judgment. I posit, therefore, that it is in the process of becoming a stable coping mechanism against the risks of difference, appearance, and judgment, and a semi-permanent part of Shireen's identity. As soon as she introduces the "mean" girls' identity as one that is concerned with appearances, she immediately defines herself against this identity, saying, "And as a person I am, I don't really care."

Shireen's descriptions of the women she observes wearing hijab are all similarly based on the necessity to not care. The eighth grade girls "don't care. They don't care about other people. . . If anybody looks at them, if anybody says anything about them—cool." In this example, the collective effort of not caring is a direct protective factor/coping mechanism with potential unwanted attention. Shireen's mother also employs this same tactic, one that Shrieen is clearly aware of. When people stare at her mother "at a traffic light," she "just looks away and acts normal." Perhaps the most interesting instance of Shireen's attention

to not-caring is in her explanation about why she is careful about discussing religion at school. As noted earlier, she at one point says she tries to avoid talking about religion so as to not hurt anyone's feelings. However, when her peers ask her about holidays she doesn't celebrate, she says, "It hurts *my* feelings, but, you know, I don't care." The obvious contradiction embedded in this sentence can be made sense of if we view the act of not-caring as a direct coping mechanism against the pain of social judgment for being different.

Zahra also enacts not caring/ignoring as a coping mechanism, but because the risk of social judgment she faces is weaker than Shireen's risk, the sense of ignoring things is also weaker in a parallel fashion; however, it is still present. After describing the instance in which strangers appreciate her mother's *rida*, Zahra says in the same speech block, "Okay, so, but at other times, I don't really care what they think. . . It's what I—it's who I am; they have to deal with it." There is one other instance of not caring/ignoring in Zahra's interview, but she *performs* it rather than describes it. When she discusses how her Muslim friend's fears regarding "what people would think" were assuaged, Zahra says, "People will ask questions, but they're not gonna be mean or rude or anything." As we know, earlier in the conversation she had described the 9/11 episode, "rude" being the exact word she herself used to describe it. Although this may again seem like a moment of contradiction, I view it as an enactment of the coping mechanism of not caring/ignoring within the text of the interview itself. Yes, Zahra experienced a moment of prejudice, but she copes with it by not giving it long-term attention; essentially, by truly ignoring it.

Life Stage Outcome: Emergent Identities and Stable Support

The emergent identities of both Shireen and Zahra often end up defining themselves through a negation: *I do* not *celebrate Christmas, I am* not *like the people who orchestrated 9/11; or, essentially, I am* not *like you, I am* not *like them*. Who are these girls like, then? Themselves. In addition to the comparisons I have drawn between Shireen and Zahra as members of the adolescent American Muslim female population, they themselves have found support systems—a major protective factor against socio-psychological risks—in truly like peers; that is, other American Muslim adolescent girls. For Zahra, the shared experience of wearing a head scarf with her Dawoodi Bohra friend, Lamiya, in front of non-Muslims immediately creates a sense of community for her, one that she perceives others perceiving as well. "So when Lamiya started wearing it, it felt like people, like, knew us; like, okay, these girls, they know each other. And there's kind of like. . . Like, we're there for each other, like, you know." Even though Zahra and Lamiya are set in contrast against "people," it is not a negative contrast. Additionally, although Zahra occasionally "hangs out" with her non-Dawoodi Bohra and/or non-Muslim friends, she says, "But if I compare how many times I've hung out with my other Dawoodi Bohra friends, then no, I barely go to [non-Dawoodi Bohra friends'] houses." Shireen shares a similar approach, one that she actually most explicitly shared after the interview itself was over: "It's easier to have Muslim friends because, like, I know she won't be judgmental or, like, I won't have to explain things to her." The sense of camaraderie both Zahra and Shireen share with their respective Muslim girlfriends can be whittled down to one element: shared experiences. The risks of difference, judgment, and explanation arguably disappear entirely, freeing the individuals' cognitive space for activities other than reactive coping.

IMPLICATIONS

While it is healthy for these adolescent girls to have a stable support system in like peers, this pattern of an emergent identity based on defining-against and then finding similar others who have also defined-against raises a larger societal question: Is it problematic to have a situation in which an individual feels othered in such a specific way that she can only truly find support in people who are in an identical socio-cultural situation? I do not have the answer to this question. On the one hand, both Zahra and Shireen were completely functional within their school social environments. They got along with Muslims and non-Muslims alike, and both made concerted efforts to emphasize that they realized not *all* non-Muslims hold prejudices or assumptions about Muslims. At the same time, they only truly seemed to trust and confide in like Muslim peers. Do they confide in like Muslim peers because of the similarities that exist between them or because of the shared experience of being othered in a particular way in a particular context? From my research here, I would say both of these factors work in a symbiotic relationship in the girls' decision- and meaning-making processes. Future developmental research on American Muslim adolescence will hopefully elucidate a more solid answer.

