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Coping Strategies among Muslim Immigrant Women living in Los Angeles

A graduate project submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements

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By

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Dedication

I dedicate this Capstone project to all Muslim immigrant women who have faced many difficulties and have remained resilient.

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Abstract

Coping Strategies among Muslim Immigrant Women in Los Angeles

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Master of Social Work

This qualitative study used an intersectional lens to explore coping methods among Muslim immigrant women living in Los Angeles. Results of a thematic analysis revealed that Muslim immigrant women deal with challenges resulting from different stereotypes against their identity. While Islam is deeply integrated to the participants' identity, it is associated with harmful and terrorist activities in media. Using an intersectional lens demonstrates that Muslim immigrant women deal with extra layers of pressure due to the perpetuated stereotypes against their place of birth and gender-roles that portray them in a negative light. Findings of this study indicate the powerful impacts of the religious and cultural backgrounds on Muslim immigrant women as these factors form their identity and coping methods. The participants cope with challenges by relying on the components of their religious and cultural backgrounds and de-stigmatizing stereotypes in different forms such spreading awareness, demonstrating decent behaviors, and engaging in advocacy. Identifying with collectivist cultural background has also led the participants to cope with challenges in more collectivist approaches rather than Western individualistic methods. In addition, the prevalence of diversity in Los Angeles was observed to act as a protective factor shielding the participants from negative outcomes of stereotypes. Diversity in Los Angeles has created a safe dynamic for the participants to practice their religion in mosques and Islamic centers peacefully and to disclose the truthful aspects of their identity positively. Implications for social work include the importance of enhancing diversity to support

Muslim immigrant women who rely on their religious and cultural backgrounds to deal with the accumulative burden of stereotypes.

Key words: Muslim immigrants, Religious and cultural backgrounds, Stereotypes against Islam, Diversity, De-stigmatization, Advocacy

Introduction

Although the Universal Declaration of Human Rights considers fundamental rights for all human beings, including the right to freely choose and manifest their religion (UN General Assembly, 1948), many individuals face discrimination. Discrimination is defined as institutional arrangements, beliefs, and attitudes that avoid equal treatment to a specific group of people and degrade them based on their affiliations (Dijker & Koomen, 2007). People can be discriminated against based around different reasons, such as race, religion, gender, and sexuality (Scherer, 2009).

Discrimination against Muslims

Muslims make up less than one percent of the U.S. population and it is estimated that about 7 million Muslims are living in America (Ghaffari & Citftci, 2010). Nevertheless, they are considered to be a major population that experiences discrimination (Creighton & Jamal, 2015). Muslims and Middle- Eastern immigrants are affected by the policies and rules that have been established to fight against terrorism in the U.S. (Bakalian & Bozorgmehr, 2009).

Creighton and Jamal (2015), studied the level of explicit and implicit opposition towards immigrants for obtaining U.S. citizenship in a quantitative study of U.S. citizens (N=1,828), finding that Muslim immigrants were subjected to greater explicit opposition compared to Christian immigrants. Results showed that both Christian and Muslim immigrants faced implicit opposition due to the prevalence of anti-immigration sentiment in the U.S. (Creighton & Jamal, 2015). Since Christian immigrants are considered to be in-group immigrants for following the same faith, they were treated in a more welcoming manner, whereas Muslim immigrants are categorized as outgroup immigrants with a different religion that causes them to face further

explicit discrimination. Islamophobia is the name of the concept showing different attitudes towards Muslim immigrants (Creighton & Jamal, 2015).

The term *Islamophobia* has been used since the end of 1980's in the U.S. (Bleich, 2011; Kunst, Tajamal, Sam, & Ulleberg, 2012). Islamophobia is a type of religious discrimination that may happen with racial and appearance-based discrimination (Samari, 2016). Islamophobia is defined as intense fear and dislike of Islam and Muslims (Ven, 2012). Following the September 11th attacks in 2001, it is perceived that Islamophobia has increased in Western societies (Kunst, Sam, & Ulleberg, 2013). Out of 138 Muslims who participated in an online survey in the U.S., 86% of them reported experiencing at least one negative stressful event such as hearing anti-Muslim comments following the 9/11 attacks (Abu-Raiya, Pargament, & Mahoney, 2011).

