**Beyond Cultural Clash Theories:**
**Examining the adolescent experiences of diasporic Muslim females**

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## Introduction

In this presentation, I plan to present a critical review of the literature on the adolescent experiences of diasporic Muslim adolescents, focusing more concretely on second generation females. In doing so, I plan to share key findings from this research, and to discuss some of the limitations of these studies. I would like to conclude my presentation by suggesting alternative frameworks that can help move research on this population towards a more holistic, yet nuanced, understanding of their lives.

## Definitions

Yet before delving any deeper into this discussion, I would like to make sure that there is at least a basic understanding of the key terms used in this presentation. As such, the terms "adolescent," "diasporic," and "Muslim," and are all used in this paper with the acknowledgement and recognition that the meanings of each of these terms are socially constructed, and therefore hold different meanings depending on the time, place, and broader context of their usage. In my presentation today, I use *adolescent* to refer to those who are between the ages of ten and twenty (Lerner, 2002). *Diasporic*, a concept central to my critique of this body of research, is broadly defined as those who are geographically dispersed from others who share a common history, ideal or identity (Kastoryano, 1999). *Muslim*, importantly, is used here as a sociological concept,

referring to any person or group of people who self-identify—either in a theological or socio-cultural sense—with the religion and people of Islam (Leonard, 2004).

**Critical Review**

While the body of literature on this population originates from several fields, the growing attention to diasporic Muslim populations generally, and diasporic Muslim females more specifically, is rooted in at least four major causes that I have identified: The first among these is that the rise in Muslim populations in predominantly non-Muslim countries such as the United States, has lead to a corresponding rise in research on this population. Related to this is the second reason, that is, because the rising population is due in large part to immigration patterns, research on the assimilation of immigrants has naturally begun to focus on the assimilation of diasporic Muslim populations to their host cultures; the third is related to the increasing politicization of Muslims, particularly after September 11, 2001, but certainly tracing back to before then, such as the work of anthropologists that arose out of colonial concerns over the past century; and the fourth is, I believe, due to a growing number of individuals who identify as members of this group who are also engaged in research with this population.

**Findings**

Depending on the impetus for research on this population, different types of studies have been conducted focusing on certain aspects of the population's experiences. Studies that have focused on the adolescent experiences of Muslim females have found, amongst many other things, the following key findings:

1. That there is a desire on behalf of the female adolescent to simultaneously assert an American or otherwise "Western" and ethnic identity, where these identifications often carry conflicting messages by members within the dominant and diasporic communities (Ajrouch, 2004; Basit, 1997; Dwyer, 2000; Handa, 2003).

2. There is often intense peer and community monitoring of female behavior, dress, and language, in an attempt to ensure her maintenance of ethnic or religious practices and/or distance from "Western" cultural norms and behaviors (Ajrouch, 2004).

3. Related to the previous finding is that the pressure to maintain the cultural or religious practices of the parents is even stronger for those diasporic females who come from lower-class backgrounds, as often their worth, for example, as a suitable marriage partner, is assessed through the purity of their reputations, versus a focus on their educational, economic, or social background, which may be valued qualities for their peers of higher socioeconomic status (Dwyer, 2000).

4. And finally, that Muslim females often face intense opposition and stigmatization from both *outside* and *within* their diasporic communities when expressing overtly Muslim identities, such as if they choose to wear a hijab, or Muslim headscarf (Schmidt, 2002).

**Limitations of Studies**

While I do not contest the validity of these findings, I believe that this research captures only limited aspects of diasporic Muslim females' experiences. More significantly, it overwhelmingly projects the female as helpless, at best, and in need of rescue, at worst. Drawing from colonial and imperial discourses, the religious and cultural practices of the young women's parents are seen as authoritarian and confining whereas the host country is seen as liberating and civil. One poignant example, ironically drawn from an author of Lebanese descent, states in her book entitled *All American Yemeni Girls* that "[I]n the United States, the children of these immigrants [Yemeni parents] straddle two worlds, the literate world of school and the home world of religious and cultural values where text (the Quran) sanctions behavior, certain language use, disposition, and cultural norms" (Sarroub, 2005, p. 22). It is clear to see from this quote how colonial sentiments are embedded in the language used by the researcher, such as Sarroub's description of the world of the U.S. public high school as "literate," in contrast to her description of the world of home as "sanctioning" and otherwise restrictive.

