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# An Exploration Of The Perception Of Collective Identity Threat Among Muslim Students In Higher Education

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This research is a product of the graduate program in [Counseling and Student Development](#) at Eastern Illinois University. [Find out more](#) about the program.

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AN EXPLORATION OF THE PERCEPTION OF COLLECTIVE  
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HIGHER EDUCATION

VITALE

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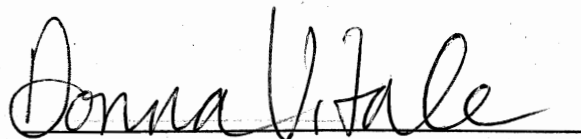
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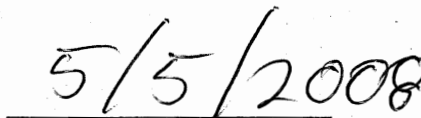
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An Exploration of the Perception of Collective Identity

Threat among Muslim Students in Higher Education

(TITLE)

BY

Donna Vitale

**THESIS**

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS  
FOR THE DEGREE OF

Master of Science in College Student Affairs

IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL, EASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY  
CHARLESTON, ILLINOIS

2008

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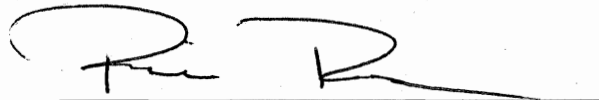
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AN EXPLORATION OF THE PERCEPTION OF COLLECTIVE IDENTITY THREAT  
AMONG MUSLIM STUDENTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Donna Vitale

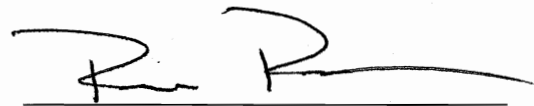
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in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

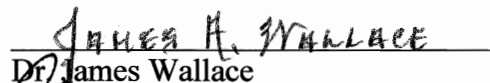
MASTER OF SCIENCE

May 2008

Committee:



Dr. Richard Roberts



Dr. James Wallace



Dr. Charles Eberly

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## DEDICATION

Patrick Harris: My husband, you are the most positive influence in my life, motivating me to do better and think harder and encouraging me every step of the way.

John Vitale & Laura Vitale: My parents, your constant support has held me high through all the weird and wonderful phases of my life—I am forever growing stronger because you are there for me.

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Thank you.

## ABSTRACT

The purpose of the present study was to examine the perspectives of Muslim students in higher education concerning their connections to campus based on their perceptions of collective identity threat. Collective identity exists when an individual holding group membership fears that in-group members' behavior will reinforce a negative stereotype about their group. Similarly, stereotype threats are personally relevant threats in which individuals may fear reinforcing the stereotype themselves (Cohen & Garcia, 2005). Research in the area of stereotype threat has high generalizability and can transfer to any race or gender (Steele, Spencer, & Aronson, 2002). For the purpose of the present study, the term "collective threat" is applied; however, stereotyping is a kind of a collective threat. It can be assumed that religions fall under the threat of stereotype and currently, members of the Islamic faith are targets for collective threat.

It has been suggested that Muslim students on campus believe there is a disconnect between themselves and their academic community (Asmar, Proude, & Inge, 2004). Either by way of not connecting to campus, lack of campus resources (understanding and support) or misconceptions about their religion, the consensus among Muslim students is disappointment over the lack of understanding about the Islamic faith in their communities. Research has been conducted on how Muslim students experience campus life, (Ahmadi & Cole, 2003; Asmar, Proude, & Inge, 2004; Asmar, 2002) but no research specifically explored how collective threats influence their matriculation into mainstream campus culture. Research in the area of collective threat has been associated with predicting high or low self-esteem. Stereotype threat has been most often

specifically associated with academics or athletics and not associated or studied in the area of religious identity. It is important to understand the phenomenon of collective threat in order to better serve the growing Muslim student population in higher education. This study utilized qualitative methods, in depth interviews and pre-interview surveys. The target population included students at one Mid-Western university with a large Muslim population in an urban area.



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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Islam is the second largest religion in the world, and between five and eight million Muslims live in the United States (Knauer, 2006). Of those millions, only about one percent are students in institutions of Higher Education in the United States (McMurtrie, 2001).

International Muslim students face many challenges and even just traveling to the states to study may be a significant one. According to a CNN/Gallop/USA today poll in March 2002, 60% of Americans were in favor of reducing the number of immigrant Muslims allowed in the country (As cited in Cainkar, 2002).

Cainkar (2002) claimed that the biggest threat of discrimination towards Muslims was not from American citizens themselves, but from the United States government, particularly, the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS). The Council on American-Islamic relations reported that interrogations, raids, detentions, and arrests were just some of the acts of discrimination by the US government that has affected over 60,000 individuals. Cainkar also reported attempts by the INS to have naturalized Palestinian activists deported from the country. By the same token, Ramadan (2007) claimed that Muslim scholars, academics and intellectuals including herself, have been barred from obtaining U.S. visas because of their criticism of US foreign policy or their support of Palestine. Because of this discrimination, many Muslim internationals simply are not coming to the United States.

According to Zakaia (2007), major international conferences, including the Arab and American Action forum (which supports building bridges between young Arab

leaders and Americans), will not be held in the States in 2008 because of the cumbersome and often demeaning screening process. Because U.S. visas are hard to obtain and dealing with security can be a humiliating hassle, the numbers of international students in the United States are down when compared to international student enrollment in Britain, Australia, Germany and France. The United States is "closing itself off" to travel, tourism, and a boost in the economy due to a security system that "ties up Americans, wastes resources and is making the United States a place people try to avoid" (p. 1).

Despite moves toward preparation for the global marketplace and a growing multiculturalism in American Universities, the fact still remains that some Muslim students have a difficult time making meaningful connections to campus culture. The culture on many U.S. campuses may be hard for Muslim students to relate, since predominant campus culture in the United States includes risky behavior such as sexual experimentation and drug and alcohol use. This sort of campus culture is popular seemingly as a way for students to gain friendships and create identity (Chronicle of Higher Ed, 2005). Busteed (2005) suggested that the drinking patterns of freshman students go up 100 percent and change for the worse after they set foot on a college campus. He coined this phenomenon "the college effect" (p. 2 ).

Based on research done by the Harvard School of Public Health's College Alcohol Study survey (As cited in Busteed, 2005), the college experience encourages drinking and students are influenced mainly by their peers and social networks to partake in drinking. More than 80% of college students drink and 44% of all college students binge drink. In addition, Kapner (2006) cited a National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism report that calls for changing the culture of drinking on U.S. college

campuses because alcohol may lead to other campus issues such as sexual aggression, property damage, assault, other drugs and negative effects for the entire campus culture. Coping with widespread alcohol use is a major issue for many Muslim students on campus. According to Asmar, Proude, and Inge (2004), Muslim students experienced satisfaction with their academics and universities but found it hard to integrate into campus culture; some experience an "unwelcome" feeling and struggle to connect both inside and outside of the classroom.

The campus experience for Muslim students in Higher Education varies greatly, but most consistently, students report carrying the burden of a "risky identity" (Nasir, Al-Amin, 2006). A risky identity for the Muslim student is a result of misconceptions or negative stereotypes about the Islamic faith by both minority and majority cultures on campus. Steele (1999) defined stereotype threat as "the event of a negative stereotype about a group to which one belongs becoming self-relevant" (p. 493). Threats of this nature are generally situational and cause anxiety that can affect individual's intellectual ability by increasing test stress (Aronson, 2004). Whereas a stereotype threat situation runs the risk of an individual personally contributing to a stereotype about a group, collective threats are threats that stem from the stereotype-confirming acts of other members of an individual's group (Cohen, & Garcia, 2005).

Negative stereotypes of Muslims, particularly Arab Muslims, are prevalent in movies and American culture in general (Shaheen, 2003; Suleiman, 1999). Ward (2005) stated "American media are a potent socialization force" (p.69). Ward suggested that lower self-esteem, among other social issues, was associated with frequent television viewing and the evidence indicates that this percentage was higher among ethnic

minorities. The perception of collective threat can come directly from the media, or indirectly from individuals or a culture (American) that views that media on a daily basis. Horwedel (2006) suggested that negative news media and skewed perceptions of Middle Eastern countries by Americans help play a role in the negative experiences of Muslim students on campus.

After the events of September 11<sup>th</sup>, many Muslim students have been discriminated against either violently and publicly, or covertly and privately. Some Muslim students claim that they have been exposed to "open hostility" or have had unsupportive campus climates (Nasir, & Al-Amin, 2006). According to one Muslim student, "It is hard to be Muslim right now because people think you're representative for all Muslims, and you speak for all Muslims in the world." (Horwedel, 2006, p. 14).

#### *Purpose of the Study*

Most of the research done on collective threat has taken place in an academic setting. Currently, there are no data that suggest collective threat affects an individual's likelihood of making solid connections to campus or perceive this type of threat as impeding on their individual and spiritual development. However, Ahmadi and Cole (2003) suggested that Muslim women who veil reported that they had a difficult time connecting to campus life due to misconceptions and stereotypes about the veil.

The purpose of this study was to connect the two themes of research: collective threat and the Muslim student experience. By exploring collective threat as experienced by Muslim students, the author sought to understand how these threats may or may not affect their daily lives.



### *Research Questions*

Is there a collective threat perceived by Muslim students? If there is a perceived threat, in what ways is it perceived? Does the media serve as a source of collective identity threat for Muslim Students? Does collective threat perpetrate a disconnect between Muslim students and their campus communities, cause downplaying of identity, or undermine social connectedness and self-esteem? The present study sought to explore these questions to examine the perceptions of Muslim students in U.S. institutions of higher education on collective threat.

### *Significance of the Study*

Not surprisingly, articles that focus on Muslim students' attitudes towards their campus climate state the same idea: There is a general disappointment about the misunderstanding of Americans regarding the Islamic faith (Horwedel, 2006; Nasir and Al-Amin, 2006). The current study is significant because no previous research has specifically targeted the effects of collective threats toward Muslim students. The present research contributes to understanding the phenomenon of collective threat and specifically, how Muslim students perceive the threat. The outcome of this research may possibly help develop a greater understanding of the challenges Muslim students face on campus, thus contributing to ways in which administrators and faculty may guide them in their college experience.

### *Limitations*

The proposed study is limited due to the lack of previous studies of collective threat as experienced by Muslim students. No research has been done to validate the assumption that collective threat creates an environment for Muslim students in which

they encounter negative social consequences. However, the broad generalizability of identity threat research (Steele, Spencer and Aronson, 2002) has led the researcher to believe that the theory will transfer to include religious minorities. Therefore, the present study seeks to explore the psychosocial aspects of collective threat. There are, as of now, no research designs that study collective threat as it relates specifically to the Muslim student.

### *Definitions of Terms*

- Collective identity is defined as “a statement about categorical membership” that is “shared with a group of others who have (or are believed to have) some characteristic(s) in common” (Ashmore, Deaux, McLaughlin-Volpe, 2004, p. 81)
- The term collective threat is defined by Cohen and Garcia (2005) as “the situation where, although running no risk of personally lending support to a stereotype about their group, individuals are concerned about the potentially stereotype-confirming acts of other members of their group.” As Cohen and Garcia define it—“the ‘I am Us’ mindset” (p. 567).
- The term “in-group” is commonly used to refer to the social group with which one identifies. It is the group that one is “in” with.
- An out-group is a collective group of people with which individual does not identify. It is the group that one is not a part of and therefore opposite of in group.
- Hijab means “veil”. It is the traditional headscarf worn by Muslim women for pride and modesty (Netton, 1992).

## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### *Previous Research*

According to a Washington Post poll in March of 2006 (Cited in Horwedel, 2006) 46% of Americans had an unfavorable view of Islam. Women in Ahmadi and Coles' study (2003) said that their veil or "hijab," was an identity marker, something that explicitly states, "I am Muslim." With such a visible marking and such a skewed view of Islam by many Americans, some Muslim students feel vulnerable.

With the double weight of negative media permeating television news stations and a general lack of knowledge about the Islamic faith by many Americans, Muslim students feel stigmatized by the threat of stereotype. Collective threats leave Muslim students wondering if they will be perceived as dangerous or as a "terrorist" by other students. In previous stereotype research, Steele and Aronson (1995) examined the threat of stereotype and found significant increases in anxiety and intellectual underperformance of Black students in a test threat situation as opposed to the non-threat test situations and when compared to white counterparts. A test threat situation is one where a variable (usually aimed at a stereotyped behavior or idea) in a testing situation becomes a threat on the performance or ability to excel on the test. These findings suggest that stereotype threats have the ability to inhibit a students' academic performance.

The research outlined in this chapter serves to relate the experiences of students with the following topics: Muslim identity, international Muslim students in higher education, collective identity, self-esteem, and self-stereotyping, collective threat,

negative stereotypes in the media, and negative stereotypes as a collective threat. The research sets up a framework for later discussion of Steele, Spencer, and Aronson's (2002) four theoretical assumptions about identity threat which include social identity and vigilance to threat, theory of context, resistance to seeing discrimination, and the psychic cost of social identity threat. The theoretical model they suggest examines the experience of threat and the model serves as a basis for the proposed study of Muslim students' experience of campus culture in the United States.

### *Muslim Identity*

Ansari (2003) studied 13 African-American Muslim women on how, and in what way they constructed the many aspects of their identities. These identities included race, class, gender and religious identity. All of the women, aged 25-95, were converts to Islam and found that their social identities were transformed from this intense experience. Ansari suggested that this religious conversion was just another aspect of their struggle in a politicized community and that it gave them a sense of "universal sisterhood".

Khan (1998) suggested that Muslim women experience doubt and disorientation about their identity because of the previously constructed views (stereotypes) of women in Islam. Khan claimed these stereotypes stem from the two opposing constructs of Orientalism (an oppressive, colonial image) and Islamism (a liberating, contemporary view usually supplying a women's needs by persuasion and cohesion) stating, "both poles essentialize the ideal Muslim woman and reduce her to the same symbols and icons" (p. 469). Khan interviewed two Muslim women in Canada and discovered that the women had to pick and choose which parts of their identity they wanted to compromise. They lived in the "third space" (p. 464) where culture is continuously being constructed

in order to maintain identity. However, for these women, one of the most important aspects of Muslim womens' identity was to get an education, because as they put it, education is important to them to gain power and status.

Ahmadi and Cole (2003) explored perspectives and experiences of Muslim women on college campuses to see if their experiences contributed to their decision to reevaluate the custom of wearing the veil. Covering the hair, the "hijab," or veil, is a common practice in Islam that is symbolic of modesty and sometimes mandated by law in non-secular Islamic countries. In part, this study was designed to expand the understanding of the growing diversity within the student body, particularly those that are more recognized, such as a veiled Muslim woman. Using focus groups, Ahmadi and Cole (2003) discovered that out of seven participants, only three students continued the practice of veiling after the study was completed. Six major themes emerged from the perceptions and experiences of veiled women on college campuses. The first theme, "being a good Muslim," (p.54) was stated by almost every participant as the reason they began wearing the veil in the first place. Secondly, "Muslim identity," was a major factor in how the sample group saw themselves. The two themes described above were suggested to be the foundation from which all the participants related to childhood or adolescent family experiences. Their families were the source of the ideas of being a good Muslim and Muslim identity.

Social aspect themes of "stereotypes and misconceptions" and "social reinforcement" (p. 54) also emerged. Some participants related feeling isolated and misunderstood by non-Muslim peers, whereas others claimed that this sort of treatment in social situations gave them strength in their religious convictions. Those that continued

to veil saw social reinforcement as the perception that Muslim peers would not think that they were "good Muslims" (p. 54). They found that there was alienation of those that did not wear the veil from their own peer group. The fifth theme that emerged was "modesty." The researchers concluded that this theme was a sort of stage at which many participants decided to discontinue wearing the veil.

According to Ahmadi and Cole (2003), some students claimed that they became a more "effective Muslim" (p. 62) when not wearing the veil. Not wearing it, they concluded, helped them socialize and have more significant relationships with non-Muslims. They also explored the religious implications of not wearing the veil, claiming that modesty can be shown in a number of ways and not necessarily from a religious practice. The final theme, "religious obligation," (p. 54) was ultimately the reason why the other participants chose to continue to wear the veil. The main idea that emerged was that the negative reactions from campus were perceived as challenges and actually gave the subjects a greater appreciation and resolve for their religious convictions. Throughout these themes, the women said both Muslim and non-Muslim peers had the most impact on their decisions. All of them felt at least some alienation that hindered their academic and social development. However, Ahmadi and Cole (2003) reported that Muslim women who veiled experienced greater threat to their identity than Muslim men, simply because they were more visible and thus more vulnerable to misconception.

Peek (2005) examined religious identity development among second-generation Muslim-Americans. This study sought to analyze second-generation Muslim-Americans religious identity construction and the way it develops. Peek explored themes of identity theory, linking the idea that as one becomes more distant from his or her traditions within



a pluralistic American context, he or she also becomes more conscious of personal religious beliefs in an attempt to form a more stable personal and social identity. Because of the increasing number of religions represented on campuses around the country, all of the 127 participants interviewed were members of Muslim Student Associations on campuses in New York and Colorado.

Peek (2005) explained religious identity development in three stages: "religion as ascribed identity, religion as chosen identity, and religion as declared identity" (p. 215). Muslim-American students mostly identified with ascribed identity in their early life, as something given to them by their parents and by cultural norms. Chosen identity, however, was formed more often as a teenager when the individuals had become more mature and were able to reflect on what it meant to be Muslim. The third stage, declared identity, was found to be a result of adversity. For example, following the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks, many Muslim students found themselves more devoted to a spiritual base in the face of discrimination. This finding suggests that if an identity group is under a collective threat, they tend to band together and declare themselves as a "unit" against adversity.

For many Muslims on campus, the threat of stereotyping undermines their role and place on campus and reinforces an atmosphere of poor group image (Kaya, 2005). The experience of collective threat is an attack on all of the facets of identity development. Describing identity, Chickering and Reisser (1997) said it involves a certain level of personal stability and integration. That is, identity is formed by clarifying self-concepts, self-acceptance and self-esteem, and comfort with gender and sexual orientation. The establishment of identity includes "reflecting on one's family of origin

and ethnic heritage, defining self as a part of a religious or cultural tradition, and seeing self within a social and historical context" (p. 49). As such, seeing one's self in a social and historical context suggests that part of identity formation involves recognizing a collective identity.

In a social and historical context, many Muslims believe that currently there is no framework from which to understand modern Muslims and that media coverage of Islam is often negatively skewed to present a poor foundation from which Muslims are viewed (Horwedel, 2006).

#### *International Muslim Students in Higher Education*

Fumiko (2005) studied the socialization and identity constructs of 26 undergraduate international students. Fumiko suggested that international students face many more challenges than American undergraduates because the changes they experience are more drastic and include reshaping their identity through social experiences. By asking students from 14 different countries questions about how they relate their identity, Fumiko found that the identity construct "citizenship to home country" was the most frequently cited. Among the students in this study, 14 students said that their identities had changed since coming to study in the United States. Identity changes were categorized into two main groups 1) having a new identity or lost identity or 2) strengthening original identity. Among those 14 students, two of them said that their religious identity was reinforced after coming to America. Overall, Fumiko found that the students identified strongly with their home country.

Regarding socialization, Fumiko (2005) suggested that the socialization of undergraduate international students depends on many factors that include discrimination,

racism, and language. Many of the students in this study found that their socialization into American culture depended greatly on how they perceived discrimination and racism and how well they spoke the native language. In addition, Fumiko found that many of the students felt left out of American Culture partly due to social and language barriers, and partly due to international student restrictions, such as not being able to work off campus.

Johnson (2004) studied 10 Middle Eastern graduate students on U.S. campuses and explored their socialization experiences in a post 9/11 world. This examination suggested that Middle Eastern International students form close communities and Islam strongly serves to unify those communities—especially in times of political upheaval. Johnson also suggested that the socialization process of Muslims on U.S. campuses relied heavily on the campus and community experiences of their Muslim peers. Nine out of 10 participants said that they socialized primarily with Muslims, while six of the 10 participants said that they made lasting friendships with American students. One issue that was a major topic for these students was the culture of alcohol on campus. Some of the participants stayed away from both on and off campus events because of the pressures of alcohol.

Lee and Rice (2007) researched the experiences of 24 international undergraduate students on the difficulties they encountered on U.S. campuses. Their case study methodology included surveys with questions that sought to assess the experiences of international students at their universities. These students first faced entrance obstacles such as gaining entry into the country and visa approvals that strongly affected their experiences. Lee and Rice suggested that one of the findings in this study was the

perception of discrimination by international students. The three categories that emerged were 1) feelings of discrimination, 2) verbal insults 3) direct confrontation. Although they admitted that international students should expect some discomfort, many students experienced high levels of individual discomfort in the classroom because of their language barrier. Some students reported experiencing direct verbal insults from faculty advisors and professors. Many of the students commented on how they felt direct discrimination by not being allowed to work off campus or work on campus over 20 hours a week. Most strikingly, however, were the students who mentioned that it was hard to socialize with Americans because of their "individualistic" attitudes or claimed that Americans lacked the desire to understand different cultures.

Speck (1997) interviewed Muslim students to assess their perceptions of their college professors. The students generally noted that there were many misconceptions about them by their professors and more specifically, their professors used media in the classroom that misrepresented their religion. Professors introduced current event articles from media that the students felt were biased and used classroom texts that distorted true Islamic beliefs. The research suggested that the professors ought to try to recognize preconceptions in the classroom and become more culturally aware.

Asmar, Proude, and Inge (2004) studied 175 male and female Muslim students in Australia, and found that the students were overall satisfied with their course work and academics. However, only 31% of the participants interviewed said that they felt a sense of belonging to the cultural community on campus and generally among those interviewed, more women than men noted feeling "culturally uncomfortable" (p. 9). This

study generally noted that cross-gender interaction was a major concern for Muslim students.

*Collective Identity, Self-Esteem & Self-Stereotyping*

Ashmore, Deaux, and McLaughlin-Volpe (2004) suggested that there was a difference between public and private regards to collective identity as well as social, behavioral, and ideological aspects. The researchers suggested that all of the previously listed individual aspects make up a collective identity. Collective identity was defined as having "individual elements" (p.1). Self categorization, for example, or the act of identifying oneself in terms of their collective group, is just a part of a "collective" identity. Depending on the context or situation, there are many dimensions of collective identity. For example, and particularly relevant for the Muslim student, Simon and Klandermans (2001) theorized a collective identity can be "politicized" when a group member becomes involved in a power struggle on behalf of a group. Their theory encompassed stages of politicized collective identity that involved shared grievances, awareness of an enemy, and engaging a third party. Politicized collective identity fosters "stereotyping processes at the cognitive level, prejudice processes at the affective level, and conformity and discrimination processes at the behavioral level" (p. 327). Their research suggested that a more politicized collective identity intensifies these outcomes.

