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# Negotiating Muslim Womanhood: The Adaptation Strategies of International Students at Two American Public Colleges

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Negotiating Muslim Womanhood: The Adaptation Strategies of International Students at  
Two American Public Colleges

by

Amber Gregory

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts  
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## **DEDICATION**

I dedicate this thesis to my friend and student, Zainab, whose courageous story and unyielding efforts to create her path inspired this work and continue to inspire me every day. May only good things come to her and her family's way, Inshallah times a hundred! I also want to dedicate this to the Muslim women international students that shared their stories, whose focus and bravery humbles me. I wish them all well on their journeys ahead.

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## ABSTRACT

From a Western perspective, North Americans and Western Europeans perceive Muslim women as being oppressed (Andrea 2009; Lutz 1997, 96; Ozyurt 2013). Led by this assumption, some view studying abroad as an international student as an experience that allows Muslim women the opportunity to “escape” this supposed oppression and to know “freedom” in the U.S. However, Muslim women’s experiences are more dynamic and complex than this dualism suggests. In this thesis, I explore adaptation strategies of Muslim women international students, and how gender, race, and religion affect their experiences while abroad. Furthermore, I explore the women’s use of emotion management as a means of navigating their experiences during their study abroad. Data consist of qualitative interviews with 11 Muslim women students from Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Nigeria, Morocco, Oman, The Gambia, Kuwait, and India. Findings in this study are consistent with previous research of international students’ challenges; Muslim women face difficulties with English language proficiency, new social network creation, transition to a student role, and management of finances during their study abroad. In addition, Muslim women international students actively synthesize traditional gender norms from their countries with new identity formations but also “police” others to ensure that they abide by traditional gender expectations. The Muslim women in this study learn and apply American *racial schemas* (Roth 2012) within a context of constructing the U.S. as a racial and religious paradise. Paradoxically, these



women still feel the need to actively debunk negative stereotypes of Muslim communities. Yet, they still maintain connected with their home countries through daily religious involvement such as prayer and wearing the hijab.

## **CHAPTER ONE:**

### **INTRODUCTION**

For a young person, leaving one's family and going to a new environment to pursue higher education can be a challenging experience. First time college students experience new surroundings, people, and lifestyles while developing new independence and self-reliance. But going to college is likely a more challenging experience for international students because they leave their homes to go to another country (Lee 2013). International students represent a unique population because unlike immigrants, they are considered sojourners, that is, individuals who *temporarily* live in a different country to work or study (Gullekson and Vancouver 2009).

Navigating higher education while attempting to master a new language and/or learning about a new culture and traditions may complicate an international student's experience. Entering into different cultural contexts of race relations, religious differences, and gender norms may affect students' experiences in the U.S. However, these factors do not discourage study abroad experiences, as 764,695 international students studied in the United States in the 2011-2012 academic year (IEE 2012). This research aims to look at the experiences of a specific group of international students at two large public colleges in a diverse urban context in the southeastern region of the U.S. and how they attempt to adapt to their new surroundings. Specifically, my research

investigates the experiences of Muslim women international students during their study abroad at two American universities.

### **Why Muslim Women**

The experiences of Muslim women international students who come to the U.S. are unique because they enter a context in which their religious community has become highly scrutinized and policed in the name of national security following the events of September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001 (Tummala-Narra and Claudius 2013). Due to this increased governmental policing and scrutiny, research has found that Muslim identity is stigmatized in the U.S. (Goffman 1963; Mir 2014). Recently, Islamic values have been constructed by receiving populations as “incompatible” with “Western values and identities” and have engendered debate of the capability of Muslim immigrants to successfully integrate into receiving societies (Blankenhorn et al. 2005; Hunter 1998; Huntington 1993; Klausen 2005; Laurence and Vaisse 2006; Ozyurt 2013:1618; Roy 2007; Saikal 2003; Wessels 2004).

Not long ago, France, in 2004 passed controversial legislation outlawing the use of “conspicuous ‘religion signs’ in public schools” in order to preserve state laicity (Thomas 2006: 237). However, critics state that this legislation is discriminatory because it overwhelmingly affects Muslim women who wear the hijab (2006). Even though this legislation was passed in France and not in the U.S., it demonstrates strong opposition to Muslim practices in the Western world.

Many Muslim women international students wear the hijab, the traditional head covering, which is supposed to cover a woman’s hair from the sight of strangers and is thought to preserve her modesty (McDermott-Levy 2011; Tummala-Narra and Claudius

2013). Studies have shown that Muslim women believe that by wearing the hijab they are demonstrating strength in their faith and womanhood (McDermott-Levy 2011; Tummala-Narra and Claudius 2013). Interestingly, the covering of a woman's hair is not exclusive to Islam but is also found in the Jewish and Christian faiths (Feder 2013). However, the hijab has become a symbol that is synonymous with Muslim women. Despite a large global Muslim population that spans many continents, the hijab has been identified as a marker for certain cultural groups depending on the country. Therefore, Muslim women international students' identities become *hypervisible* "in their social encounters . . . and therefore were associated with "Muslim" rather than any other identifier" (Mir 2008:35).

In addition, Muslim women's experiences are influenced by pervasive media portrayals of Islam and their communities and many Westerners believe these representations to be true (Abbas 2013; Mir 2014). From a Western perspective, North Americans and Western Europeans perceive Muslim women as being oppressed (Andrea 2009; Ozyurt 2013; Lutz 1997, 96). Guided by this assumption, North Americans and Western Europeans may view studying abroad as an international student as an experience that allows Muslim women the opportunity to "escape" this supposed oppression and to know "freedom" in the U.S. So, are Muslim women's experiences more dynamic and complex than this dualism suggests? This research aims to explore the spectrum of Muslim women's experiences beyond the stereotypical notion that these women are inherently oppressed.