What is problematic with this and other such examples is that there is no accounting for the historical, political, or social context in which the girls are coming of age; nor is there any exploration of the empowering potential of the religious, ethnic, or diasporic cultures- and on the other hand- no exploration of the oppressive potential of the dominant host culture(s), particularly as these contexts interact with the multiple identities of the diasporic individuals, as shaped by their religion, race, class, or gender (Anthias, 1998). As such, though these cultural clash theories are extremely pervasive in

both academic and popular texts (Handa, 2003), they oversimplify the complexity of the identity formation process and the dynamic interaction and hybridization of the multiple cultures and contexts within which the diasporic females function. Furthermore, they often essentialize the perceived cultures of the sending and receiving countries, projecting them as static and transmittable from one generation to another, where conflict originates when parents cannot accept that their host-born daughter has chosen "American" culture over the cultures of their own.

**Alternative Frameworks**

In order to move away from these myopic views of the diasporic Muslim female's adolescent experiences, I argue that it is imperative to inform our work with theoretical frameworks that account for the broader historical, social, cultural, and political contexts in which these individuals are coming of age. This includes an examination of both the local and global contexts and an acknowledgement of the agency of the females to use their diasporic backgrounds as spaces of resistance and empowerment.

More concretely, the decentering of "nation" as a center from which diasporic dispersal occurs is particularly important for conceptualizations of *Muslim* diasporas. By shifting away from nation-centered diasporas to non-geographic centers allows one to examine the experiences of Muslim female adolescents through broader lenses, not having to exclusively focus anymore on the ethnic or national cultures of their parents and therefore shifting away from the cultural clash and assimilation theories used in previous research.

The notion of "ummah" is often identified as a more relevant factor uniting otherwise diverse groups of Muslims together, particularly in non-Muslim lands, but also throughout the world (Grillo, 2004). Ummah literally means "community," but is often used to refer to the community of believers led by the Prophet Muhammad over 1400 years ago. Still, all references to a Muslim diaspora do not automatically assume a religious connotation; instead, there are often political and social motivations for this unification, such as resistance against Western hegemony and imperialism (Clifford, 1994; Kastoryano, 1999; Khan, 2000).

Use of diasporic Muslim identifications and networks is particularly important when considered in light of the pervasiveness of Orientalism in the lives of diasporic Muslim females. Orientalism refers back to Edward Said's (1978) critique of the Western study of Muslim and "Eastern" people and lands. Said's (1978) influential work sheds light on the ways in which Western academics and media depict Muslims as "others." Through their essentialized images of Muslims, they depict Muslim men as barbaric, sex-crazed and violent, and Muslim women as oppressed, sexualized and exoticized individuals in need of rescuing by the always superior Western way of life.

Many studies that have used Orientalism to frame their research have found that the pervasiveness of Orientalism in predominantly non-Muslim lands has a direct impact on the lives of Muslim adolescents, and particularly Muslim females, on their decisions to strategically use a "Muslim" identity as a form of resistance against Western hegemony. Interwoven with issues of diaspora, such as the intergenerational conflict discussed earlier, Dwyer (2000), has also found in her own research that Muslim females in Britain in fact strategically constructed a Muslim identity that hybridized the cultural

practices of their ethnic and national backgrounds in turn responding to both the stigmatization and stereotypes of their peers and the cultural impositions of their parents.

Khan's (2000) research with Muslim women in Canada also leads her to assert that rather than being viewed as a source of constraint, identification as a "Muslim" can in fact be seen as a source of empowerment, particularly in the context of the diaspora. She states, "Within this third space [the diaspora], muslim subjectivity is no longer about an identity politics making claims about absolute knowledge boxed in rigid boundaries, an identity that a few can control (such as Islamists) and others can vilify (such as orientalists)… The unstable, hybridized muslim identity is no longer a trait to be transcended but a productive tension filled with possibility" (Khan, 2000, p. xvi.).

**Conclusion**

These alternative conceptualizations of diaspora and Muslim females that I have presented, allow us to recognize both the agency of the young women and the empowering potential of their diasporic backgrounds and experiences. This is in contrast to current research, which often depicts them as immersed in cultural conflict and in need of rescue. Alternative conceptualizations of this population and their religious, cultural, and otherwise diasporic practices and networks may in fact be viewed as productive and empowering, rather than constraining and uncivil, resulting in more holistic and nuanced understanding of the adolescent experiences of diasporic Muslim females.

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