De Cremer (2001) explored the relationships between collective self-esteem and group identification and self-stereotyping. Self-stereotyping is defined as identifying oneself with a stereotype about his or her group. The researcher sampled 49 British University employees and asked them Likert scale questions to assess their collective self-esteem. In group favoritism (and a strong commitment to in-group) was found to be high

among those participants with high collective self-esteem. Self-stereotyping was also found to be high among participants with high collective self-esteem. As a result, a major part of one's self-concept is derived from group membership and can lead to in-group biases or self-stereotyping.

Ethier and Deaux (1994) studied first year Hispanic students at two Ivy League colleges. With a total of 45 participants, they predicted that the students whose ethnic identities were more prominent than other parts of their identities would be more likely to take part in ethnic activities on campus and be more aware of cultural differences on campus. Also, those students who were steeped in their own group identification before changing contexts (going to college) would find that their ethnic identity became more salient than it was before changing contexts. They measured maintenance of identity by assessing three main categories: Identity, collective self-esteem, and perceptions of threat. As predicted, strong group identity was related to high self-esteem and greater association with a collective group on campus. In contrast, students whose ethnic identity was less salient had a lower self-esteem and showed more negative changes within the new context. Identity among the low-identifier students was particularly vulnerable when exposed to threat and the researchers suggested that perceived threat resulted in lowered self-esteem and negative changes among both groups. As Cohen and Garcia (2005) also suggested, students who have a weaker sense of collective identity felt more of a threat and tended to disassociate with their own identity groups.

Ruttenberg, Zea, and Sigelman (1996) studied the effects of collective self-esteem within one's own group on the negative attitudes toward other groups. They hypothesized that the higher collective self-esteem one has within their own ethnic group, the more



prejudiced they may be towards other groups. The researchers sampled 49 Arab students and 42 Jewish students by measuring their collective self-esteem within their own in-group and by measuring their sentiment towards the out-groups with stereotyping cartoons of that group. The research found that high collective self-esteem was not actually a predictor of prejudice towards the out-group.

### *Collective Threat*

Individuals gain self-worth through their personal feelings and thoughts, and through their associations with groups and actions of groups. Cohen and Garcia (2005) explained the "I am us" mindset as the belief that one's identity group actions will have an impact, either negatively or positively, on individuals within that group. Their research assessed the impact of collective threat on the academic performance of intellectually stereotyped minority groups. Collective threat was defined as an action by a person in the minority identity group that threatens majority perceptions about individuals within that minority group. For example, subsequent to September 11<sup>th</sup>, many Muslim cab drivers in New York City chose to display signs that declared their love for America and signs that stated that they were not terrorists (Aronson, 2004).

Similar to Steele and Aronson's (1995) work with stereotype threat, Cohen and Garcia (2005) experimented with collective threat by examining situations where black college students were put in a test threat situation. Historically, black students have had to contend with the stereotype of intellectual inferiority. In this kind of controlled testing, a test threat situation consisted of black college students observing a same-race peer in a circumstance that evaluated his or her intelligence. A non-threat test situation consisted of black college students observing a same-race peer taking non-evaluative tests or tests

of a non-diagnostic nature. Collective threat is activated when a student perceives a stereotype about their race may be confirmed.

Cohen and Garcia (2005) found three impacts of collective threat: negative effects on self-esteem, dissociation of individual from the in-group, and management strategies in social threat situations that produced either identity affirmation or conversely, downplaying identity. Collective threat among minority students was the highest reported racial threat and was often linked to lowered self-esteem. It was also suggested that students who identified more strongly with their collective identity tended to positively self-stereotype and feel more solidarity within their group.

#### *Negative Stereotypes in the Media*

Suleiman (1999) examined Americans' images and views of Muslims and observed some of the contributing factors to these views. He discussed the historic aspect contributing to a generally negative view of Islam by many Americans including the media. The dehumanization and hostile stereotypes in American television, movies, and radio contributed to the extremely negative images of Muslims. He suggested that scholars and historians either ignored Arab Muslim history or viewed it as a simple stereotype. He also suggested that the social and political consequences of negative stereotypes led to, 1) Muslim's being viewed as a threat and 2) created an atmosphere where Muslim's experienced defamation, intimidation, and harassment.

Shaheen (2003) claimed that Hollywood has greatly influenced the negative views by Americans of Arabs and Muslims. The stereotypes perpetuated by American movies often portray many Muslims as being crazed, over-sexed money hungry Sheiks and Arabs. These kinds of images allow Arabs to be dehumanized. Of the over 900 movies

that Shaheen has documented as perpetuating a stereotypical image of Arabs, he found only a small handful that celebrated Arabic heritage and depicted the Arabs as normal, everyday people. Shaheen argued that for over 100 years, the negative and repetitious images of Arabs that have saturated the movie screens have done a great injustice to many groups of people and have clouded the West's judgment of an entire culture. Films as early as the 1920's depicted the Arabs, in the words of Shaheen, as a "bearded, robed Arab ruler as one collective stereotypical lecherous cur" (p.180) and women as "femmes fatales" who are eroticized and mute. Shaheen suggested that the stereotypes endure because they are convenient for film makers, they are based on violent events in the media, and because our nation's law-makers, teachers, and leaders have not spoken up. Not surprisingly, Shaheen claimed that the stereotypical portraits have increased over the last three decades.

More recently, Shaheen (2006) has argued that newer films such as "Munich" and "Syriana" did not vilify Arabs and Muslims, but probed into some of the more compelling questions regarding war, revenge, and what it means to live in a culture of violence. Shaheen claimed that these films depicted common Arab people as innocent victims of a larger issue that included power struggles, corruption, and money.

Harb and Bessaiso (2006) conducted 21 in-depth interviews with British Arab Muslim families to reveal their perceptions of the media representations of British Arab Muslims after September 11<sup>th</sup>. The researchers wanted to find out what kinds of strategies were in play by the participants to overcome a sense of threat caused by negative media representations. Almost all of the interviewees said that post 9/11, they questioned their sense of identity, lost faith in British T.V. news, and stated that politics

was part of their daily lives and culture. Most all the families balanced their news by watching Al-Jazeera, a news station broadcast out of the Middle East, because they found that the Western media seemed biased against the "Arab." The families also perceived Western news stations as misrepresenting Islam instead of educating the public about it. Harb and Bessaio suggested that both Western and Eastern media sources represented conflict from an "ethnocentric" viewpoint and that Muslims may use the Eastern media as a way to confirm identity, engage in discourse, and understand their role in the modern world.

Al-Qazzaz (1975) suggested that mass media sources are large and important factors that perpetrate stereotyping, prejudice, and bias against Arabs. In his analysis of 36 textbooks used in American elementary and junior high schools, Al-Qazzaz found the books to be considerably biased towards Arabic culture. Although he found bias among the depictions of Chinese, Native, and African-Americans as well, he sought to discover what biases are portrayed about the Arab culture. Although only five to eight percent of the worlds Arabs are nomadic, Al-Qazzaz found almost every single textbook depicted Arabs as strictly tent dwelling, camel riding robbers and nomads. All other aspects of Arabic life, culture, and contributions to society were excluded. Many of the textbooks were found to oversimplify the Islamic religion as having a "war-like" character and often times overemphasized Mohammad as going to, or living in the desert. Al-Qazzaz suggested that students who use biased textbooks will have an ingrained, distorted view of Arabs.

Said (1981) suggested that the West views Islam as over simplified, that is, stereotypical and divides the world between "us" and "them." He coined the term

“orientalism,” which is to mean that the Western characterization and concept of the East is used as a means to justify domination. Said claimed that the orient, or the Middle East, has been viewed for centuries by the west as inferior and as such, distorted and stereotypical views of both the Middle East and Islam are able to thrive. American media coverage of foreign events takes the “us” standpoint which engenders an ethnocentric view of reality.

#### *Negative Stereotype as a Collective Threat*

Steele and Aronson (1995) reported that the main finding of stereotype research was a dramatic difference between the test scores of black participants who had been in a non-threat situation and black participants who had been in a threat-producing situation. Their study sampled both black men and women and engaged a white control group to compare scores. All participants were tested and shown to be at the same level of intellectual ability prior to the experiment. Researchers told the threat group that they would be tested on intellectual ability and the non-threat group was told that the test was a non-diagnostic examination of problem solving techniques. Such conditions measured the intellectual ability of an identity group when they thought that their intellectual ability, which historically had been stereotyped to be less developed than their white counterparts, was being tested. The black participants in the threat condition performed a full standard deviation lower than their white counterparts and yet, in the no-threat condition, there was no difference (Steele et al. 2002).

Similarly, collective threat research (Cohen and Garcia, 2005) produced results that confirmed the underperformance of minority individuals when they believed that the

intellectual ability of a member of the same identity group was in question, thus downplaying collective identity.

Ahmadi and Cole (2003) reported that students who had downplayed their Muslim identities in identity threat situations had unveiled, so as to not have a direct, visible association with their private religion and to avoid negative stereotypes or constant questions by the majority group. Ahmadi and Cole (2003) discovered that discrimination, isolation and stereotyping were other reasons why Muslim women chose to unveil. One student in the study who unveiled claimed that unveiling made her "more effective as a Muslim" (p. 62) by allowing her to have a closer relationship to peers. The veil served as a barrier to campus life due to the negative perceptions of other students about the veil. Other Muslim students who used identity affirmation strategies had, in the face of stereotypes, re-confirmed their resolve in their faith by continuing to wear the veil as a deliberate measure of pride and commitment (Ahmadi & Cole, 2003). This did not mean that the students who unveiled were less committed to their religion; it simply meant that for some, the stress of stereotype threat overrode the need for practicing Islamic tradition through dress code.

In an academic setting, Nasir and Al-Amin (2006) reported that Muslim students who experienced discrimination on campus were observed to do more poorly academically than other Muslim students who had not dealt with this kind of confrontation on a daily basis. Students reported an emotional disconnect from the campus community when faced with prejudice, but more directly, Muslim students who had experienced discrimination by professors in the classroom were more likely to distance themselves from school altogether.

*A Theoretical Approach to Threat*

Ashmore, Deaux, and McLaughlin-Volpe (2004), who theorized that there are many aspects to the collective identity, claimed that there may be a "shift in terminology from social identity to collective identity" (p.1). The reason for the recent shift is because collective identity includes both personal and relational identity and not just social identity; it encompasses all aspects of self. Steele, Spencer, and Aronson (2002) used the term "social identity" (p. 1) and have created a general theory of social identity threat that has four assumptions.

The first theoretical assumption is "social identity and vigilance to threat" (p. 416). People have multiple social identities from which they engage in social activities and have the potential to realize at any time, that at least one of those identities can and will be discriminated against or devalued (for example, race, gender, religion). The assumption is that individuals experiencing threat feel it from a social cue or from previous knowledge of an existing stereotype; thus vigilance to the threat occurs. For example, Suleiman (1999) suggested that terrorist crimes are immediately blamed on Muslims and that before authorities figured out who was accountable for the Oklahoma City bombing, there were reports of hate crimes and open hostility towards Muslim-Americans. There is an existing stereotype that Muslims are responsible for terrorizing public places. Because such a stereotype exists, Peek (2003) found that after 9/11, Muslim students in New York City colleges were apprehensive to use public transportation for fear of aggression by the other passengers. The students used the "buddy system" (p. 275) when riding subways to protect themselves against backlash.



The second assumption was "theory of context" (p. 417). Threat is assumed by an individual depending on the context of the situation. There may be cues in the social setting that trigger the idea of threat, especially in a homogenous setting where an individual may be one of the only out-group members. For example, Asmar, Proude, and Inge (2004) found that Muslim students seemed more satisfied and felt more valued with their universities when there were significant numbers of other Muslim students on campus. In a majority group setting, it may be more likely for a Muslim student to perceive threat or devaluation.