The experiences of Muslim women international students merit further examination because research has shown that demographics of American campuses

illustrate increased diversity (Shafer 2012). Furthermore, Muslim international and Muslim American students are entering American universities in increasing numbers and these data reflect national statistics that indicate that the Muslim population in the U.S. is growing (Shafer 2012).

However, Muslim students can encounter anti-Islamic sentiment and discrimination on college campuses, which is fueled by negative depictions of their communities (Shafer 2014; Tummala-Narra and Claudius 2013; Mir 2014). Since the events of September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001, Muslims have become a racialized minority group by which “a specific religion becomes identified by a direct or indirect reference to real or imagined ethnic/racial characteristics” that in turn homogenizes diverse groups into one racial category (Joshi 2006). Racialized Muslim women are particularly susceptible to negative treatment because of *hypervisibility* of the hijab (Mir 2014) which functions as a racialized religious marker (Joshi 2006). But research has shown that Muslim women can choose to engage negative depictions through activism and by debunking stereotypes (Haddad 2005).

This agentic engagement therefore synthesizes cultural traditions with new identity formation, which challenges the pre-conceived notion of the “oppressed” or “free” duality (Andrea 2009; Lutz 1997, 96; Ozyurt 2013). However, it is important to note that analysis of Muslim women international students’ encounters and adaptation strategies can also provide more profound understandings of the experiences of other minority groups and is not exclusive to their stories. However, more analysis is needed to learn about how these occurrences arise and how these women adapt.

Using a theoretical framework that involves the study of emotions, I examine adaptation through in-depth interviews with students to better understand their experiences. For this study, adaptation will be defined as it relates to acculturation, which “is the process of culture change and adaptation that occurs” when multicultural individuals converge (Gibson 2001:19). Ward (1996) defined two ways of adaptation to acculturation: *psychological*, regarding an individual’s general well-being, and *sociocultural*, pertaining to the individual’s social ability to manage “their daily life in the intercultural setting” (Berry et al. 2006:306). For this study, psychological and sociocultural adaptation will be used in conjunction with research on Muslim women international student’s experiences.

### **Theoretical Framework: Sociology of Emotions**

For this study, the theories and concepts from the sociology of emotions will be employed, thereby allowing for a deeper understanding of the students’ experiences, challenges, and their ways of coping. The sociology of emotions framework facilitates insights into comparing the experiences of studying and living abroad between students who have arrived recently and those who have already been here for several months or years. Scholars have determined that emotions are embodied and physiological (Ekman 1984; Stearns and Stearns 1985). Emotions are also social; they are influenced by culture and social institutions in addition to being created and experienced in social interactions (Boiger and Mesquita 2012). Various theories in this tradition examine emotions within social and historical contexts. Within these contexts, concepts such as emotion work, feeling rules (Hochschild 1983), and display rules (Ekman 1984) have been identified and investigated.

Saying that emotions are “socially constructed” means that they are a part of culture (Averill 1980; Boiger and Mesquita 2012; Harré 1986; Hochschild 1983; Lutz 1986; Ratner 1989) and subject to change within a historical context (Elias 1939; Linklater and Mennel 2010; Stearns and Stearns 1985). Thus, emotions vary across cultures and regions of the world (Boiger and Mesquita 2012; Masuda et al. 2008) and are subject to “feeling rules” (Hochschild 1983) and “display rules” (Ekman 1984). Feeling rules refer to “standards used in emotional conversation to determine what is rightly owed and owing in the currency of feeling” (Hochschild 1983:18). They establish “the sense of entitlement or obligation that governs emotional exchanges” (1983:56). When expressed, emotions are subject to display rules which “are overlearned habits about who can show what emotion to whom and when they can show it” (Ekman 1984:320).

More recently, Boiger and Mesquita (2012) emphasized the *interactional* construction of emotions; emotions arise in moment-to-moment interactions and as individuals try to manage their impressions to others (Goffman 1959; Meanwell et al. 2008). According to Goffman (1959), “successful acts of impression management create smooth interactions that elicit positive emotions, and failed acts of impression management create botched interactions that elicit negative emotions” (Meanwell et al. 2008:2). Thus, Goffman’s work highlights the *interactional* construction of positive and negative emotions.

Building on Goffman’s ideas, Arlie Hochschild, a pioneer of the sociology of emotions, developed the concept of “emotion work.” She formulated the concept based on data collected in a preliminary research that surveyed 261 university students. Her findings showed that the students “often spoke of acts *upon* feeling . . . In short, they

spoke of managed feelings” (1983:13). For Hochschild, emotion work or emotion management is when an individual encourages or stifles a certain feeling. Emotions are dependent on outside influences such as display rules. Further, “acts of emotion management are not simply private acts; they are used in exchanges under the guidance of feeling rules” (1983:18). Individuals engage in two strategies of emotion work: “surface acting” and “deep acting.” According to Hochschild, “in surface acting we deceive others about what we really feel, but we do not deceive ourselves” (1983:33). On the other hand, deep acting means, “taking over the levers of feeling production, by pretending deeply,” to change one’s thoughts to align with feeling rules (1983:33).

Hochschild uses these ideas in her research of flight attendants and service workers. In the service sector, Hochschild states that “emotional labor” is emotion work when it “is sold for a wage and therefore has an *exchange value*” (1983:7). Hochschild established that individuals manage their emotions in the workplace by manipulating their private feelings to match their employers’ expectations of how they should perform service work. In the workplace, private emotions are managed in order to provide a commodity, service, and this is considered to be “emotion labor” (Hochschild 1983).

According to Hochschild (1983), individuals engage in “transmutation” of their private emotional system, composed of “emotion work, feeling rules, and interpersonal exchanges” (76), for public purposes, and that emotions are “processed, standardized, and subjected to hierarchical control” (153) leading to *emotive dissonance* at work (90). In other words, Hochschild demonstrates through her work that emotions in public settings are subject to workplace policies and expectations of behavior. Hochschild explains that as a result of these policies and expectations, individuals lose connection



with their emotions. This means that there is a clear example of connecting both private and public emotion work. However recent studies, as seen below, tend to focus on either one or the other.