Western media plays a significant role in the construction and perpetuation of negative stereotypes of Muslims and Islam (Ven, 2012). Muslims are consistently portrayed as fundamentalists, terrorists, and sexist people in Western media (Abdullah, 2013; Al-hamdani, 2016). According to a study conducted in Sweden, aggressive language was used to describe Islam and Muslims on Swedish social media (Törnberg & Törnberg, 2016). In this study, topic modeling and critical discourse analysis were combined to explore the pattern of representation of Muslims and Islam in Swedish social media. Analyzing 50 million posts between the years of 2000 and 2013, from the largest Swedish forum showed that Muslims were mainly called derogatory terms, such as sand nigger, fanatic, and violent (Törnberg & Törnberg, 2016). In addition, Islam is portrayed on the social media outlet as a religion that evokes violence (Törnberg & Törnberg, 2016). The results of this study are considered in alignment with online Islamophobia and common negative representations of Muslims in Western media (Törnberg &

Törnberg, 2016). In the U.S. media, Muslims are also presented as dangerous and untrustworthy individuals (Van, 2012).

It is important to know that the level of tolerance or intolerance towards immigrants can impact their sense of identity and quality of life (Salari, 2002). Belonging to a group that is feared by society can negatively influence Muslim's health and their psychological adaption, regardless of whether or not they experience discrimination on a daily basis (Kunst et al., 2013).

Discriminatory Practices against Muslim Immigrant Women

While media perpetuates negative images of Islam and portrays Muslim men as terrorists, Muslim immigrant women are introduced as oppressed individuals with extremely low-status in society (Salari, 2002). Many non-Muslims believe that Muslim women are forced to wear a hijab (Furseth, 2011). From a Western radical feminism perspective, wearing a hijab is perceived as a sign of subordination of Muslim women (Furseth, 2011). In other words, wearing a hijab is perceived as an over-determined sign of otherness excluding Muslim women from Western communities and cultures (Jasperse, 2009).

Wearing a hijab can imply different religious, cultural, social, and political meaning. According to the Oxford dictionary of Islam, the term hijab is defined as a symbol of modesty, privacy and morality (Esposito, 2004). Some people consider wearing a hijab as a religious obligation and some perceive it as a matter of choice (Robert, 2007). Two qualitative studies about hijab revealed that wearing a hijab is perceived as a voluntary practice among Muslim women in Western countries that gives them a sense of empowerment and social status (Al Wazni, 2015; Furseth, 2011).

Wearing a hijab can be a different experience for Muslim immigrant women in Western societies compared to their original countries due to the pressure resulting from the perpetuated

stereotypes. Muslim immigrant women in Canada, who participated in a qualitative study (N=26), explained experiencing further discrimination for wearing a headscarf and manifesting their religious affiliation in public areas (Rahmath, Chamber, & Wakewich, 2016). Furthermore, Muslim immigrant women from Iraq and Lebanon (N=5), who participated in a qualitative study in the U.S., expressed notable interpersonal conflicts for wearing a hijab in America, which had created challenges for them and made their integration a more difficult process (Robert, 2007).

Immigration and acculturation challenges

Immigrants may face cultural transitions, social isolation, and discriminatory practices in their new destinations (Adam & Ward, 2016). Coming from different cultural backgrounds and following different cultural norms can impact the ways individuals perceive incidents and deal with different circumstances.

According to Fozdar and Torezani's (2008) findings in their mixed method study of humanitarian refugees (N=150) in Australia, Middle-Eastern refugees were observed to be under the influences of their cultural standards and etiquettes in answering questions regarding their well-being and perceived discrimination. The participants were not comfortable in sharing their stories of discrimination because of their cultural politeness norm which considers criticizing others openly as an inappropriate and rude behavior. The same study illustrates the importance of cultural backgrounds in constructing immigrants' behaviors and coping strategies (Fozdar & Torezani, 2008).