The third assumption, "resistance to seeing discrimination," (p. 418) was the idea that individuals did not want to confirm their "cues" by acknowledging that a threat is likely or that it will personally touch their lives. At this level in the theory, the individual becomes frustrated with the idea of prejudice against his or her identity group and thus may resist the idea that discrimination may come to him or her just by belonging to such a group. Steele et al. (2002) stated that "people can both accentuate and diminish the perception of how much prejudice is directed at them—depending on the circumstances" (p. 418).

The final assumption, "the psychic cost of social identity threat," (p.419) results in a conflicted frame of mind where one is motivated to seek out cues of devaluation, and yet is motivated not to perceive them. Other factors, such as time and experience in the setting, can influence a more balanced frame of mind regarding the expectation of devaluation and threat.



### *Summary*

Although not an exhaustive literature review, the research presented here suggests that socially, Muslim students generally experience stronger religious convictions, become more conscious of their traditions, and become more devoted to their collective spiritual base and identity when faced with adversity (Peek, 2005; Ahmadi and Cole, 2003). Academically, the research suggests that minority students under collective threat experience lower levels of self-esteem and fare worse than students not under collective threat in testing situations (Steele, 1995; Cohen and Garcia, 2005). High collective self-esteem and self-stereotyping seemed to be a predictor of strong group identity and thus, vigilance to threat (Ruttenberg, Zea, and Sigelman, 1996; Ethier and Deaux, 1994; and De Cremer, 2001). Muslim identity has been perceived negatively through the eyes of the media, movies, and textbooks (Shaheen, 2003 and 2006; Harb and Bessasio, 2006; Al-Qazzaz, 1975; Said, 1981), which is a form of collective threat. Theoretically, identity threat assumes that the individual under threat may recognize such a threat by contextual or social cues and protects him or herself from devaluation and stereotype by vigilance, resistance or integration—any one of which can be strenuous to their collective identity (Steele *et al*, 2002).

### CHAPTER III

#### METHODOLOGY

##### *Design of the Study*

The present study used a qualitative design with in-depth interviews. McMillan and Schumacher (2001) stated that “qualitative research describes and analyzes people’s individual and collective social actions, beliefs, thoughts and perceptions” (p. 395). In-depth interviews were defined as “open-response questions to obtain data of participant meanings—how individuals conceive of their world and how they explain or ‘make sense’ of the important events in their lives” (p. 443). For the purpose of the present research, in-depth interviews were used to gather rich information that explores the Muslim student experience in relation to collective identity threat. The researcher also used pre-surveys for descriptive information about the participants. The qualitative interview method was important for this type of research because it acknowledged the voices of the students themselves to examine collective identity threat.

##### *Participants*

The researcher used the snowball method of gathering research participants. Students were recommended by a contact in the Muslim Student Association at a large, public Midwestern university. The University was in a metropolitan area, with a nearby Muslim community. A total of eight students were interviewed and given an informed consent form and a pre-survey before their in-depth interview.

One justification for using a general Muslim population as opposed to one ethnicity/race/gender is described by Cainkar:

During the 1990's, a major shift in identification, affiliation and behavior occurred among a significant proportion of Arab Muslims in Chicago, one that is mirrored nationwide. Their primary affiliation changed from secular to religious. They began to identify as Muslims first, Arabs, Palestinians or Jordanians second. Mosques and religious institutions replaced secular community centers as locales for community social life, organizing and education. Secular Arab student organizations dwindled while Muslim student organizations thrived. Muslim women who in the 1980's did not cover their hair began to do so. Islam become more than a private way of life; it became a public active way of being (p.26).

Of the eight participants in the study, all described themselves as being optimistic, friendly and confident students. Each participant felt a strong connection to campus and was involved in social activities or was a member of the Muslim Student Association on campus. A short biography of each student will be helpful in understanding their background. The names have been concealed to protect their identities.

Participant 1 is a 21 year old Lebanese-American who is originally from Dearborn, Michigan and wears hijab. She majors in health science and plans to graduate in 2008 to become a physical therapist. She says that she is highly uncomfortable praying on campus but is a resident assistant in the on-campus residence halls.

Participant 2 is 21 years old and was born in the United States by international parents; her father is from Egypt and her mother is from Slovakia. Participant 2 is well spoken, friendly and empathetic. She does not wear hijab because she feels it would

inhibit her in the professional life as an event planner at a local college. Her major is business-marketing and one day hopes to work for a non-profit or government agency.

Participant 3, also 21, seems an easy-going and outspoken woman who is a junior in Elementary Education and plans to become a teacher, and one day a mother. She was born in the United States but her parents and family are from Pakistan. She studied abroad in Egypt for a year and often travels to Pakistan to visit family. She wears hijab and says that she feels it protects her from drinking, drugs, and sex.

Participant 4, a vibrant and talkative 26 year-old, does not wear a hijab unless she is at Mosque or men come to her home, she feels that if she ever puts on the veil, her mind must be "ready." Participant 4 was born in the United States but her family is from Pakistan. She is an Education Major with a strong interest in Social Justice and Human Rights. She had an arranged marriage in 2003 and moved to California and although the union didn't work out, she is still an advocate for arranged marriages. She is in the process of writing a children's book that focuses on understanding and accepting other cultures.

Participant 5, a 21 year old from Bangladesh is in his 4<sup>th</sup> year as a biology/pre-dental student. He is also interested in human rights and providing individuals with "dignity." Participant 5 was very interested in speaking about the Koran and the tenets of his religion. He is friendly and informative about Islamic tradition.

Participant 6 is an African-American woman who converted from Christian Unitarian to Islam about a year and a half ago. She has a love for south Asian culture and joined the Indian Student and Muslim Student Associations on campus. Originally, she joined the MSA because she was curious but soon found out that she loved Islam. She

does not wear hijab because she feels that you must be very pure to wear it and also because she feels it is not necessary in the American culture. She is a flight attendant for a major airline and hopes to create an inter-faith dialogue after finishing her degree in South Asian studies.

Participant 7 is a soft spoken older student who was born in Pakistan and came to the United States to receive his degree. He has been at the University for 5 years and is very happy here. He is also part of the Muslim Student Association.

Participant 8 is an African-American man who is a member of the MSA on campus. He was very shy but then opened up as the conversation continued. He grew up in an all Muslim community where his father is an Imam (priest).

#### *Location*

This study utilized a large public university in the Midwest. The university, in a large suburban area, has a student population of approximately 18,000 students with an active Muslim Student Association. The university offers undergraduate and graduate degrees and has an international program.

#### *Data Collection*

Chickering and Reisser's (1997) identity vector was useful in the development of pre-survey questions to determine how the students perceived themselves and at what level of identity development they seemed to be at before exploring their perceptions of threat upon that identity. The researcher used open-ended questions that probed into the experience of being a Muslim student on campus. The semi-structured interviews served as a vehicle for exploration into the effects of collective threat and in what context that threat is perceived. The theoretical model proposed by Steele *et al.* (2002) provided

some direction for the interview questions. The researcher explored topics that included the perceptions of stereotypes about Muslims, Muslim identity, and the experience of collective threat. These topics were important because they served to provide rich information on the experience of Muslim students on campus which can have a positive impact on the way higher education operates in regards to creating identity safe places for Muslim students.

### *Treatment of Data*

The researcher interviewed students on campus in a private room for public use, however, some interviews took place in an open space due to lack of a private area. The interviews lasted approximately 45 minutes to 1 hour per student and were captured on a small, manual tape recorder. All interviews were transcribed using sessions marked with numeric code in which each letter corresponded with the students name. To protect their privacy, the students names were not used in the research; however, they are identified by participant numbers. The data were examined using the constant-comparative method which is described by McMillan and Schumacher (2001) as "comparing and contrasting each topic and category to determine the distinctive characteristics of each" (p. 468). This method was meant to provide an understanding of the process of discovering the themes presented by the students. The categories of context, stereotype, and coping with identity threat were examined and the researcher found themes in each that revealed similarities and differences in the students' perceptions. To increase validity, some students were asked to member check in the interview transcription. Each student was promised a copy of the completed thesis with a thank you letter.

## CHAPTER IV

### RESULTS

The main themes that emerged from the qualitative analysis are detailed in this chapter and organized according to the research questions. Many themes were fitting to more than one question; however, each theme was categorized only once according to the most appropriate of the four research questions. Several themes were explored as the students had many rich experiences to share.

#### Research Question #1: Is there a collective threat perceived by Muslim Students?

In the first section of this chapter, an example is given of one student's perception of collective identity threat which seems to best illustrate the idea of threat. The following themes emerged as pressure on the student: being a purist and a scholar, being a representative, and representing identity in context.

Each student had stories to share regarding perceptions of collective threat. The perception of collective stereotype is best described by Participant 2 when relating a story about wearing her hijab for the first time on campus:

I went to the bathroom with my hijab and put it on and I was walking to the room and I actually saw one of my friends from high school and I smiled at him and he gave me the dirtiest look I have ever seen, I've never, it was the first time wearing hijab in public and I've never felt so embarrassed and shy and scared—I'm said, you're my friend, we went to high school together. He didn't recognize me and I never brought it up to him, I never said oh, you know that girl that you gave that dirty look to when you were walking in the hall? I didn't want to make him feel



uncomfortable. It's something that's tangible, you say you're Muslim like, yeah ok you're Muslim, but that makes it real. It was the worst feeling in the world, I have to say. It was my own friend and to feel like I wasn't accepted by him. It was a horrible feeling; I felt awful. Once I put the scarf on, I'm a different person and people look at me differently. I think it changes the way people do look at me and I think that that particular experience was especially scary for me because it was someone that I had known for four years and on campus all of a sudden it was like I was a different person.

Participant 2 said that the anticipation of a negative experience is the reason she does not wear the veil today.

#### *Being Purist & Scholar*

The theme of pressure among the students emerged as we discussed some of their interactions with non-Muslim peers outside of the classroom. Mostly, the experience of pressure was related to parties and drinking, however, almost every student said the peer pressure was not extremely strong and most people just didn't understand why they didn't want to or couldn't drink. Participant 1 claimed that the students were not forceful but curious:

They asked me, 'you're never going to try a drink?' I said, no, I don't really want to, my religion doesn't let me but personally I don't want to either. 'Really, just once?' And I said no, I mean, they get surprised but, but never insisting that you have to do it, you have to do it.



Participant 4 said something similar.

I turned 21 at the university and I was going back to the dorms and they were drinking alcohol and they were like "come on, come on, you just turned 21, drink, drink! And I said, no, I don't drink. No, come on, come on, just a little sip! The peer pressure goes into it but I'm like no, I just don't drink. They just didn't understand why I didn't drink. They said, what is it going to do? Who is going to know? I said I'm going to know!

Similarly, Participant 8 felt that the pressure was self induced by not participating. He said, "It's not like they are pushing me or anything like that and encouraging me to do it, but it's the fact that I'm around it makes it kind of peer pressure. To be the person not doing it, you can put the pressure on yourself."

Most every student related an incident in the classroom that they perceived as requiring them to be an Islamic Scholar. The classroom was a place where they knew if an Islamic issue came up, they would be the first person looked at or called upon. Most of the students were uncomfortable with being an assumed scholar, but often they were happy if they were able to dispel myths about their religion. Participant 6 said that she felt major classroom pressures and people "want the cookie cutter answer to everything." She claimed,

They want to know that it's going to be ok, but there is a lot of peer pressure to say the right thing. I think there's more peer pressure from other Muslim students than from actual non-Muslim students because we all are trying to watch each other's backs and make sure we do not say something that they are going to freak out about. You know, everybody

put a smile on your face and be cool, don't talk about terrorism, don't even put it in your vocabulary.

Classroom pressure for her was measured by both making sure that her statements about Islam were accurate and true as well as her Muslim peers' statements being true.