In recent years, the sociology of emotions has emphasized the study of “public” interactions and emotions, predominantly in the workplace (Arluke 2007; Meanwell et al. 2008; Smith and Kleinman 1989). For instance, major findings at an animal shelter illustrate that individuals learn emotion management and reframing strategies to pacify uncomfortable feelings associated with their jobs (Arluke 2007). Smith and Kleiman (1989) found that medical students engage in strategies to distance themselves from their patients using humor, focusing on the body, blaming the patient amongst others while demonstrating their physician authority. There are, nevertheless, some studies of emotion work in the private sphere of family life and other intimate relationships. For instance, Chin (2000) argues that parents control their emotions so they can help manage their children’s emotions during stressful times of intensive tutoring and studying in preparation of elite private high school applications. Simon et al. (1992) showed that adolescent girls negotiate romantic feeling norms in groups. In intimate relationships, partners construct emotions in response to each other in an on-going exchange (Boiger and Mesquita 2012; Gottman et al. 1999).

A university setting is not a traditional workplace setting. However, a campus environment could be considered a public space that may influence the student’s public emotions. Public emotions are considered to be when “emotion work, feeling rules, and social exchange have been removed” (Hochschild 1983:153) from private emotion systems which are subject to workplace policies of comportment. In this case, students’

public emotions are subjected to the university environment and due to this they may engage in emotion management.

It is also important to link personal experiences of emotions with emotion as a culture. Emotions are cultural constructs, and this is important to keep in mind when studying individual experiences and strategies. Culture provides a context for how social aspects are interpreted because “interactions and relationships are always framed by the prevalent ideas, meanings, and practices of how to be a person and how to relate to others that are also referred to as cultural models” (Boiger and Mesquita 2012: 226). Culture includes practices that influence the recognition of emotions and meanings, and “cultural models constitute the context in which emotional behavior takes place, and, as such, also guide and inform emotional responses” (Boiger and Mesquita 2012: 226). Therefore, culture does influence individuals’ emotions, their emotional responses, and judgment of other cultures (Lutz 1986). For example, research has shown that Americans view emotion as a feature of an individual whereas Japanese individuals view emotion through the relatedness to others’ emotions (Boiger and Mesquita 2012; Masuda et al. 2008).

Cultural judgments of emotions could be predicated by “emotion codes” which are sets of commonly known information “about which emotions are appropriate to feel when, where, and toward whom and what, as well as how emotions should be outwardly expressed” (Loseke 2009: 498). Emotion codes structure and make up resources people use to express states of emotion and when responding to the emotions of others (Loseke 2009; Tudor 2003). Moreover, as cultures are diverse, so are emotions because not every individual is a “culture robot” as they may stray from

socialization, allowing for the development of diverse and creative emotion codes (Loseke 2009; Swidler 1986).

By researching international populations, this study is well situated to highlight how emotions are culturally framed and can differ across cultures, and how these frames relate to personal experiences. Some researchers believe that emotions are very important in cross-cultural experiences and that emotion skills are dependent on cultural differences between the individual's host and home countries (Gullekson and Vancouver 2009; Tan et al. 2005). Emotions are culturally determined and may not be shared with other cultural groups (Matsumoto et al. 2008) because home culture affects how international students perceive, react to, and interact in the host culture (Lin 2012).

The intersection of race, ethnicity, and emotion work has not been deeply explored in the sociology of emotions literature. According to Wingfield (2010:251) "most of these studies overlook the racial character of professional workplaces and how emotion work is experienced by racial/ethnic minorities."

Previous research of emotions in the workplace has found that corporate culture is more conducive to white norms in an assumed homogenous environment (Mirchandani 2003; Wingfield 2010). It was also found that minorities do more emotion work in the workplace and that feeling rules, as defined above, are racialized (Harlow 2003; Wingfield 2010). Kang's research (2003) demonstrates that race does influence emotions in work environments; for example, white upper class women received higher standards of service and benefitted from higher levels of emotional labor that included "emotional pampering and physical pleasure" (835) performed by workers of color,

compared with African American and Caribbean customers. Thus, race affects emotions, as minorities are more likely to engage in emotion work.

Like race, there is little research in the sociology of emotions regarding religion. In fact, “research about emotions in the context of religion is rare,” (Huber and Richard 2010: 21). This is surprising because “religiosity is closely linked to emotional experiences,” for example as “believers seek joy in religious conduct.” Research shows that late attachment theory explains that God is a parent figure and there is a “close emotional bond” with the believer (Huber and Richard 2010) and that this religious bond, “reflects a strategy of emotional regulation” (Huber and Richard 2010: 21). Other research in this context has shown that religious practices such as prayer or group meetings encourage believers to reframe negative aspects as positive (Wilkins 2008). This is done in accordance to a relationship with God “by focusing on good thoughts, to attribute the emotional control to Christ” (291). This notion is supported by Koenig and Larson’s (2001) claim that religion is associated with well-being due to community involvement, profound social connections and “a sense of meaning” (Wilkins 2008: 281).

As studies have shown, religion and religious practice may be emotional experiences and a relationship with a God figure can help regulate emotions and encourage the reframing of negative aspects as positive. This is important to keep in mind when examining the experiences of Muslim women international students who may find strategies to adapt to their experiences as international students, their new status as ethno-racial minorities within their religion, or practices that affect their well-being.

In sum, past research in the sociology of emotions informs and theoretically frames this study. Previous studies have demonstrated the importance of emotions within private and public contexts and how individuals manage their emotions in those contexts. This research will explore emotions and emotion work within a cultural context in which Muslim women are racialized, and given the stereotypes about Islam and post - 9/11 Islamaphobia, how these patterns of racialization are gendered. It will look at the links between personal experiences and emotion culture and also add to the existing literature on gender, race/ethnicity, religion, and emotions.