Immigrants' cultural values and principles can influence their interactions with people from different social and cultural backgrounds, which is identified as an acculturation process (Ibrahim & Dykeman, 2011). Immigrants with a strong connection with their culture of origin may experience further pressures in the acculturation process (Ibrahim & Dykeman, 2011).

Many Muslims and Middle Eastern immigrants come from collective-identity backgrounds, which are different from the prevalent individualistic culture in Western societies (Fischer, Ai, Aydin, Frey, & Haslam, 2010). This difference and fear of losing one's identity has caused some Muslim immigrants difficulties assimilating and blending into the fabric of the U.S. (Cook-Masaud & Wiggins, 2011; Robert, 2007).

Coping Strategies

Individuals deal with discriminatory practices and negative consequences in different forms (Hopkins & Shook, 2017; Ven, 2012). Abu-Raiya, Pargament and Mahoney (2011) found a connection between using positive coping methods such as reaching out to others and experiencing post-traumatic growth in a sample of 138 Muslims in the United States. Muslim women who participated in a qualitative study in Canada (N=26), mentioned demonstrating decent behaviors as their positive coping method to breakdown the negative assumptions regarding Muslims (Rahman, Chamber, & Wakewich, 2016). Nevertheless, not all Muslims cope with religious discrimination or challenges positively. Some Muslims use negative methods, such as isolation, that were observed to cause more depression and anger for them (Abu-Raiya et al., 2011).

Protective factors were observed to help individuals to cope better with discriminatory practices. According to Fozdar and Torezani (2008), individuals with personal or social supports were considered to better cope with the negative outcomes of discriminatory practices and lower-life satisfaction.

In addition, relying on religion was considered to positively influence individuals' coping methods. According to Adam and Ward (2016) survey's findings, Muslim immigrants (N=167), who relied on their religion, were observed to better moderate their acculturative stress, lower

life satisfaction and negative well-being. This protective role of religion was also seen among Muslim women in New Zealand (N=153), who participated in a quantitative study, and for Muslims in Tennessee (N=26), who participated in a qualitative study (Al-hamdani, 2016; Jasperse, Ward, & Jose, 2012).

Purpose of this Research

The current qualitative study uses an intersectional lens to provide further information regarding coping mechanisms used by Muslim immigrant women living in Los Angeles who face religious discrimination and immigration challenges with consideration of their different backgrounds and intersecting identities that can impact their coping methods.

Method

Sample

Muslim immigrant women in Los Angeles ($N=8$) were recruited using snowball-sampling methods. All Muslim women participants immigrated to the U.S. within the last 5 years, dwelling in Los Angeles at the time of study, and ranged in age from 18 to 50 ($M = 27$; $SD = 9.72$). Participants were all educated individuals who held, at minimum, a college degree.

Research Design

A phenomenological design was selected for this qualitative study. Phenomenology is a qualitative research method that considers a phenomenon or a concept and the essence of an individual's lived experience in regards to that phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). In phenomenological studies, data are collected through in-depth interviews with a small number of participants between 5 to 25 individuals (Creswell, 2013). Phenomenological studies offer a deeper understanding of a phenomenon that is experienced by different individuals (Creswell, 2013). In the current study, Muslim immigrant women's experiences related to the phenomenon of Islamophobia and their immigration's challenges are considered.

Measure

The measure used in the current study is a self-designed qualitative interview schedule (see Appendix A) asking Muslim immigrant women open-ended questions about their coping strategies used to deal with immigration challenges and religious or national discriminations in Los Angeles.

Data collection and Analysis process

Data were collected through face-to-face interviews with Muslim immigrant women ($N=8$). Individual in-depth interviews lasted between 12 and 45 minutes in locations identified

by the participant. Interviews were transcribed and analyzed using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a data reduction and analysis strategy where interview transcript data is segmented, categorized, summarized and reconstructed in a way that captures the important concepts within the interview data (Ayres, 2008).

Thematic analysis and encoding procedures are applied to examine qualitative data (Boyatzis, 1998). Encoding is a process that needs an explicit code, which can embrace different themes (Boyatzis, 1998). A theme is considered as a pattern found within collected information that primarily describes observations and subsequently interprets them (Boyatzis, 1998).