Participant 4 said that she is always the first in class to say anything if a Muslim issue is brought up, but also made sure to say that although she likes it when professors call on her, some students may not. She said,

I mean if the professor wants your opinion so that way she won't be judgmental, and that way it does help out but it's kind of a little bit hard because it is focusing all on you and then you have to know your stuff or else you feel like you're an idiot in the class. There are some people that are really shy, there are some people that are Muslim and they don't know much about their own religion and they're still trying to learn about their own religion. It's just like if she was talking about Christianity she just points to somebody ok, you're Christian you tell me such and such about the bible verse and that.

Participant 3 felt that professors knew very basic knowledge but expected the Muslim students to answer very difficult Islamic questions. Participant 3 said,

You have to go and ask a scholar to answer them [the questions]. I'm not a scholar and you have to become a scholar because there is so much study that you have to do, you have to know every single aspect.

Although the above examples show instances where the professors called upon the students to explain Islam, both Participant 2 and Participant 1 related instances that

they corrected professors on something that they considered untrue. Both women felt as though this was an uncomfortable but necessary position. Participant 2 corrected her professor on something that was false in regards to Islam and felt that because the professor is in a position of influence, students will believe the information regardless of the facts. She said about the incident:

After that, whenever something would come up in regards to Islam she would always look at me or make a, not a snide remark but you know she would call me out on it or something. I don't think I feel bad when I say things like that, when I call someone out on it, but again it's not a place that I'd like to be. Just because some people start asking questions and of course, I don't know all the answers, when I come up to a question that I can't answer they think, 'oh she doesn't know what she's talking about', it's just not always the most comfortable position.

Similarly, Participant 1 had this story to share:

I had an intro to Africa class and they were talking about how everything started in Africa and how human beings started with all the classifications and stuff and we came to where Islam was taking over Africa and spreading and a lot of the people in the class turned to me because I was the only Muslim in the class and I didn't know a lot because I just know general stuff. I never really read into it that much but I know what I'm supposed to know. I think I should know more but I answered the questions to the best of my ability. I mean, I felt like I was antagonized by some people. They just had really in-depth questions that I just couldn't

answer but I said, I can read up on that and come back to you with that.

But if I am the only Muslim in the class and that subject arises, it kind of makes me feel uncomfortable because I'm afraid of what others are going to say, but when I get into the discussion and explain things, I feel much better.

### *Being a Representative*

All the students felt that at some point, they have been seen as a representative of Islam. Most of the students made sure that what they said and did was in order not to give Islam a bad name. Participant 8 said,

I have to be careful of what I say, I have to try to be very extremely correct so I don't give them another misconception to live with or anything like that. My father's an Imam [priest] so I think I'm good at dealing with questions about Islam. I just make sure I'm correct; I don't want to give anyone the wrong information. I guess I try to represent myself as best as I can and show good character because I guess that goes a long way when it comes to people's misconceptions and things that they don't understand about Muslims. They see Muslims with good character, something they may not associate with Islam as a visual. I try to correct something.

Although Participant 8 always tries to be of good character, he finds it difficult to constantly be polite, particularly when he is pulled over by the police or stopped at the airport. He explained,

I got pulled over a quarter mile off campus two years ago and I had my red Kufi [Islamic Hat] on, and I was driving my mother's mini-van. And I thought, was I speeding or something like that, I didn't know, I didn't really know. I didn't really give it much thought so the officer came to the window and I didn't see his partner come around the other side of the car and he asked me a couple questions—for my drivers license, registration and everything. He says, 'just step out of the car', and I'm thought oh, man, I knew, I just knew it was something. He asked me, 'do you have any bombs on you or anything like that?' And I thought ok, here we go again and at the moment that happened, I guess my automatic response was get defensive or get angry and I almost said something that I shouldn't have said but you just try not to give a negative impression, try not to add to peoples misconceptions or what they may believe about Muslim people—just be polite and try to not say anything. After awhile it was just like, ok, this is the world we live in. We can't help but deal with it—try to make the best out of it and be representative of Islam—don't be somebody that goes off the handle, because that's only going to reinforce peoples perceptions of how Muslims are.

Similarly, Participant 1 felt that being a representative meant constantly being polite:

Ok, you have to be extra nice to everybody, so they don't sit there and generalize Sometimes I feel like I can't be mad at somebody, I can't be upset at somebody because I have to put that image, that we are not mean people. Everybody gets upset, everybody gets mad but sometimes I feel

like I can't show those emotions. I have to be extra nice to certain people to show a certain population that I'm a nice person, I'm not a threat and I kind of almost I want to mirror image my religion—the way I treat people, I want to be extra nice because I want to show them Muslims aren't bad. They are people just like us. I love being nice to people because that's who I am—always nice but sometimes you get frustrated and I can't show that frustration sometimes. It's stressful.

Both Participant 1 and Participant 8 were visibly associated with Islam, which may make them more representative. Although neither Participant 6 nor Participant 2 wear hijab, they both perceived that wearing the veil would automatically put them in a position to be a greater representative of Islam. There is an extreme pressure to be as true to the religion as possible as not to give Islam a bad name. Participant 2 said,

I think there's a lot of pressure because once you actually put on the scarf you are expected to be a role model, even when you're in line at the grocery store. Whatever you do people are watching you and they associate your actions with other Muslims. For myself, I'm a little nervous because maybe I'm not at that part religiously, maybe I'm not that great of a person, maybe I'm going to slip up and say something one day in front of people and they will think hey, all Muslims are like that. For me I feel like I'm a better representative if I meet and talk with them normally and then somewhere down the line in our relationship they find out that I am Muslim, and then they will think, you're a good person and you're Muslim rather than something else. I think it would really hinder

me in my career, too. Personally, I don't think I would feel as comfortable as I am now knowing that everybody is watching my every move or something.

Participant 6 felt similarly about being a good Muslim with the hijab on:

I don't wear hijab because that's the ultimate epitome of faith and I don't think that I am ready for that. Not in the sense that I'm not ready to take off the makeup or not ready for that kind of thing, not the physical aspects of it all but the mentality of it. In my mind, you have to be a perfect, perfect Muslim in order to wear the hijab.

### *Representing Identity in Context*

Almost every student said that they have had situations where just by walking into a certain setting they know they will be stereotyped or even threatened because of their Muslim identity. Most often, these contexts involved the airport or at a job, but some students were even afraid to go into unfamiliar stores or locales. Participant 1 cried as she explained,

In some areas I won't even go into a store, if it's an area where I don't know if there is a big population of Muslims and people don't know it [are familiar with Islam]. I'm afraid to actually go into a store, I'm afraid I'm going to be looked at. This gets me emotional, I'm sorry. In some areas I feel like people just look at me and look at me like I'm oppressed and stuff and I don't like people to look at me that way because my religion doesn't stop me from doing things. I'm comfortable in Rochester. In some areas I will just do it [go to the store] but I was out in Royal Oak once and I

needed to go to a CVS really badly and I found one on the block and I thought I don't want to go down there because I don't want people to look at me or say anything so I just didn't go down. I'm not usually the type of person who is scared of that kind of stuff, I don't care, I try not to care so much but it hurts when I can't even go to a store because I'm afraid someone is going to look at me wrong. I'm afraid that something is going to happen to me because I'm Muslim or have people say, 'your people bombed our country' and they are going to retaliate against me. I've heard of the hate crimes and I just don't want to be part of that.

Although Participant 1's situation was because the area was unknown, Participant 8 recited an incident at a store that he was familiar with but was still under suspicion.

I was at the grocery store and something happened. The FBI and swat team had come in the grocery store and they were asking people for ID and they asked me for my ID and they kind of took me to the side and saw my ID and saw my name and they all surrounded me and asked me questions. I didn't know what was going on at the time, but I found out that somebody had been seen with a gun in the store and they were trying to find out who it was and when they saw my name, they automatically associated me with something like that. That was the only time I kind of felt threatened like that. I was kind of upset that I was targeted but at the same time I wasn't surprised about it. I guess that's just the nature of how our society is. You can't be really surprised when things like that happen. So I decide to deal with it in the best way and I tried at the time to say that



I didn't have anything to do with it. I was just worried about what could happen to me.

Both of the students above seemed to be worried in the situations at the store about what could happen to them physically. Participant 6 was at a store in the mall and was not afraid physically of discrimination, but for this first time perceived discrimination based on her Muslim Identity. She went to the mall with a few Muslim friends all wearing the hijab, and the women working at the shoe store had attitudes, were rude to them and wouldn't help her or her friends. She watched as the employees gladly helped other customers and she explained,

I was considered lucky because my other friends, the hijabi ones, the employees didn't even talk to. That was one of the incidences where it was kind of awkward. I've always been discriminated as a black person, but never as a Muslim! That was the first time.

The following instances cite pressure from the context of workplace or job security. Participant 3 had an incident at work of which she understood to be discrimination. A customer was very rude and mean to her and she was worried that it was somehow her fault and that the incident could affect her job. She first worried that her boss would think poorly of her and consequently of Islam, but later found out that her boss found the situation to be understandable and was fine with it. Participant 3 ended up just being "pissed" and said,

I didn't get angry in front of them but in the back of my mind I was down a bit because I thought, wait, that could be a situation where I could have lost my job. I don't really show my emotions but I was scared of losing

my job and presenting Islam in a different way than actually representing it in a good way, which then my manager was like 'no, it wasn't your fault'. So then I was relieved, but when I was in that situation I was a little mad because how come we always have to do this [worry] and not anyone else—how come someone that's Caucasian doesn't have to, or someone of a different color?

Participant 6, who is a flight attendant said:

I just got out of training with Northwest and that was interesting. I tried my best not to let anyone know [I was Muslim] at first, I didn't want it to jeopardize my job. I didn't want people to think of me differently. I didn't want it to be harder on me. It turned out that people were really interested. I did have one instructor that disliked me because of it, yes, one day I wore the hijab and they freaked out. The lady pulled me aside and, you get written up for improper dress code and during the six weeks of training we had to wear business professional and she said that the veil was not business professional and I said, well do you know what this is? And she said, no, and I said well, it's a hijab. At that time it was Ramadan, one of the holy holidays that we have, and I said, I'm just wearing it because of Ramadan, because this particular day means a lot to me and she said 'oh, ok and the entire day she was a little stand-offish about it so I didn't wear it after that. I had another Muslim girl in my class and she was so excited to see me in hijab and she said, 'oh that means I can wear it too'. A week later she was let go.

Despite some bosses and coworkers being interested and understanding, both women feared that their job was in jeopardy. These types of incidents made the students worry that they would lose their jobs.

Travel seemed to be the number one context in which the students automatically perceived that they were under suspicion. Some of the students were surprised by the blatant discrimination and some were not. All of the students, however, were upset and angry over incidences that took place at airports and border crossings.

Of an overseas family visit Participant 3 said,

I got so mad because they let everyone go besides us and I thought the reason why they made us stop is because we wear hijab and we are Muslims. They made us take off our shoes, and this was in the beginning when they were being strict and I was so mad at them. I think we were going to Florida and that was right when they started getting strict and now everyone has to take their shoes off—before it was just pinpointed on Muslims and they said you have to take off your shoes, you have to go to the side, to check you. I was so mad, you know why they do that, because we're Muslims—that's why and My dad's said, 'Shut up!' He's said, 'don't say anything'. I said, Why?