## **CHAPTER TWO:**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

#### **International Students' Experiences**

For a young person, leaving habitual surroundings, friends, and family to pursue higher education could be a challenging experience. Shanley and Johnston (2008) identify concerns for first year college students that include self-efficacy, creating new social networks, homesickness, safety, and financial struggles. In addition to these concerns, the college experience for international students can be compounded by cross-cultural encounters, concerns with language proficiency, legal status problems, discrimination, confronting new cultural norms, and managing the additional distance from their social support networks of family and friends (Lee 2013; Rahman and Rollock 2004; Swagler and Ellis 2003; Tavakoli et al. 2009; Ying 2005). Akin to their American classmates, international students attending college for the first time will gain different roles and responsibilities that will affect their lives and well-being generally.

Education researchers have argued that the primary goals of study abroad programs are to acquire content knowledge (Brewer 2011; Kulacki 2000; Pusch and Merrill 2008), develop cultural skills (Brewer 2011; Deardorff 2008; Vande Berg 2007) and learn through lived experience within a “real world” context to prepare students for a

more globalized world (Bennett 2008; Brewer 2011; Pusch and Merrill 2008; Selby 2008). Watson et al. (2013) proposed that studying abroad can lead to three outcomes; 1) foreign language proficiency (assuming the student studies in a country with a different language), 2) cross-cultural development, and 3) regional awareness and competence. Thus, the study abroad experience can benefit students through immersion in the above categories.

Despite numerous study abroad benefits, there is potential for challenges. Many international students struggle with exposure to a new a language, the loss of social networks, becoming, in some cases, a racial minority, and gender ideologies that might conflict with the norms of the host region (Alazzi and Chiodo 2006; Chittooran and Sankar-Gomes 2007; Edwards-Joseph and Baker 2012; Lee et al. 2009; Marville 1981; Tummala-Narra and Claudius 2013; Zhang and Goodson, 2011). Unclear is under what conditions international students encounter these situations given the diversity of their experiences. The following sections elaborate on these potential challenges for international students.

## **Language**

English language proficiency could influence an international student's academic performance. A student's level of English proficiency can determine their comprehension of class material and their professors (Alazzi and Chiodo 2006; Heikinhemo and Shute 1986). International students participate in class less often because they are self-conscious of their speaking skills and accents. International students believe that by abstaining from class participation, they can mitigate negative stereotypes on behalf of English speakers (Fuentes et al. 2012; Lee 2013). Also,

language proficiency influences independent work, such as homework or assignments outside of the classroom, and students may need additional time to complete their work (Constantinides 1992; Lee 2013). In short, non-native speakers fret regarding their language abilities and their academic work (Chittooran and Sankar-Gomes 2007; Lee 2013; Mamiseishvili 2012; Tummala-Narra and Claudius 2013).

### **Loss of Social Networks**

In addition to language proficiency challenges, international students have reported struggles associated with loss of social networks. Edwards-Joseph and Baker (2012) examined the experiences of Caribbean international students in the U.S. They found that many participants experienced loneliness due to a loss of face-to-face contact with family and friends. Participants expressed longing for frequent communication with their home social networks and they had difficulties creating new ones in the U.S. Because of these circumstances, many students felt alienated. This is consistent with other research that shows that international students experience loneliness and stress resulting from a loss of their networks and difficulties creating new ones (Chittooran and Sankar-Gomes 2007; Edwards-Joseph and Baker 2012; Tummala and Narra 2013; Zhang and Goodson 2011).

### **Racial Minority Status**

Newcomers enter into an American racial context of the “ladder of dominance” in which Anglo-Saxon groups are viewed as superior over non-white racial groups (Grosfoguel and Georas 2000). The “ladder of dominance” is illustrated through Feagin’s concept of White racial framing in the U.S., which is “an overarching worldview



that encompasses important racial ideas, terms, images, emotions, and interpretations” (Feagin 2010: 3). Feagin (2010) explains that a majority of White Americans and those who aim to assimilate to the majority use the White racial frame as a racial judgment reference. White racial framing is used to demonstrate perceived racial superiority of whites, and individuals who aim to achieve similar high regard adopt behaviors, ideas, and terms associated with whites.

Research has shown that race does affect a student’s experiences; Caucasian international students experience fewer challenges like discrimination and prejudice during their studies than non-Caucasian students (Chittooran and Sankar-Gomes 2007; Tummala-Narra and Claudius 2013). Students who are perceived as racial minorities in the countries in which they study (such as the U.S.) hail from places in the Middle East, Asia, Latin America, and Africa. Research shows they encounter more discrimination than European students and U.S.-born students (Smith and Khawaja 2010; Tummala-Narra and Claudius 2013). In Tummala-Narra and Claudius’s research, Muslim international students at a U.S. university experienced race-based discrimination including stereotyping, verbal harassment, and physical threats, and as a result they reported feelings of “otherness” on their campus (2013). American racial dynamics may influence how students interpret their race while in the U.S. Caribbean international students were unsure about which group they pertained to based on a perceived sense of negative racial stereotypes associated with Blacks (Edwards-Joseph and Baker 2012).

## **Gender**

Women constitute 44% of international students in the United States (IEE 2012). Some international students' experiences are influenced by traditional gender roles brought from their home country and these blend with the new gender roles they confront in the host country (Lee et al. 2009; Marville 1981). Fong and Peskin (1969) found that female Chinese students reported struggling with traditional ideals of womanhood (e.g. of being a mother) and the pursuit of higher education. Female Chinese students' pursuits of higher education were viewed as endangering gender norms in Chinese society as the roles of mother and student are viewed as incompatible (Lee et al. 2009).