I began this thematic analysis process by independently reading and then re-reading the interview transcripts while documenting initial reactions to the interviews, words and quotes that stood out. In thematic coding, the researcher frequently begins with a list of themes known (or at least anticipated) to be found in the data (Ayres, 2008). Through this process, I formed thematic codes that were documented in the margins for each individual interview. I compared findings and searched for patterns of experience within each interview and then identified overarching unifying themes among all of the interview data.

An intersectional lens informed my comprehensive understanding of coping methods and potential influential factors on those coping methods among Muslim immigrant women who participated in this study. Throughout this perspective, different aspects of the participants' identity, including their different religious and cultural backgrounds, were taken into consideration.

Reflexivity Statement

As a Muslim immigrant woman from Iran, I have experienced several unequal treatments on different occasions based on my religious affiliation and nationality. My personal struggles

motivated me to conduct this study. Although this study is not free of bias, it is done with hope of promoting equality, humanity and social justice for all Muslim immigrant women.

Results

This section highlights the main themes that emerged from reviewing and analyzing the participants' interviews, which include: (1) The impacts of cultural and religious backgrounds on coping methods used by Muslim immigrant women, and (2) Diversity as a protective factor shielding the participants from stereotypes against their identity. Participant responses are quoted and presented in the following paragraphs to support each theme that was identified.

The impacts of religious and cultural backgrounds on coping methods used by Muslim immigrant women

All the participants identified *Islam* as their religious affiliation and the collectivist cultural identity as their backgrounds. The participants' responses demonstrate that Islam is considered meaningful among all the Muslim immigrant women who participated. In response to the question of how their religious affiliation impacts the way they identify, all the participants provided similar answers which shows religious affiliation is deeply integrated with their identity:

"It is the very basis of my existence. Literally from the moment I wake up to the moment I go to sleep, I do everything in accordance to my religion and it makes me who I am and it's very essential to my existence" (Participant number 8, Syria).

"Your religion goes where you go. I am a certain kind of Muslim culture; I try to the right thing in accordance to my religion" (Participant number 3, Pakistan).

The participants carried their religion to the U.S. and have regulated the appropriateness of their behaviors based on their religious principles. While religion was observed to shape an important component of their identity, the perpetuated stereotypes against Islam and Muslim identity were considered as their common and prominent concerns. Media was mentioned as a

source that associates Muslim identity with terrorist activities. The stereotypes have caused Muslim immigrant women with evident identifiers of Islam to deal with burden of being presented and perceived as harmful individuals. Muslim immigrant women with a hijab or a Muslim name mentioned receiving weird looks and being excluded from social interactions as different forms of mistreatments they experienced:

“Muslim women usually are either victims of terrorism or terrorism collaborators. Media shows like a Homeland where a mother would send her child to go blow himself up, which is not a reflection of Muslim mothers. It’s just very negative and harsh. I think the way media present Muslims probably contributes to the reasons why people sometimes would see me with a hijab and be like: oh, I don’t know how to act around her” (Participant number 2, Kuwait).

“I think the media nowadays portrays Muslims as these evil angry people that just want to harm everyone else”, (Participant number 5, Syria).

The participants considered the stereotypes as wrong presentations of their identity. They consider Islam a peaceful religion that condemns any violence and forceful activities. Religion for Muslim immigrant women is a meaningful factor shaping their identity. By associating Islam with terrorism in media, a meaningful component of their identity is presented as harmful. Generalizing all Muslims as scary individuals leaves the participants to deal with presumptions that present their identity to non-Muslims in a negative light.

Applying an intersectional lens shows that Muslim immigrant women not only deal with the perpetuated stereotypes against their religion, but they also deal with challenges resulting from the stereotypes against their place of birth and gender-roles. Muslim immigrant women are introduced as individuals who come from dangerous countries that engage in terrorist activities. They are also presented as victims of patriarchy and oppressed individuals who do not access to

equal opportunities in comparison to women in Western societies. The generalized negative image was observed to influence non-Muslims' interactions towards them:

“Some people are like oh you are from Pakistan; your country has been in the news for bad reasons lately. They treat me differently because I belong to Pakistan. I am proud being a Pakistani. It's where I born, It's my hometown” (Participant number 1, Pakistan).