Each student had a travel story to share about being stereotyped. Two more are related below:

Participant 4:

The biggest problem I think I ever had was in high school. My junior year we were going to a wedding in Canada, this was before September 11<sup>th</sup>,

maybe around 98 or 99. We were all going to a wedding. The guy was from Michigan and the person that they were marrying was from Windsor. We were going and we were all dressed up in our cultural outfits and it was winter, it was really cold and my grandparents were in the car with us too. So we were going [through customs] and the lady, she was a white older lady in the booth, she said, 'so where are you going? I said, we're going to Windsor. She said, 'what for?' I said, a wedding. She said, 'where's the gift?' She wanted us to open it. The gift was jewelry and I had wrapped it up nice with a little bow and it was just this tiny box of earrings and a ring, something really small. I said, why—why, and she said, 'where's the receipt?' I said that we are going to a wedding, how are we going to have a receipt? Five police officers come out and make us get out of the car and stand in a line and it's cold, my grandparents too, we are in front of the line. My sister's crying, I'm crying, this is getting ridiculous. I was more upset then my parents were and then this one cop, this police officer said as we were going back to the car 'it doesn't matter, none of your Paki food will be able to come through the border anyways.' I guess the wedding was catering from Detroit to come through and I guess they had them on hold too at the border. He said none of your 'Paki food', and Paki is a very derogatory term for a Pakistani and right then I knew that this was all a whole racist and stereotype type thing.

Participant 8:

I've flown about six or seven times and every single time I've flown, it's always been an issue because the first time I flew I was leaving from Atlanta – a huge airport. If you had your ticket you'd show your ticket to the lady before you went to baggage handling. I showed my ticket to the lady and every time I showed the ticket to that person they always circled my name and pulled that security guard up there and said 'follow him' and I'd have to go somewhere and get searched.

Research Question #2: If there is a perceived threat, in what ways is it perceived?

In answering the second research question, stereotype seemed to be the way that the students most often perceived threat. The students also related the ways in which they understood stereotype to occur. The following themes emerged: visible and cultural differences and how we perceive looks, words and actions.

All of the participants in the interview process related stories of themselves as having to contend with preconceived ideas about their religion by other people. For example, Participant 1, who wears hijab, had trouble keeping her composure at work when a man told her that she is going to hell because she didn't believe in Jesus, even though, as she said, "Jesus was a prophet" in Islam. Participant 4 had to explain her religion to another women in her fitness class who couldn't understand why she would want an arranged marriage and said to her "you're living here in America, you should be American." Participant 8 recalled the first time that he understood the idea of stereotype and that people were really unaware what Islam was about.

I remember being confused about what I was doing—I remember one time me and my father were doing some work on a lady's house, she was non-Muslim, and it was time to pray so we asked to pray at her house and she asked if we were going to light any fires or anything like that. So that's just kind of the awakening, like wow, people really don't understand.

He also explained that people are never really sure what to expect, like a co-worker who saw his very ethnic name before he met him.

### *Visible Differences*

Most students found that if they were not automatically tagged as a Muslim and all the stereotypes that go along with it, they fared better socially and felt as if it were easier to get to know people and become more effective at breaking down stereotypes.

Participant 2, who does not wear Hijab, said

I think when people look at me they don't automatically assume that I am Muslim, which is great. I don't want to be tagged as a Muslim right away. I'd rather have people meet me and then usually down the line they say, 'oh, you're Muslim?' It is kind of surprising to them, because then I say, oh, you're Mormon?

Since she doesn't "look" Muslim, Participant 2 has encountered situations where if she had been more visibly associated with Islam, she may not have seen instances of stereotype. Participant 2 said,

At thanksgiving I was at JC Penny buying something and I noticed the women in front of me, she was white and probably Christian of some sort, was having a conversation with me but the people in front of her were

Muslim and I could tell because they were wearing the scarf. She was saying stuff and I didn't want to say anything because I think because it was early and I just didn't. If something comes up that is serious, I will always defend my religion but in that situation I didn't feel like it, but I think what her whole point that was getting across was, 'go back to your country', basically.

Participant 2 and Participant 1 believed that there is a big difference between women who wear the scarf on campus and women who do not. Participant 2 said,

I think that because I don't wear the scarf I'm more accepted and more welcome and I can see that there is a difference between people who do make an open statement, people who say that they are openly Muslim.

I'm not hiding it; I'm just not putting a big red flag on.

Participant 1 said,

If I didn't wear a scarf I would be able to go into a store in the middle of nowhere and just do what I need to do, but because I wear a scarf, I'm just telling everybody, here comes a bad person, this is what they think.

Both women claimed that having a visible association with Islam automatically puts them at a higher risk for threat.

### *Cultural Differences*

Both Participant 8 and Participant 6 asserted that the biggest misconception they are faced with is that they are associated with the Nation of Islam. Although the Nation of Islam was founded in the Detroit area where they live, the students believed that no matter where they go, this perception will follow. The Nation of Islam began in the

1930's as a means to reunite lost African tribes in the United States with their history in order to restore their previous high civilization and self independence (Muhammad, 1996). Participant 8 said,

I think they separate you because I don't think the stereotype is what they consider to be Muslim, they don't see African-Americans as Muslims.

There is almost an automatic association with more of a Nation of Islam type.

They felt that many people perceived all African-American Muslims to be from the Nation of Islam.

Many of the students stated that there are cultural differences between the way each culture adapts to Islam but felt that the differences are not shown in the media and as such, many people confuse cultural or stereotypically Arabic culture, with Islam.

Participant 1 argued that

Islam gives equality for both races and for both genders; it's just the culture that makes it look different. It's the culture that says, ok the man as the head of the household has to do everything, but my religion basically, in its own ways, makes equality for both. They think, 'oh why is it ok when the man hits the women?' Every race, every gender, there are women being abused by their husbands. Why is it that you're targeting Muslims? Why are you saying that the women are oppressed in Islam, but you see other women that can't get out of marriages that are not Muslim? Culture plays a big role. A lot of people kind of define their religion by their culture. There are flaws in the culture that make things look bad, I



mean every culture has their flaws, but for us I guess it's just making our religion a flaw as well.

Participant 2 explained,

When I go to Egypt I still don't wear a hijab and everybody else is wearing hijab and I'm the only one not wearing hijab. It's kind of strange in both terms when I go to Egypt I don't cover up, I wear short sleeves and really I think that people get confused between the culture of Islam and the religion of Islam. In Egypt it's a lot of culture and I grew up in a different culture, the culture here [United States]. I don't feel that in this culture that it's something that I need to do. If I grew up in Egypt and I was 100% Egyptian I might feel that I need to wear hijab and that when I come here I need to wear hijab, but here I don't feel that need to.

Participant 6 explained the cultural difference as she perceived it:

That's why Islam is so great because it's a way of life that revolves around your specific culture. If you wear the actual head scarf [in America] then you are drawing more attention to yourself and it's not meant for that. If I was in Saudi Arabia, I would wear a head scarf because what's appropriate here would not be appropriate there.

### *Looks, Words, Actions: How We Perceive*

Students related ways in which they understood that they were being stereotyped.

Participant 8 claimed that during conversations, he recognized this by the way people would ask questions. He said, "Maybe people are outside of their comfort zone in conversations with you and people try to sugar coat what they say because they are

around you or something like that.” Participant 6 said that she wouldn’t even get into conversations with people sometimes because they wouldn’t even approach her. The few questions that she did receive ended up placing her in an uncomfortable situation. She said,

People would already assume I wasn’t willing to talk to them. If I was in a group of Muslim students, they would say, ‘oh, she probably doesn’t want to talk to an American.’ My friend actually asked me well when are you going to stop being Muslim and be an American again? It was awkward.

Participant 2 also felt as though she was treated differently when people found out she was Muslim; she could tell by the way they acted:

If people asked what I was doing for Christmas or something and I would say, oh well you know what, I actually don’t celebrate Christmas—I’m Muslim. I don’t like to say that right away because I guess they kind of, not treat me differently but just be more careful about what they say because they think they’re going to offend me—especially with the Christmas thing. I really don’t care. I live in this country, I know about Christmas, it’s fine. If you say Merry Christmas to me, I’m not going to freak out.

Many of the students, whether it was in a certain context or situation, found that when people were rude it was most often perceived as discrimination. Participant 4’s professor from California found out that she was Muslim and Participant 4 believed that consequently, she became “really rude.” She said,

I could tell right away her whole persona changed. My grade even changed, everyone in the class knew she didn't like me but didn't know why. One of the girls in the class said, it's probably because you're Muslim.

When Participant 4's Grandfather died and she returned to Michigan for the funeral, her professor did not allow her to turn in a late paper. Participant 4 perceived this as a discriminatory act. She related,

I'm sitting there crying in front of her and she did not care—at all. She gave me a zero on the paper. She was mean and snotty and did not want to hear anything that I had to say at all.

Research Question #3: Does the media serve as a source of collective identity threat for Muslim Students?

The emergent theme that this question produced was media misrepresentation. Every participant showed an immediate rush of disappointment and anger when the topic of the media was discussed. The words angry, terrible, hate and upset came up often. The students seemed very affected by the media representation of Islam and many were concerned with the way the media uses terms to misconstrue Islam and relate a mass misconception out to the general public. The misuse of terms by the media was a re-occurring theme as Participant 1 explained,

It angers me- it makes me really mad. I was watching the news last week, it was actually a couple of weeks ago, and there was something about these schools are teaching radicalism—students to be radical Muslims and the schools are called madrasahs—that's what they said. Well, madrasah

in Arabic means school. I'm looking at the screen thinking, are you kidding me? Why do they generalize to all Muslims saying things like, 'this bomber was a Muslim.' Why? Just because a small population or a little percentage of a certain religion did something bad, why do you have to generalize over all of them? Other people have shot up schools and why doesn't that population look at all white people as shooters who are going to shoot up a school? There are bad things going on in the world from all different races and religions, but why is it that Muslims are the ones that are targeted and looked at bad? It just, it makes me really, really angry.

Immediately following 9/11, Participant 4 had similar thoughts about the misuse or misleading terms in the media:

I kept thinking, please don't let it be a Muslim, please don't let it be a Muslim. It had to be people from the Middle East, but the day after in one of my classes the professor wanted me to talk about it. She asked some of the students how they felt, so I raised my hand and I told them that anyone who does that kind of act are not considered to have any religion—they are not Muslim, because if you're going to do something to that extent, you're not a Muslim- you're killing yourself first of all that's against Islam to do suicide or anything like that. I brought that up in class and I also talked about the main thing that I didn't like about the news was that they kept saying *Islamic Terrorist*, *Islamic Terrorist*, and that just upset me. I don't like the media portrayal. Why do you have to put religion into that,

put the word Islam in before—just say terrorist, that's all you have to say.

Don't put religion in front of it because those people don't even know their own religion, they don't even know the true religion.

About the media portrayal of Islam Participant 6 said,

Oh, I hate it. I hate it; there is nothing more angry to me than that. You wouldn't understand it if you didn't know anything about Islam. You wouldn't see the hidden messages that they say if you didn't know anything about it. All the little things that they portray out to you. It's like you should feel this way, they don't say that you should feel this way but they kind of portray that and it's just so upsetting.

Participant 7 said,

Yeah, that is like a negative impression they are making of the Muslims which I am not really comfortable with because when I see a movie I only see the negative part, it would give you a negative impression of what you are but that's not the whole truth—that's just one part of the story so they don't give you the whole perspective they just give you the bad part of it and they would keep showing it every day. They only portray the negative side and if I was shown the negative side of one community or maybe even say about Christians every time I would see them on TV and think, ok, there's something wrong with Christians and I have to be careful if I see them. I think that that's the impact media has made.

Participant 2 said,

I think it's horrible, I really do. It's kind of sad because the media doesn't just do this for Islam but they do this for a lot of other things. They portray it in a horrible light, in a really bad light and they are amazing at taking words and twisting them around and making it seem like something else. So in the news it's just amazing to watch sometimes because certain things will pop out and it is common sense that some of this stuff people should know isn't really true but they see it so many times over and over again that people think that it's true.