Differing gender roles may not always produce tension between home and host countries. For example, some research has suggested that female Japanese students tend to embrace American gender roles, which typically leads to an increase in the students' confidence and assertiveness (Lee et al. 2009). McDermott-Levy (2011) also found that Omani nursing students experienced a new sense of self-reliance during their studies in the U.S. Among respondents in her study, McDermott-Levy found that students acquired newfound independence without the traditional accompaniment of a chaperone or family member. They also acquired responsibilities that were traditionally spearheaded by men in their home country. However, new freedoms were related to the women's public activities such as shopping, visiting friends, walking on campus, and using public transportation, and not their traditional gender roles.

## **Religion**

International students may experience difficulties regarding their religious practices at American universities, especially among those brought up in countries where religion is tightly embedded within the social fabric of their culture and daily living. In Islam, Muslims must pray five times a day. In McDermott-Levy's research (2011), female Omani nursing students encountered a lack of structural and institutional support for prayer times in between their classes. Students highlighted lack of private places to pray and sufficient time between classes. McDermott-Levy's research was unique in presenting the perspectives of Muslim international students and the struggles they encountered practicing their faith in American settings. In light of the many challenges outlined above, the next section examines the strategies that international students engage in to manage these experiences.

## **International Students' Strategies of Adaptation**

Yakunina et al. (2011) found that universities are encouraging students to rely on their "multicultural strengths" such as persistence in cross-cultural experiences, developing resilience, and being optimistic (Yoon and Portman 2004) to manage the experiences they confront while studying abroad. International students are encouraged to initiate contact with American classmates, join on-campus clubs and activities, practice their English with American classmates, and learn about American cultural norms and traditions (Lipson and Goodman 2008; Yakunina et al. 2011; Yoon and Portman 2004). While these suggestions are widespread throughout the literature, Ward et al. (2001) found that secondary coping mechanisms (i.e. acceptance and

positive reinterpretation) do not resolve international students' issues (Smith and Khawaja 2010).

Although university administrators encourage students to rely on intrapersonal skills and traits to resolve their issues, research reveals that these strategies are not consistently successful (Smith and Khawaja 2010). This leads to the question, in what other ways do international students respond to both the positive and negative aspects of studying abroad? Moreover, how do these experiences affect students' emotional states, and do these in turn, affect their adaptation experiences?

### **Immigrant Coping Strategies**

In examining the experiences of international students who are sojourners, how other travelers, such as immigrants, cope with adaptation struggles can be considered. The following section discusses immigrants' coping strategies relating to language proficiency, loss of social networks, changing gender dynamics, adjusting to new racial environments, and religious involvement.

Previous research has found that immigrants, like international students, use strategies to adapt to language proficiency challenges. For example, research shows that high English language proficiency is associated with lower levels of acculturative stress (Torres et al. 2012). Some immigrants with lower English language proficiency stated that "being silent" was an effective coping strategy rather than be perceived negatively by native speakers. However, the "silent" strategy resulted in isolation of the immigrant in social settings with native English speakers (Omeri and Atkins 2002). This is similar to international students' strategies of not participating in class.

Some immigrants with low English proficiency who avoid speaking with American born individuals may experience isolation. Also, similar to students, immigrants experience isolation through loss of home social networks (Al-Sharideh and Goe 1998; Araujo 2011). Vaquera and Aranda's research (2011) found that maintaining home relationships by speaking with family and friends could help immigrants manage negative emotions such as loneliness.

Immigrants use strategies when encountering language and social network difficulties; research has found that gender struggles can also spur immigrants to engage in strategies of challenging traditional gender norms. Grasmuck and Pessar's study (1991) of Dominicans revealed that gender barriers in their country frustrated women, so they emigrated to the U.S. to pursue work and to establish financial independence. Men traditionally controlled the household finances and the women believed that earning money would give them more leverage in household decisions.

Religion can also provide a context in which immigrants engage in adaptation strategies. It has been found that belief in a supernatural being can provide a sense of security in a context of uncertainty that can help individuals understand their "social and existential context" in various life situations (Ellison et al. 2012). For Muslims, their faith pertains to an international worldview, part of a large-scale Islamic community (Brown 2009; Esack 1993). Islamic faith is an integral part of everyday life for Muslims and is maintained through daily prayer activities. Engaging in traditional Islamic activities for Muslims is a means of overcoming obstacles of discrimination and stress (McDermott-Levy 2011).

Race also influences the experiences of immigrants in the U.S. Race is socially significant because it is a set of meanings learned at a young age to understand the world and individuals use those meanings to determine their levels of comfort (Hartigan Jr. 2010). Roth (2012) identifies how immigrants strategize to deal with racial experiences. These include, "performing it, adopting types of behaviors, styles, and routines that signal who they are within a racial framework" (151) through language, hairstyle, clothing, "ways of interacting, body language, and mannerisms" (154). Immigrants purposefully chose certain strategies to circumvent perceived discrimination and elevate their position in an American racial hierarchy. Roth (2012) argues that adopting cultural behaviors of race may provide some socioeconomic advantages but individuals "remain racialized as Latinos" (175) and still encounter social impediments.

International students are not immigrants because of their sojourner status (Gullekson and Vancouver 2009). However, international students and immigrants may encounter similar experiences and engage in common coping strategies. Findings in immigrant studies can inform our understanding of possible coping strategies students use to adapt to new surroundings.

In spite of what we know about immigrants' strategies, we know less about how international students might rely on strategies that include emotion management and emotion work. This is particularly important given that being in a new country can yield conflicting emotions (Aranda et al. 2013). It is important to examine how gender, religion and race affect the experiences of female Muslim international students at American universities because this may determine the type of situations they encounter, the choices they make, and how emotions plays a role in adapting to new environments.

## **Specific Research Aims**

Despite extensive research on international students' and immigrants' issues, and studies within the sociology of emotions, the experiences of Muslim women international students have not been considered. Bhatia and Ram (2001) indicate that there is a need for further analysis focusing on "historical, political and social forces on the migratory experience" (Gibson 2001: 22), in conjunction with race, class, and gender. Most importantly, the emotion work of young Muslim women international students in a university setting has not been researched. This population merits analysis because their sojourner status, gender, race, class, and religion may compound their experiences. Also, these women are part of a large international student population in the United States that continues to grow each academic year (IEE 2012) and thus their experiences should be considered.