“Many people expect me to be as a typical Iranian woman, a person who gets married and become a housewife. I am not that person. I had to battle those that people assumed real”, (Participant number 4, Iran).

Muslim immigrant women's coping methods are formed by the components of their religious and cultural backgrounds. They were observed to cope with challenges by relying on their religion and de-stigmatizing stereotypes. They mentioned praying as a form of coping with pressures. De-stigmatization as their common coping methods was observed to be practiced in different forms such as spreading awareness, demonstrating decent behaviors, and engaging in advocacy to demonstrate a positive image of Islam and Muslims:

“I will try to explain. I compare Muslim women with a hijab to the nuns and the Christianity. Nobody asks them why they cover themselves. They have wrong or misunderstanding about Muslims. Islam is so good. The ethics and behaviors in Islam are the same with Christianity. If I have a positive behavior, so why do they care I am wearing a hijab or not?”, (Participant number 7, Lebanon).

Muslim immigrant women in this study considered their family as a distinguishable factor providing supports in dealing with challenges. The protective role of family can be associated to the participants' collectivist identity, which was identified different from the dominant individualistic culture in the U.S. Coming from a collectivist cultural background has

led the participants to cope with challenges with more collectivist approaches rather than individualistic methods:

“What I love about my culture is your parents are never going to disown you, in the more American culture; it’s just like you are 18 you move out and live yourself. I go to my parents for advice”, (Participant number 3, Pakistan).

Diversity as a protective factor shielding the participants from stereotypes against their identity

Although the participants mentioned their concerns regarding the stereotypes perpetuated against different aspects of their identity, all of them considered diversity in Los Angeles as a protective factor that has shielded them from stereotypes against their identity. Diversity has created a safe dynamic for them to practice their religious affiliation in mosques and Islamic centers within Los Angeles peacefully:

“Here in L.A., we are really fortunate, Mosques are very welcoming and community oriented. I like to go to mosques, it’s very refreshing (Participant number 5, Syria).

In addition, diversity has enabled Muslim immigrant women to disclose the truthful aspects of their original backgrounds positively and to be engaged in advocacy peacefully:

“California is very diverse and open; it’s an amazing place to be. Going outside of California is not easy to live; there are so many factors that could be a problem for me, my skin color, my religion, my accent, my nationality. People here are very open. Our rights are respected here”, (Participant number 6, Pakistan).

“I feel confident to wear a hijab here. I go to events to speak up and stand up”, (Participant number 2, Kuwait).

The prevalence of diversity was observed to help Muslim immigrant women to demonstrate their religious affiliation, cultural backgrounds, and gender-roles in a positive light.

Discussion

This qualitative study was conducted through an intersectional lens to explore coping methods among Muslim immigrant women in Los Angeles. The themes that emerged in the findings have implications for expanding our understanding of the powerful impacts of the religious and cultural backgrounds on coping methods used by Muslim immigrant women and the prevalence of diversity as a protective factor shielding the participants from stereotypes against their identity.

Findings from the current study demonstrate that Muslim immigrant women brought their religion to the United States with them and have considered it as a meaningful component shaping their identity. Associating Muslim identity with harmful activities in media was mentioned as their common and prominent concerns. Findings of this study show that stereotyping Muslims as harmful individuals caused the participants with evident identifiers of Islam to deal with extra layers of pressure. Muslim immigrant women, with a hijab or a Muslim name, mentioned being excluded from social interactions as a form of mistreatments they experienced. These findings are consistent with a study that Muslim women in Canada wearing a hijab experienced further discrimination (Rahmath et al., 2016). In addition, the findings are parallel to the previous studies in which Muslims were presented in a negative light within Western media (Törnberg & Törnberg, 2016).

Using an intersectional perspective in this study reveals that Muslim immigrant women face extra burden due to the stereotypes against their place of birth and gender-roles. These results are consistent with the previous studies in which Muslim women were assumed as oppressed individuals (Furseth, 2011; Al Wazni, 2015).