According to the above students, the media has politicized their Muslim identity and given it a bad name by continuously repeating misleading or false information. What the media does not do, according to Participant 2, is make a distinction between the different Islamic cultures. She claimed,

They [the media] just label the group as Muslims, not Arab Muslims, not Afghani Muslims, they just say they're Muslims. There will be people from Brazil that are Muslim but people will still associate them with terrorism because now the religion is associated with that.

Similarly, Participant 4 claimed that the media doesn't show certain aspects of terrorism and over-emphasizes Islam in relation to it. She said,

It's [terrorism] more of a social problem—money issues and stuff to help their families out to do that—it's not more in the name of religion or anything like that, they are peer pressured into doing it or they tell them, 'oh, we're going to give your family this much or we're going to give you

this or you're going to be a hero.' They go into it in that state of mind more than anything else. They don't even look into who the people are or if it's for religion or anything else, they look at it as what they are getting out of it. The media doesn't show that.

Research Question #4: Does collective threat perpetrate a disconnect between Muslim students and their campus communities, cause downplaying of identity, or undermine social connectedness or self-esteem?

The final multi-faceted question dealt with both the ways in which students cope with collective threat and its effects. The themes that emerged were ignoring and vigilance, education and adversity as strength.

The notion of coping and dealing with collective identity threat came up often in the interviews. Ignoring and vigilance seemed to be the best way of coping in a situational and immediate threat condition and education seemed to be the students' most preferred method in the long run. Adversity as strength was a theme that emerged as an outcome of understanding one's experience.

#### *Ignoring and Vigilance*

Dealing with stereotype and misconception was often found to be a result of context. Depending on the context, some of the students changed their preferred method of dealing with threat and stereotype. For example, Participant 4, who is writing a book and getting a degree in secondary education, changed her preferred method of dealing from education to ignoring because of the situation. She was having lunch with a teacher from her student-teaching school whose husband recently lost his job. Participant 4 said,

The woman said, 'I wish all these people who are coming to our country and taking our jobs, why can't they just go back. Who are they?' I felt really uncomfortable and I just didn't want to say anything because she was older and she was upset because her husband lost his job so I didn't say anything to her. Afterwards I thought, I can't believe she said that and I actually liked her the first time but ever since then I kind of stood a distance away from her.

Although Participant 4 chose to ignore the offensiveness of the situation, Participant 1 claimed that sometimes she isn't even aware of the stares anymore because she's been conditioned to ignore them. She claimed,

I don't notice stares. When I was visiting with my friend in Florida, I was walking with her and I didn't notice stares. She's said, 'oh god, did you see that lady staring at you?' No. She's said, 'oh, I just want to go talk to them and yell at them.' But I think that's normal. I don't notice it because I'm used to it. I'm going to get stares—it's not like something out of the ordinary. As long as they are not doing anything to me physically they can stare all they want. I'm not any different—I talk, I have two legs and two arms, eyes, mouth, nose, everything. The only thing that's different is that I'm covering my hair. It kind of drives me crazy because nuns cover their hair and they are dressed in not showing their body shape—well, they're not looked at funny, but I am.

Many students related stories of ignoring threat or discrimination, but a few had other methods of dealing, such as becoming vigilant as Participant 8 related:



The other day there was a party across from our apartment and someone pulled the fire alarm. When everybody came back in the building, the police were going door to door trying to find out who it was. They knocked on my door and I answered the door. They were asking for ID's and everything like that. It kind of dawned on me, how much I got on guard. They were asking me for my ID and my name and things like that but I guess there wasn't any negative response from them—they were just kind of trying to find out who it was. I kind of realized that I put myself on guard and that happens sometimes. I guess I prepare myself to maybe explain myself or explain something about where I've been maybe or where I'm going—as opposed to the next individual who says, 'oh my name is Brandon' and gets to go along his way. I kind of prepare myself to be scrutinized.

### *Education*

Most students preferred to educate people as a means to deal with identity threat. Every participant claimed at one time or another to have educated someone about Islam when their identity was being questioned or threatened. Although this is not an immediate response to a physical threat, most of the students agreed that education was the means to a greater end. Participant 1 wanted people to ask her questions and not to assume things about her. She did not think that any question was stupid if it ended up being an opportunity to educate. Participant 6 claimed that she used to get angry when people would talk bad about Islam in front of her. Now, she said,

I just kind of sit back and I just asked them—have you ever looked that up, where did you hear that from? Hey, this a really cool website and why don't you check this out or that kind of thing. I don't tell them straight off the bat that I'm Muslim because then they automatically tune me out.

Once I give them information they wonder, well, how did you know that? Then they feel more comfortable with someone that looks like them, that acts like them and talks like them. It's scary when it's someone that's different, from a different universe.

Similar to what Participant 6 said above, Participant 8 indicated that he would be better able to educate if the 'students' did not know right away that he is Muslim:

I try not to let them know that I'm Muslim right away. I just try to use the context of what they're saying and try to make them see. Maybe if they're talking about something negative about Islam or something like that, I try to make them see that it may not be true without letting them know that I'm Muslim because if I tell them that I'm Muslim, then they're only going to go on the defensive. I try to engage them and change whatever misconceptions they happen to have without telling them that I'm Muslim so it doesn't seem like I'm just defending Islam as opposed to just telling the truth.

Participant 4 felt like the perception of threat of discrimination was lessened when she was able to use the situation as an opportunity to educate rather than the situation causing a strain on her self-esteem. She said,

I'm going educate you, sit you down and tell you what's up. It's not just my culture and race [to be understood]. I think I just try to back up as much as I can with anyone because if someone is giving me the wrong information about someone's culture or religion and maybe I know something. I say outright, no, this is what I think, this is what I know and this is what I've heard and read about.

Education, however, does not always work when people are not even willing to listen, as Participant 4 pointed out:

I wore henna on my hands and I went into the store. I remember one time because I had it on both hands and the lady at the cash register wouldn't even take the change from my hand. She asked, 'Do you have a disease?' She had to be in her 20's or 30's, I mean come on, do you have a disease? Yeah, I have the disease of flowers growing out of my hands and I'm thinking, what is your issue? I have this disease where flowers and intricate designs just pop out from my hand. I just explained to her that this is henna, it's a henna tattoo and it's temporary. She didn't even care. She seemed so appalled and didn't even want to know or want to care. It just seemed like I was wasting my time even telling her.

Even so, Participant 4 ultimately felt that education was the best way she knew and wanted to deal with stereotype. Participant 7 agreed when he claimed that the onus of education is on the part of the school's Muslim Student Organization. He said,

The MSA organization could be more proactive and tell people what Islam is about and what we all do and what is good about it. The one here at our

school is not that active so it's on our part to give out our ideas, what are we about.

### *Adversity as Strength*

Although all of the students related ways that they dealt with identity threat, most all of the students claimed to have had some good come from situations in which they experienced threat. Participant 4 said,

The border crossing situation made me stronger. I think it made me push more towards bringing out people for being more tolerant. I wanted people to know what was going on. I think that is gave me a boost. When I was younger I wasn't as outgoing, I wasn't as outspoken as I am now, but I think when certain situations happen like that it makes you stronger.

Participant 1 said the same of incidents of identity threat, particularly of going into unknown stores or situations. She asserted,

I think it makes me stronger, because sometimes I will walk into the store, like the Target and the stores on Rochester Road, and not want to do it at all. I'm by myself, I don't know the area, my family is not even here, so I actually pushed myself and went and nothing bad happened, so it makes me stronger in a sense—it doesn't lower my self-esteem. I am very comfortable with who I am. It makes me stronger but it also makes me wake up to even more reality. As if this is real, people really do think this. It makes me stronger in the sense that I can defend my religion but it gives me a kind of reality check. It hurts—I don't want to have to deal with this again.

In summation, the students in this study were eager to discuss their experiences and had many things to share. The emergent themes of being a purist and scholar, being a representative and representing collective identity in context were themes that represented threat perception. The themes of visible and cultural differences and looks, words, and actions were categories that represented the way threat is perceived. Media misrepresentation was a theme that represented the way that students felt about the media as a collective threat and finally, ignoring, vigilance, education and adversity as strength were themes that represented the ways in which students dealt with threat. The themes will be further discussed in relation to previous research in the following chapter.

## CHAPTER V

### DISCUSSION

The main themes from the first research question (is there a collective threat perceived by Muslim Students?) included being a purist and scholar, being a representative and representing collective identity in context. The second question (if there is a perceived threat, in what ways is it perceived?) had themes that included visible and cultural differences and how we perceive looks, words and actions. The third research question (does the media serve as a source of collective identity threat for Muslim students?) was marked by media misrepresentation. Finally, the fourth research question (does collective threat perpetrate a disconnect between Muslim students and their campus communities, cause downplaying of identity or undermine social connectedness or self-esteem?) explored themes that included ignoring and vigilance, education and adversity as strength. Discussion of the themes as they relate to the literature review, recommendations for further research and for the Student Affairs Professional will conclude the current research on Muslim student perceptions of collective identity threat.

In general, this study suggested the opposite of Johnson's research (2004) in that the participants of the current research socialized well with both Muslim peers and non-Muslim peers and made lasting relationships with both groups. Johnson (2004) suggested that the culture of alcohol on campus made it difficult for students to socialize. Although the students in the current study found the pressures of alcohol were real, they were not severe enough that they were socially or self segregated on campus. Most of the students in the current study felt very connected to campus. For example, Participant 7

said, "I feel very comfortable, nobody really cares what religion you belong to, [I am] just like everyone else."

Generally, and consistent with research by Ethier and Deaux (1994), was the theory that strong group identity was related to high self-esteem and greater association with collective groups on campus. All the participants rated themselves as strongly identified with being Muslim and each student had some connection to the Muslim Student Association on campus. In the pre-survey, most every student rated themselves as being highly confident and optimistic with a strong self-esteem. This seemed to indicate support for Ethier and Deaux's (1994) study on ethnic identity.

In the theme of pressure, each sub-theme within it demonstrated the students' assumptions of threat or discrimination based on the situation in which they found themselves. They understood pressure as experienced both inside and outside the classroom and also during traveling or on the job. The classroom pressure as experienced by the students was consistent with Lee and Rice (2007) who suggested that international students experienced discomfort in the classroom because of verbal insults. Also, Speck (1997) noted that students in her study had teachers who used media in the classroom that misrepresented their religion. Although both Participant 2 and Participant 1 experienced this type of pressure and level of discomfort, they seemed to welcome it as a necessary evil in order to correct false representations and change peoples' minds.

Representing a collective identity in context was a theme that emerged as the students discussed traveling and other types of activities where they knew stereotype would occur. Participant 8 explained his situation of flying and being stopped every single time:

It didn't happen to anybody in front of us, it didn't happen to anybody behind us. It happens every time I fly. After awhile you think, well, this is the world we live in. We can't help but deal with it and try to make the best out of it— be a good representative of Islam and don't be somebody that goes off the handle.

Although Participant 8's account of expected and consistent discrimination was not as severe as Participant 2's situation of being fearful of both physical retaliation and verbal harassment when entering an unknown store, each student perceived this threat as constantly imminent within that particular context. Steele, Spencer and Aronson's (2002) "theory of context" (p.417) noted that the situation one is in may trigger the perception or likelihood of discrimination, similar to the students' own experiences.

The participants in this study explained the greater ability and ease of discussing Islamic issues and ideas with non-Muslim peers and the community by not being visibly associated with the religion. Like research by Ahmadi and Cole (2003) that suggested some students were "more effective" (p. 62) as Muslims when they were not visibly associated with the religion, the participants in this study felt that they were able to overcome collective stereotypes and have a more healthy and valuable discussion.