To answer these questions, the specific aims of this research are as follows: a) to broaden our understanding of Muslim women international students' experiences at large public colleges in the southeastern part of the United States; b) to investigate the range of emotions experienced when confronted with new situations; c) to focus on how race affects the experiences of adapting of Muslim women international students; d) to examine how gender affects their experiences within their families; e) to investigate how religion affects their experiences; and, f) to examine how students engage in emotion work to cope with the challenges they experiences.

## **CHAPTER THREE:**

### **METHODS**

This study uses in-depth qualitative interviews to examine the experiences of adaptation of Muslim women international students during their study abroad at two large public colleges in the southeastern part of the U.S. Their personal experiences provide opportunities to analyze the strategies used to adapt and how individuals managed their range of experiences during their studies. This research uses qualitative data because, as Meanwell et al. (2008) argue, individual cases are helpful in creating theories and depicting experiences and emotional processes.

Descriptive language is useful for the reader because it is persuasive, can demonstrate the researcher's understanding of the situation and can help the reader "make sense" of a situation (Firestone 1987). I collected data through semi-structured interviews that probed students' experiences adapting to the challenges confronted in the course of adapting to being abroad. The students' encounters will be recounted in their own words because this may provide the most direct way to understand their perspectives on adaptation.

Research has shown that qualitative data findings can be influenced by the researcher's bias and it is important to establish trustworthiness and credibility of analyses and methodology (Bulpitt and Martin 2010). The researcher must understand



that his/her perspective can even be advantageous to the study. My own experience as an international student in Europe, in addition to having taught English as a Second Language to students from the Middle East, Asia, Africa, Europe, South and Central America, has given me insight into the kinds of situations international students face. Given that the researcher's perspective can also potentially influence assumptions about the participants' experiences, authenticity is important and researchers suggest using open-ended questions, allowing adequate time for responses, using reflection, and being non-directive to mitigate the reliance on assumptions (Bulpitt and Martin 2010).

### **Population and Recruitment**

Participants in this study entered a higher education context at two universities in the southeastern United States. The individuals are between 17 to 31 years old, or in "young adulthood" which is defined as a period when individuals are transitioning to traditional adult roles that include self-responsibility, autonomy, and financial independence (Arnett 1994; 1997, 1998, 2001a, 2001b, 2003; Cote 2000; Greene et al. 1992; Hartmann and Swartz 2007; Scheer and Palkovitz 1994). Many students acquire the mentioned responsibilities when they leave their homes to pursue higher education.

All participants in this study were either currently enrolled in undergraduate studies or students in the "ELLP" language program. The "ELLP" program is an English language-learning program that students attend before going on to study at both large public colleges.

Participants also were recruited through word of mouth and through snowball sampling. If students were recruited through ELLP, it is possible that they were hesitant

to speak with me as a native English speaker or they may not have felt confident regarding their English language proficiency and/or accent (Alazzi and Chiodo 2006; Heikenhemo and Shute 1986). Participants were recruited through on-campus clubs and organizations. Participants recruited from these sources represent a sample of convenience, as they self-volunteered.

Initially, this research intended to have a comparative research design by juxtaposing the experiences of “novices” and “veteran” participants. Novices were considered individuals who had been in the U.S. for one to three months. Veterans were individuals who had already been in the U.S. for longer than one year. This comparative design was intended to provide insight into the differing experiences of each group based on their length of time in the U.S. The researcher embarked on this study with pre-conceived notions of the experiences of novices and veterans. The researcher believed that there would be substantial differences between the two groups based on the length of time in the U.S. However, this was not the case as both novices and veterans encountered similar experiences.

It is important to note that participants in this study do not represent all Muslim women students in their home countries because these students studying abroad in the U.S. typically come from higher socioeconomic backgrounds and are the most likely students to participate in exchange programs because they can afford the associated expenses (Otero 2008). In addition, the participants’ experiences are not representative of all Muslim women international students because the two large public colleges are situated in a large metropolitan area with a diverse population. This, therefore, increases their chances of meeting other individuals from their home countries, speak

their language, or who share their religion. Therefore, their experiences are likely to be different from those students who attend private universities, religiously affiliated universities, rural universities, and smaller colleges, among other different types of institutions. So, this sample is not representative of Muslim women international students as it is a sample of convenience.

## **Participants**

Eleven Muslim women international students were interviewed for this research. Each participant was interviewed face-to-face at a location of her choosing. Only one interview was conducted with two participants at the same time, Fatema and Maryam from Oman. These women were interviewed together because of their history together; they arrived to the U.S. two years ago and were roommates at another American university. Four months prior to the interview, they decided jointly to transfer to another university in the southern region of the U.S.

Participants were recruited who are current international undergraduate or ELLP students that had been in the U.S. ranging from two months to several years. Appendix A provides a table of participants' demographic information. Participants' ages ranged from 17 years old to 31 years old. In addition, two of the 11 participants were already married and raising young children, ages 1 to 6 years old, while studying in the U.S. The married women in this sample arrived to the U.S. primarily because of their husbands' academic or professional plans. See Appendix A for further demographic information of study participants.

## **Interviews**

For this study, data were collected using an open-ended interview guide. Interviewees consented to participate and confidentiality was maintained throughout the research process. The document of informed consent is available in Appendix B. Interviews were conducted between the Fall 2013 and Spring 2014 semesters. The interviews took place in a public or private place chosen by the participant; interview locations included the university library, café, park, quiet study area, etc. The researcher recorded all interviews with the participants' consent. Staying consistent with the semi-structured interviewing technique, during the interviews, the researcher listened for clues and probed into the participants' experiences and did not probe topics that individuals were uncomfortable discussing (Weiss 1994).