Findings of this study show that Muslim immigrant women cope with challenges by relying on the components of their religious and cultural backgrounds and by de-stigmatizing the stereotypes. De-stigmatization was observed to be practiced in different forms such as spreading awareness, demonstrating decent behaviors, and engaging in advocacy. These findings are in alignment with the previous studies that acknowledged the impacts of cultural and religious backgrounds on Middle-Eastern immigrants and refugees (Adam & Ward, 2016; Al-hamdani, 2016; Fischer et al., 2010; Jasperse et al., 2012). Furthermore, the results are parallel with the previous studies in which Muslims were considered to defend Islam by showing respectful attitudes as a representation of their religion to break down stereotypes (Al-hamdani, 2016; Rahman et al., 2016).

The participant's responses show that diversity in Los Angeles has acted as a protective factor shielding them from stereotypes and negative outcomes. Diversity has provided an opportunity for the participants to practice their religion in mosques and Islamic centers in Los Angeles peacefully. Furthermore, diversity has enabled them to be engaged in advocacy and to disclose different aspects of their original backgrounds positively. Muslim immigrant women in this study were observed trying to prove that they are not harmful individuals, but rather they are equal and good human beings who deserve to be treated with dignity, respect, and equality.

This study suggests that social workers who work with this population, should take into consideration the powerful impacts of the religious and cultural backgrounds on Muslim immigrant women's coping methods. They should also understand the importance of enhancing diversity and associated policies to acknowledge and respect different backgrounds of Muslim immigrant women. Diversity can allow Muslim immigrant women to practice their religion in public areas and to de-stigmatize stereotypes peacefully and positively.

Lack of U.S. geographic diversity and the fact that all the participants were educated Muslim immigrant women who were able to speak English fluently, are limitations of this study that prevent these findings from being generalized.

Conclusion

Using an intersectional lens reveals that Muslim immigrant women deal with different layers of pressure resulting from stereotypes against their identity. Muslim immigrant women's religious and cultural backgrounds carry powerful impacts on them and has formed their coping methods. Enhancing diversity which acknowledges and respects their backgrounds can shield them from stereotypes and negative outcomes of discrimination and can provide them an opportunity to disclose the truthful aspects of their identity positively and peacefully.

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Appendix A

Interview Question

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to gain deeper understanding of coping strategies used by Muslim immigrant women in Los Angeles, California.

Participant Confidentiality

I hope during this study to create a safe, non-judgmental environment within which you can talk about your thoughts, motivations, and expectations from participating in this program. All information will be kept confidential and I will only record information that does not identify you or other participants. Participation in this study is voluntary, and you may withdraw at any time without penalty. During this study, we are here to support, learn from, and be respectful of each other. It is important to maintain strict confidentiality regarding any information disclosed, identity of participants, and conversations that take place.

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Interview Questions

- 1- How does your Muslim-identity influence the way you view yourself?
- 2- With whom do you choose to reveal your Muslim identity? What assumptions do your friends have of your identity?
- 3- How often do you wear a headscarf or implement religious rituals? What are your experiences of following your religious principles in Los Angeles?
- 4- How do you feel other people perceive you based on your religious affiliation/nationality? Can you give me an example of a time people perceived you negatively? Positively?
- 5- How do you deal with any potential misunderstanding or prejudice towards your religious affiliation or nationality in daily life?
- 6- What are your experiences in regard to Muslim community, mosques, or Islamic centers?
- 7- How do you cope with any tensions resulting from your religious identity, nationality or immigration challenges?
- 8- What are your experiences in regard to travelling as a Muslim woman?
- 9- Can you describe your experiences of a typical day at your place of employment with coworkers as it relates to your Muslim identity?
- 10- Can you describe your experiences of a typical day at your school with classmates or faculty as it relates to your Muslim identity?
- 11- In what way do you find your Muslim identity is presented in media? How do deal with this presentation?
- 12- Is there anything else that you think is important for me to know regarding to your experiences of being Muslim in Los Angeles