For example, when discussing something negative that was mentioned about Islam, Participant 8 said,

I try not to let them know that I'm Muslim right away, because if I tell them that I'm Muslim then they're only going to go on the defensive. I try to engage them and change whatever misconceptions they happen to have



without telling them that I'm Muslim so it doesn't seem like I'm just defending Islam as opposed to just telling the truth.

Participant 1 and other students had similar instances to share which support the research by Ahmadi and Cole (2003) that the idea of Muslim visibility inhibits social interaction and by erasing those visible signs, one can become more effective at both breaking stereotypes and growing as an individual.

Media misrepresentation emerged as a very sensitive issue among the participants. The idea that Muslim identity was being politicized was brought up by Participant 6 who led a panel for an inter-faith dialogue and found she continuously had to field political questions. She claimed,

A lot of people were drawing their sources from what the news had said and they were asking, 'why did they [Muslim's] do this and this and this here?' We continually had to repeat ourselves that we do not defend terrorism, that is not our faith. I think that the media has had a major role in having people think that that's what we believe in and it's not. Every time someone would stand up they would ask something political and that's not what we were there for. We were there to unite some of the same kind of similarities and ideas that we Muslims have with other faiths like Judaism and Christianity and even Hinduism.

Ashmore, Deaux and McLaughlin-Volpe (2004) claimed that politicization was a part of a collective identity when that identity was involved in a power struggle and at such times, the stereotype and discrimination process toward that identity intensified. Ansari (2003) suggested that this kind of politicized identity created a stronger sense of

community. Similar to what Peek (2005) said about Muslim students banding together in the face of discrimination, the students in the current research seemed committed to the Muslim Student Association and to education as a means of creating awareness and community.

Students used different tactics to deal with the perception of threat and most often the following themes were present: ignoring and vigilance, education, and adversity as strength. Often, the researcher found that students in the current study used what Steele, Spencer and Aronson (2002) theorized as "resistance to seeing discrimination" (p.418) and "vigilance to threat" (p. 416) to deal with what they perceived to be identity threat. For example, Participant 8 said that he gets "on guard" and doesn't realize until after how much and how often he does so. This was his automatic response to threat of which the researcher interpreted as vigilance.

Adversity as strength seemed to suggest that the students have strong social connections consistent with the research of both Ahmadi and Cole (2003) and Peek (2005). However, unlike Cohen and Garcia's (2005) suggestion that collective threat has negative effects on self-esteem and causes a disassociation with ones in-group, the students in the current research seemed to gain power both collectively and individually in the face of collective identity threat. For example Participant 1 said, "It makes me stronger [perception of threat], in a sense, it doesn't lower my self-esteem. I am very comfortable with who I am." However, Cohen and Garcia's (2005) collective identity threat research seems to indicate that the results of their study are measured as an outcome of an immediate threat.

### *Recommendations for Future Research*

Further studies in this area must look at this question: do the results of the current study on collective identity threat as perceived by Muslim students indicate that the negative or positive effects are a result of an immediate threat (a physical or verbal altercation) or a threat that stays the same over time (i.e. the perception that most people believe that terrorism is a "Muslim thing")? The current research does not distinguish if the effects of threat are a result of immediate or long-term threats; however, the researcher most often saw the negative and positive effects of ignoring, vigilance, and education as a result of dealing with threat over time.

As the above paragraph indicates, further research should include the investigation of the effects of threat in the immediate versus the long term perception. This would be important in understanding how to deal with identity threat on campus and how students deal with it individually. Further research into the experiences of Muslim students on campus and collective identity threat would be of value on an interdisciplinary level. The following bullets are recommendations for further study:

- The current research used a population that was incredibly outgoing and well matriculated into campus life including each being a member of the Muslim Student Association. Further studies should include students who are not as well integrated into campus life and are not part of the MSA on campus.
- Because most of the students in this study seemed to cope with threat in a positive way, further exploration into groups who have strong collective identity and membership in an identifying student organization would be helpful in

understanding how these groups and individuals cope with threat in a positive way.

- Research that specifically investigates the theme of “being a representative” could be useful in understanding if the idea of being a representative for a specific identity population is self-imposed (self-stereotyping) or a social construct. The implications of this will be helpful in understanding the racial climate and interaction at your university.
- The current research involved a variety of different ages, genders and ethnicities across the board. Future research may find narrowing the sample population will have a different outcome.
- The current research on collective identity threat should be investigated in the student populations of fraternities and sororities and other registered student organizations (RSO's) on campus. The entire campus community including Greek students and other RSO's would benefit from understanding how these organizations form collective identity, perceive collective threat and stereotype threat, and how they deal with such threats.

#### *Recommendations for Student Affairs Practitioners*

Understanding cultural differences is something all people should strive to do; however, for the Student Affairs Professional, this is something that is not only integral to the job, but an important mission for most universities who value multiculturalism and diversity. In that sense, the present research may be important for the Student Affairs Professional to understand the pressures that Muslim students are under in order to better serve both a religiously and ethnically diverse student population.

The researcher recommends that Student Affairs Professionals help to actively pursue, organize, and nurture Muslim Student Associations on campus. The participants in this study were very vocal in acknowledging that the MSA's on campus were integral in helping educate the wider campus community and foster awareness on campus, providing resources for both Muslim and non-Muslim students and creating identity safe spaces for Muslim students to develop and grow as individuals and as students. The five times daily prayer is a revered pillar of Islam and many participants felt that public prayer was a way that they felt threatened due to staring, comments, and perceived discrimination. Whether by reserving space in the student union or opening up a classroom, it is important to give Muslim students a private space on campus reserved for daily prayers.

### *Conclusion*

This study was carried out in order to understand Muslim student perspectives on collective identity threat. The interviews from the participants personal perspectives both coincided and diverged from the literature review, however, insight was gained into the way in which Muslim students perceive threat and how they dealt with it.

From the discussion, the researcher observed that students who are involved in the campus activities of their identity group seem to have a healthy self-esteem, remain confident and strong in the face of adversity, and deal with threat in a positive way. It was also observed that the effect of the media representation of Muslim collective identity could be potentially very harmful for students whose ethnic identities were not as salient as the participants interviewed here. Each student was angered and saddened when the discussion of the media came up. They all were hurt and disturbed by the

representation and by the personal effects of that representation (i.e. questions, stereotypes, politicized identity). The students in this study described themselves as positive and confident as evidenced by the way they dealt with threat and pressure. These students seem unique in their strength of character and although they were still upset and angered by the media portrayal of Muslims, they seemed extraordinarily vigilant to the images.

Students who face discrimination on campus because of their identity need to be aware that there is a place for them to exist on campus without the threat of harassment or perception of hate. It has been suggested that by creating identity-safe places for Muslim students, they may flourish academically and socially (Nasir, & Al-Amin, 2006). Also, in order to give Muslim students a better sense of belonging and comfort, many institutions of higher education are now appointing Islamic chaplains to serve their Muslim populations (Hamilton, 2006). These kinds of changes can make a big difference in the security and safety Muslim students feel on campus in the face of collective identity threat.

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## APPENDIX A

### Pre-Survey

## PRE-SURVEY

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Age: \_\_\_\_\_ Birth Country: \_\_\_\_\_

Ethnicity/Race: \_\_\_\_\_

Major: \_\_\_\_\_ Year: \_\_\_\_\_

Future Goals:  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Do you consider yourself to be a Muslim? \_\_\_\_\_ Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No

**Please answer on a scale:**

1-Definitely; 2-Mostly; 3-Sometimes; 4-Not Very Much; 5-Definitely Not

I am optimistic \_\_\_\_\_ I consider myself a friendly person \_\_\_\_\_

I am generally confident in things that I do \_\_\_\_\_

I am happy at my university \_\_\_\_\_ I feel comfortable in my current setting \_\_\_\_\_

I am valued at my university \_\_\_\_\_ My connection to campus is strong \_\_\_\_\_

I feel comfortable praying at my university \_\_\_\_\_

Being Muslim is a major part of my identity \_\_\_\_\_

My gender is a major part of my identity \_\_\_\_\_

I am involved in campus activities and campus culture \_\_\_\_\_

EMAIL: \_\_\_\_\_

APPENDIX B  
Guided Questions

## GUIDED QUESTIONS

- How connected do you feel to campus?
- Do you feel welcomed?
- Tell me about your friends?
  
- How strongly do you identify with being Muslim?
- Is it one of your main identities?
  
- How do you feel you are perceived on campus?
  
- Do you pray on campus?
  
- Is it different in groups? Alone?
  
- How do you feel about the media portrayal of Muslims? (any medium)
  
- Do you feel you have a threatened Identity?
- In what situations/contexts?
- Examples?

## APPENDIX C

### Informed Consent



## CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

### *Perceptions of the Experience of Collective Identity Threat Among Muslim Students in Higher Education*

You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by Donna Vitale, from the Counseling and Student Development Department at Eastern Illinois University.

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. Please ask questions about anything you do not understand, before deciding whether or not to participate.

You have been asked to participate in this study because you are a student who identifies with being a Muslim.

#### • PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study is to explore the Muslim student experience. The research seeks to bring to light the voices of the students and examine their perceptions of collective identity threat.

#### • PROCEDURES

If you volunteer to participate in this study, you will be asked to:

- Fill out a pre-survey
- Participate in an in-depth interview of approximately 45 minutes to 1 hour at your University
- Be willing to be recorded in the interview for later transcription (tapes will then be destroyed)
- Correspond in a follow-up email or letter

#### • POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS

There are no reasonable and foreseeable risks or discomforts associated with this study. However, due to the nature of the questions and the possible trauma associated with such a nature, participants may feel upset. If the participant needs to further discuss the topics or needs to process the materials at greater length, the researcher can refer the participant to the Graham Health & Counseling Center on the campus of Oakland University. The number to schedule an appointment is: 248.370.3465.

#### • POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO SUBJECTS AND/OR TO SOCIETY

This study does not benefit the participant directly. This study seeks to benefit the Muslim student community by bringing to light the circumstances under which Muslim students are stereotyped and to understand the nature of collective threat as a means to positively impact their connections to campus.

#### • CONFIDENTIALITY

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. Confidentiality will be maintained by means of using my personal computer to record

information. The information will be coded in a spreadsheet and information will be identified only by participant's mother's maiden names for confidentiality. Only the researcher and her Graduate Advisor will have access to the participant's information. No other party will have access. All audio tape recorded in the interview process will be destroyed immediately after completion of research.

### • PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL

Participation in this research study is voluntary and not a requirement or a condition for being the recipient of benefits or services from Eastern Illinois University or any other organization sponsoring the research project. If you volunteer to be in this study, you may withdraw at any time without consequences of any kind or loss of benefits or services to which you are otherwise entitled.

You may also refuse to answer any questions you do not want to answer. There is no penalty if you withdraw from the study and you will not lose any benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

### • IDENTIFICATION OF INVESTIGATORS

If you have any questions or concerns about this research, please contact Donna Vitale at

PHONE: 586.322.0701.

ADDRESS: 2005 S. 12<sup>th</sup> Street, Charleston, IL 61920.

EMAIL: *dlvitale@eiu.edu*.

### • RIGHTS OF RESEARCH SUBJECTS

If you have any questions or concerns about the treatment of human participants in this study, you may call or write:

Institutional Review Board

Eastern Illinois University

600 Lincoln Ave.

Charleston, IL 61920

Telephone: (217) 581-8576

E-mail: *eiuirb@www.eiu.edu*

You will be given the opportunity to discuss any questions about your rights as a research subject with a member of the IRB. The IRB is an independent committee composed of members of the University community, as well as lay members of the community not connected with EIU. The IRB has reviewed and approved this study.

I voluntarily agree to participate in this study. I understand that I am free to withdraw my consent and discontinue my participation at any time. I have been given a copy of this form.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Name of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date