Interview questions related to interviewees' backgrounds, arrival at the university that hosted them, their experiences at the university, their feelings about those experiences, their peers and professors, and what they believe it means to be an international student at an American university and whether their religious faith or involvement in a local religious community/congregation affected, either positively or negatively, their transition to or adaptation to life in the United States and in this region in particular. The research interview guide can be found in Appendix C.

## **Data Analysis**

All interviews were transcribed and coded for themes relating to gender, racial, and religious strategies using grounded theory. In addition, interview content was coded for evidence of emotion management such as re-framing, suppressing, engaging in surface acting, and minimizing in the context of the challenges they faced.

Data analysis in this research is based on grounded theory, which is a strategy of inquiry whereby a researcher employs orderly research methods in order to extract theoretical explanations from social phenomena such as processes, interactions, and actions (Charmaz 2006; Creswell 2003). This approach allows for analysis of data grounded in the experiences of participants, rather than based on deductive hypotheses derived from existing theories (Charmaz 2006). Therefore, data were first collected and then analyzed for emergent themes connected with this research's specific aims relating to gender, race, and religion that also demonstrated the participants' emotions. For example, interview quotes analyzed included words, or phrases with the word "feel" or explicit emotion words such as "happy," "sad," "nervous," etc.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Upon receiving USF IRB approval, I began this study. No ethical issues arose during the study. Informed consent was acquired from all participants and confidentiality was maintained. Participation in this research was voluntary. The participants were not compensated for their involvement other than the researcher offered to buy them a coffee or tea at the university café. Ten out of 11 participants declined this offer to buy them coffee or tea and one accepted. However, I explained that their participation was important in order to share their voices about their experiences as international students.

I interviewed individuals who were not native English speakers, and I did not speak their language(s) such as Arabic, Pulaar, etc. This may have presented a challenge in terms of how participants understood the interview questions and chose vocabulary in their responses. Ten out of 11 participants did not use a translation

application, but one individual translated specific words from the interview. Also, some cultures may not openly speak about emotional topics. To address this issue I called upon my experience as an ESL teacher and tried to clearly explain my questions without directing my participants' answers. I was respectful of cultural customs and did not further investigate issues that made the students feel uncomfortable or stressed. A limitation of my research is that I could only interview participants with mid to high English language proficiency.

It is important to consider my position in this research as a non-Muslim white American woman. I understand that my participants could think of me as an outsider and that I lacked knowledge of their culture, history, language, and traditions, etc. I admit that my knowledge of the Muslim world is not substantial and as a result, the participants might have believed that I did not understand their experiences. Nonetheless, I aimed to present myself openly and shared personal information about why I wanted to do this project because of my experiences as an English as a second language teacher to students from around the world. I strived to demonstrate to my participants that despite my outsider status as a white American non-Muslim woman, I appreciated their culture and I wanted to share their voices. To do this, I read about Muslim culture and religion to show my participants that I am somewhat familiar with their traditions and history. Also, I attended Muslim student club meetings and activities. This helped contribute to building trust during the interview process.

## **CHAPTER FOUR:**

### **INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS AND EMOTION WORK**

#### **Challenges of International Students**

International students encounter different cultural issues while studying abroad at American universities. In this context, their first year university experience differs from their American peers because they confront cultural challenges such as gaining proficiency in a new language and creating new social networks. This chapter examines some of these issues related to adaptation, including English language proficiency, making friends in the U.S., and financial issues that come with being abroad. I argue that Muslim women international students encounter these challenges in the course of transitioning to being an international student. I illustrate throughout how these women engage in emotion work strategies to cope with the struggles they encounter.

#### **Language**

English is not the first language of many international students at American universities. Therefore, language proficiency is a cultural challenge that students perceive they must master in order to progress in their higher education goals. Laila recently arrived from Saudi Arabia and is enrolled in an intensive English language

program at her university. She expresses her desire to improve her language skills and pursue further studies at the undergraduate level upon completion of the English program. Throughout our interview together, she describes her experiences with English as a second language: “Yeah. I always talk. I always like to improve my English . . . I talk to [them]. . . I feel uh, maybe my English is not good but I will improve it with talking, with talking with the American people, yeah.”

During our interview, Laila assesses her English ability as unsatisfactory. She aims to increase her English language proficiency by talking with native speakers. She actively recognizes opportunities to practice her English and engages with others despite periodically becoming frustrated with her lack of language abilities. Laila’s efforts regarding her English proficiency coincide with previous research that demonstrates “that the language barrier is the international students’ biggest challenge during their early adjustment periods” (Lin 2012: 338).

International students must master their own language abilities but also strive to increase their comprehension of others. Lin (2012) found that a language barrier presents a challenge to students who aim to achieve academic success. Therefore, international students must attain higher-level proficiency in order to understand their professors and classmates and to succeed in their classes. Laila discusses her challenges with English comprehension in the classroom.

AG: Are there any issues or challenges that you’ve encountered since studying at the university?

L: Maybe first class when teacher start talking English, I had oh my God, how I will I follow the instruction he said? It’s difficult for me. In the first class only. Then I...

AG: So what did you do to, to fix that situation?



L: I, when I came to home, I study English and I uh study vocabulary, more vocabulary.

AG: So how did that make you feel when the teacher was talking and maybe it was hard to follow what they were saying...how did that make you feel?

L: Uh...I told to myself, I make challenge with myself to practice more and more.

Laila struggled with English comprehension on her first day of class. She experienced difficulties understanding her teacher and interpreted this to be serious enough for her to fervently study during her free time to improve her abilities and her chances for success in her classes. English proficiency is important in course success because international students with lower language English proficiency encounter difficulties in school (Lin 2012). When asked about her feelings regarding this situation, Laila demonstrates her comprehension of the importance of English language proficiency because she states that she challenges herself to improve.

