Noor El-Gazairly

Gingrich 7th

February 1st, 2019

Molded Through Culture: the Muslim American Experience and its Place in My Identity

When approached with the question “Who are you?”, one might immediately regurgitate a pre-compiled list of basic identifying factors such as one’s name, basic interests, and other basal forms of public identification. These are what are known as self-schemas according to Judith Howard of the Sociology Department at the University of Washington. Self-schemas can be defined as pre-dictated and organized knowledge about the basic characteristics of an individual specifically set aside in order to serve a publically identifying service. For example, if someone was to ask you to introduce yourself, you might include your vocation or perhaps a hobby in addition to your nominal identity. Therefore, you leave your impression to be uniquely identified by a person or a group by what you offered in your self-schema. In addition to this pre-ordained identifying list is what is known as a group-schema. These are shared experiences, ideas, or a subscription towards a certain stratified group that has already been identified in society such as gender, political affiliation, religious convictions, etc. These two create a modern formula as to who you are in comparison to others, more specifically as “socially distinguishing features that a person takes a special pride in or views as unchangeable but socially consequential” (Fearson, 2). In essence, this means that one’s chosen presentational identity is an implicit link to already known social identifiers that are consequential to interaction; such as

one's beliefs or other factors that may dictate the way the rest of the interaction is handled. Thus, in terms of socialization and introduction of oneself in a social setting, one's identity is essentially reduced to these two elements: self-schema and group-schema. While this makes the infinite spectrum of human psyche much more relatable and comprehensible on an external interactive basis, it largely redacts the minute yet monumental contributing factors that spark each human as unique in terms of identity. The question of what precisely qualifies as a contribution to identity is daunting and more than likely holds an unattainable answer, seeing as identity runs deeper than simply genetic code. Each experience that one faces as they mature and autonomously develop impresses certain lessons, traits, and eventually identifying characteristics that will be used later in life to contribute towards one's identity. This is even more daunting of a task when contextualized into cumulative human history. Up until recently, and not even completely globally, one's identity was assigned due to class, rank on feudal hierarchy, or caste. Only recently have humans begun to complicate and diversify their own personal identities, as societal development has granted them the liberty to do so. Ergo, in order to ease the existential crisis faced with holistically identifying oneself, humans have placed their identities in the hands of one another. In order to identify themselves, they have created an equation of identity in which the plethora of factors that make one's identity up all boil down to a relation. The relation refers to pre-established "social categories and the sources of an individual's self-respect or dignity" (Fearson, 2) from those categories, essentially translating one's identity through the shared experiences of others.

One contributing consequential social group that has translated my identity is that of Muslim Americans. The conundrum in this is that technically it is not just one category, but

rather a category within another. Not only have I isolated a nationality, but I have from that derived yet another identifying specificity of a religious conviction. In theory I could continue to isolate specificities until they translate my identity with complete accuracy and precision, however, the amount of contributing factors that have shaped me in addition to the broad identification of Muslim American is insurmountable, if not infinite, just as is everyone's personal identities. The definition of Muslim American is quite self-explanatory: it is the shared social categorization of those who are of American descent, nationality, citizenship, or inhabitance who were raised, converted, or practicing the faith of Islam. While this identity can be beheld by quite a significant amount of people (roughly 3.45 million Muslim inhabitants of the United States), each individual connotation may vary; ever so slightly or ever so drastically. As a matter of fact, no ethnic or racial group in the Muslim American community makes up a majority, which is demonstrative of the wide range of other identities and diverse contributions to this social identification group. Intrinsic shared qualities of those who subscribe to the identity of Muslim American can be inferred to be those of Muslim teachings and upbringing, which in my experience has been built upon and around the five pillars of the Islamic faith. They are: *lā ʾilāha ʾillā llāh muḥammadun rasūlu llāh* (there is no God but God and Muhammad [peace be upon him] is his messenger), to fast during the holy month of Ramadan, to give alms to the poor, to pray the five prayers of the day, and to embark upon the pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in your life. Muslim culture is largely based upon those pillars in that most Muslim Americans have the shared experience of praying, share a monotheistic faith, actively are taught to be charitable and patient as well as practice discipline during Ramadan. My experience growing up within the Muslim community has not just been based on the scripture of the faith, but of the innate

qualities that it creates which has helped shape my morals, interactions, and the way I, as well as many others in the Muslim American community, conduct ourselves. In re of the combination of two outward identities (the American nationality as well as the Muslim faith), a unique culmination of geographical and spiritual attributes can be observed in through those that identify with this group. Not only are the traditional Muslim values of humility, modesty, and subservience conveyed, but so are intrinsic American values of independence, privacy, and inherent equality. One instance that has anecdotally been told by many Muslim American women that well summarizes the intersectionality of these two identities is the empowerment and self-expression of the hijab. The portation of a hijab, or traditional headscarf, is a personal choice in the Muslim faith, but many Muslim American women are interpreting their choice to wear it in traditionally American terms. In Western spheres of scrutiny of Muslims, many times the hijab is regarded as oppressive or indicative of a despotic culture. In true American fashion of the expectation of respect and equality of one's personal identity, Muslim American women have combated such connotations by fiercely and proudly wearing their hijabs as a symbol of their own independence while simultaneously conveying their faith and spiritual identity.