Even though Zahra and Shireen ultimately seem to make similar decisions regarding social relationships, Zahra's dramatically more positive experience with the risk factors of difference and appearance is notable. If the root of this positivity does lie in the diversity of the student population as I posited earlier, the implications of this conclusion point to an encouragement of exposure to diversity in middle school. It seems to not only reduce the negative "othering" effects of being of a different cultural sub-group, but also the larger negative effects of peer pressure—particularly for girls—on appearance and self-evaluation. By facilitating events in which students interact with "different" or, dare I say it, "weird" peers, schools could potentially improve the entire quality of life for girls, from adolescence and through to adulthood, by reducing the peer attention on a homogenous aesthetic norm and the seemingly inevitable connection to self-worth and identity that grows out of it.

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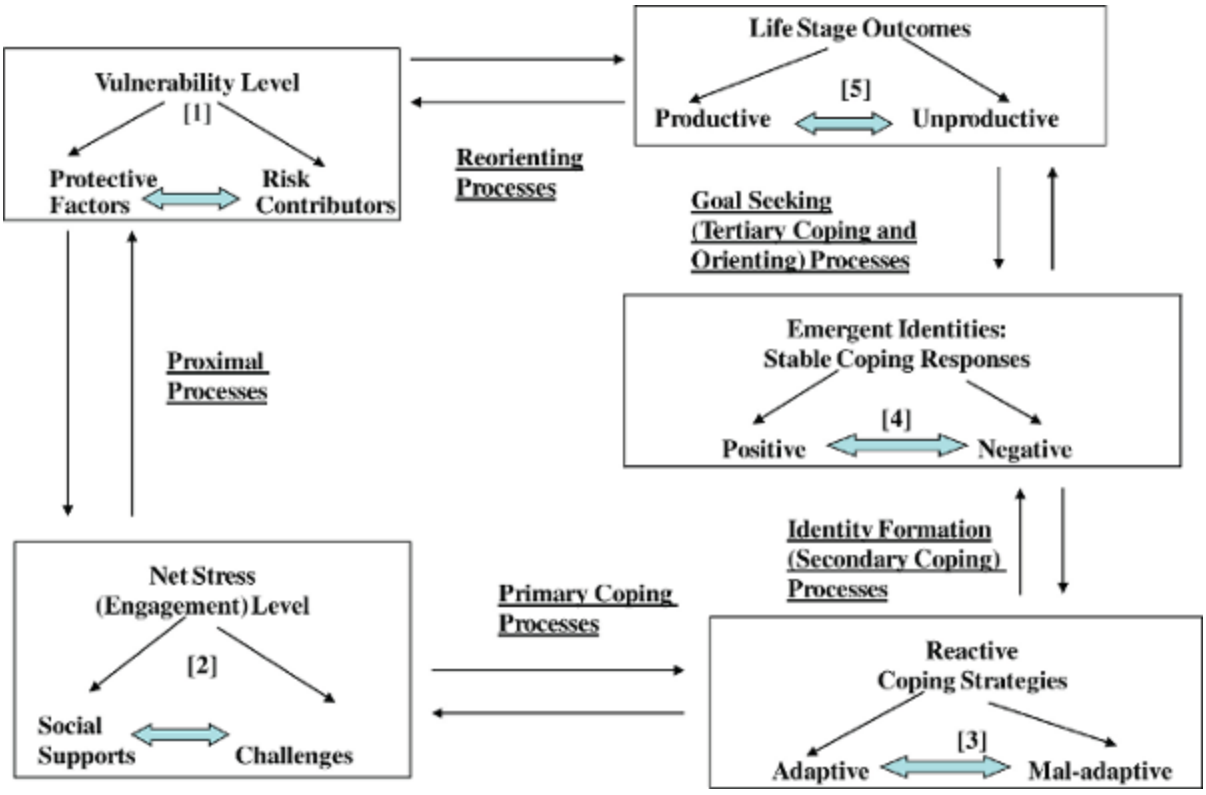
Tasneem Mandviwala earned an M.A. in English literature from the University of Houston and is currently a doctoral student in the Department of Comparative Human Development at the University of Chicago. Her research interests include gender studies, cultural psychology, and social psychology, with a specific focus on multi-cultural experiences in the contemporary U.S.

Appendix

Visual Model of PVEST


Life Stage Outcomes
[5]
Productive
Unproductive
Vulnerability Level
[1]
Protective Factors
Risk Contributors
Reorienting Processes
Goal Seeking (Tertiary Coping and Orienting) Processes
Emergent Identities: Stable Coping Responses
[4]
Positive
Negative
Proximal Processes
Identity Formation (Secondary Coping) Processes
Net Stress (Engagement) Level
[2]
Social Supports
Challenges
Primary Coping Processes
Reactive Coping Strategies
[3]
Adaptive
Mal-adaptive