The perception of Muslim Americans in Western culture has been highly visible in modern times of the global era we find ourselves living in today. The new generation of Muslim Americans born to immigrants have been raised into the American ideals, granted the rights of this county by birth, thus the expectation to be afforded the rights of this country is seen as an indelible right of many Muslim Americans. This highlights a generational discord between born and naturalized Muslim American citizens in that those who immigrated to this country and did not grow up with the rights of a U.S. citizen ingrained in their identity are willing to suffer

racism, xenophobia, and Islamaphobia, because they believe it is a necessary evil known among immigrant communities as the "American tax" that one must endure in order to enjoy the right of American citizenship. Growing up as a natural born citizen of the United States, it has been a fundamental belief of mine that I, as an American and as a Muslim, should not have to worry about not being protected by my rights as a citizen when I am faced with instances of hate, and that is demonstrative of my identity as an American. In terms of comparative politics and human relations, identity "plays a central role in work on nationalism and ethnic conflict" (Fearson, 1). Muslim American identification hasbeen recently been faced with a bombard of stigma and profiling as radical and western-hating terrorists. As a matter of fact, this perception has been so inflated and harmful, that the years following the 2016 election saw the largest spike in hate crimes since the 9/11 attacks. According to CAIR, "...anti-Muslim bias incidents and hate crimes are up 83 and 21 percent respectively…" since the beginning of 2018. However, biases from Western culture are not the only afront to those of Muslim American identity. As a dual identity social group, Muslim Americans face warped perception from non-western Muslims as well. Growing up, it was difficult for me to find a comfortable space in society that conformed to my complete identity and fulfilled both halves of what it meant to be Muslim American. Facing marginalization from other Americans for being Muslim is one common theme to most Muslim Americans, and the subconscious feeling of "not being American enough" was one facet. However, an additive to the outsider condition is that we are often regarded as "too Western" or "too Americanized" by those of the Islamic faith that haven't been shaped by American nationality as part of their congenital self-identification.

This projection of Muslim American is not simply what I relate to others in order to better identify myself socially. It has bred a unique melange of nationality, spirituality, language, and culture that has not only shaped me but helped contextualize my cumulative experiences through the scope of identity. It has been a sense of pride in my heritage and has led me to find community in others with shared exposure to contributing factors that make the Muslim American identity. In my experience, my personal specificity of life hasn't just merely created a distinctive form of social identification, but it has specified and molded my own mannerisms, conduct, and qualities that make me who I am. I carry with me lessons of faith in constant balance and constrast with my upbringing in liberty, which I personally believed have been my own answer to the age-old question: "who am I"?

قَالَ رَبِّ اشْرَحْ لِي صَدْرِي وَيَسِّرْ لِي أَمْرِي وَاحْلُلْ عُقْدَةً مِّن لِّسَانِي يَفْقَهُوا قَوْلِي

"My Lord expand for me my breast and ease for me my task and untie the knot from my tongue that they may understand my speech"

(Dua for good grades)

Works Cited

April 17, 2018. “Muslim Americans: Immigrants and U.S. Born See Life Differently.” *Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project*, Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project, 17 Apr. 2018, www.pewforum.org/essay/muslims-in-america-immigrants-and-those-born-in-u-s-see-life-differently-in-many-ways/

Fearon, James D. “What Is Identity (As We Now Use the Word)?” *What Is Identity (As We Now Know the Word)?*, Department of Political Science, Stanford, 3 Nov. 1999, web.stanford.edu/group/fearon-research/cgi-bin/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/What-is-Identity-as-we-now-use-the-word-.pdf.

Howard, Judith A. “Social Phycology of Identities.” *The University of Vermont*, Annual Reviews Sociology, 2000, www.uvm.edu/pdodds/files/papers/others/2000/howard2000a.pdf. Department of Sociology, University of Washington, Seattle, Washington

Misra, Tanvi. “Anti-Muslim Incidents in America, Mapped.” *CityLab*, 9 Mar. 2018, www.citylab.com/equity/2018/03/anti-muslim-hate-crime-map/555134/.

Schachter, Elli P. “Context and Identity Formation: A Theoretical Analysis and a Case Study.” Journal of Adolescent Research, vol. 20, no. 3, May 2005, pp. 375–395, doi:10.1177/0743558405275172.

Wilkinson, Bard. “Intimate Portraits Show the Diversity of America's Muslims.” *CNN*, Cable News Network, 28 Aug. 2018, www.cnn.com/style/article/muslims-of-america-portraits/index.html

Misra, Tanvi. “Anti-Muslim Incidents in America, Mapped.” *CityLab*, 9 Mar. 2018, www.citylab.com/equity/2018/03/anti-muslim-hate-crime-map/555134/.