In their efforts to adapt, Muslim women international students engage in emotion work. According to Hochschild (1983), emotion work or emotion management is when an individual encourages or stifles a certain feeling. The women in this study use emotion work strategies of reframing, suppressing, through surface acting, and minimizing. Even though these students are not immigrants, but rather sojourners (Gullekson and Vancouver 2009), their experiences shape their emotional states. For Laila, rather than discuss sentiments of frustration or disappointment, she emotionally reframes strategically her language difficulties as an opportunity for improvement rather than a fault (Scott and Myers 2007).

When students have achieved higher-level English proficiency and comprehension, they may still struggle with cultural issues related to language. International students may not be familiar with regional dialects or English spoken by

other non-native speakers. Different accents and pronunciations may cause students to have decreased comprehension. Hadij, a Biology student from The Gambia<sup>1</sup> does not explicitly state that she has experienced challenges with English. Her first language is Pulaar, a tribal language spoken throughout Africa, and her second language is English. However, despite being in the U.S. already for two years, she expresses her frustrations with comprehending other non-native English speakers at the university.

AG: Are there any issues or challenges that you've encountered since studying at the university?

H: Some of the professors have accents like... (laughs). I have one professor, she has a French Vietnamese accent and like French and Vietnamese mixed up, I just sit there and she's talking and I'm like, "Oh my God, what are you saying?!!" (says in high pitched voice). (laughs) I mean it's her accent, she's Vietnamese and she went to a French school.

AG: So what do you do in that situation?

H: Well in that situation I try to pay attention as much as possible. I mean most of my learning I do on my own when I study.

Despite a high-level of English proficiency and comprehension, Hadij still struggles to understand her internationally born professor. She expresses frustration for not understanding the "mixed up" accent of her Vietnamese professor even though they are speaking English in class. This frustration may be due to Hadij's unfamiliarity with a different English pronunciation. Studies have shown that international students have to adjust to understand accents of the people around them (Edwards-Joseph and Baker 2012; Lacina 2002; Zhai 2002).

Muslim women international students may suppress unfavorable sentiments and actively aim to "induc[e] positive feelings" (Williams 2013: 513) as an emotion work strategy. Therefore, suppression of unfavorable sentiments is built upon feeling rules,

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<sup>1</sup> Proper spelling of the country is The Gambia rather than Gambia.

which are “standards used in emotional conversation to determine what is rightly owed and owing in the currency of feeling” (Hochschild 1983: 18). Therefore, in interactions, individuals engage in an exchange of emotions that are deemed appropriate by cultural standards. When individuals experience “misfitting feelings” (Hochschild 1983), for example a lack of grieving at a funeral or sadness at a wedding, they engage *in situ* (Schrock et al. 2009) suppression of the unfavorable emotions in order to avoid sanction from others and to induce cultural appropriate responses (Hochschild 1983). Hadij strategically suppresses frustration, which can be considered as a “misfitting feeling” that does not comply with feeling rules in the classroom (Hochschild 1983).

To address the lack of comprehension of her instructor’s English, she resolves to learn course content independently outside of the classroom, which she strategically reframes as her learning style (Arluke 2007; Martini and Busseri 2010; Smith and Kleinman 1989). Therefore, international students’ language difficulties signify larger implications as studies have shown that students’ academic work is dependent on their language abilities (Tucker 2003; Lin 2012:334). However, students’ academic progress is not solely dependent on language abilities, but also on their capability of new social network creation.

### **New Social Networks**

In addition to language struggles, international students may encounter cultural difficulties relating to social networks. Shanley and Johnson (2008) identify creating and maintaining new social networks as challenges for all first year university students. However, this challenge may be magnified by other factors for international students as they navigate new cultural contexts. Social networks during study abroad experiences

are important because students are far from their home social connections, therefore, new social networks are crucial and will differ greatly from already established ones (Lacina 2002; Lin 2012).

Mimi is a 17-year-old freshman who arrived from Nigeria two months before I interviewed her and lives in the student dormitories on campus. She explains that she did not anticipate the difficulty of creating new social networks in the U.S: “Um...uh the fact that I kind of like expected it to be really easy for me to make friends and all that. But it’s not really easy, it’s not really easy.” She repeatedly expresses her assessment of the difficulties of creating new social networks therefore highlighting its perceived hardship.

Later in our discussion, Mimi categorizes creating new social networks as a challenge she has encountered while studying abroad.

AG: Have you experienced any challenges while studying in the U.S.?

M: Uh, not really. Uh, not really. Well maybe like making friends.

AG: Can you explain that to me?

M: Uh cause it’s (laughs) it’s really not that easy to make friends like...how should I say?

AG: With who?

M: Not with like anyone. And...

AG: Is it easier to make friends in Nigeria?

M: I think it’s easy...I don’t know I think just because it’s a different environment like here and like the cultures are different. So you don’t like..I don’t really know how some people will see things so it’s kind of difficult to like... it’s kind of difficult to like ... how should I say? Blend in in the United States. But maybe in time it will get better.

When asked about challenges in the U.S. Mimi is hesitant to express her thoughts. Display rules dictate who is permitted to express what emotions in interactions

(Ekman 1984). In this case, Mimi does not readily express negative experiences in the U.S., which she could interpret as not socially acceptable when interacting with an American. But Mimi states that it is difficult to make friends with “anyone” and that she considers this to be a struggle associated with studying abroad. When compared to her experiences in her home country, she strategically reframes this by saying that challenges stem from differing cultures and contexts rather than failed attempts to make friends with Americans (Arluke 2007; Martini and Busseri 2010; Smith and Kleinman 1989). From her viewpoint she is apprehensive to establish new social networks due to her inability to anticipate others’ cultural perspectives. Rather, she reframes this to be due to a cultural disconnect, so she encounters integration challenges into her new environment.

Mimi’s experience regarding social networks is not exceptional; Edwards-Joseph and Baker’s (2012) work found that upon arrival, international students did not foresee social network difficulties and this resulted in alienation. As a result, the students experienced the feeling of not fitting in due to a cultural disconnect with others around them. However, according to the participants who perceived they did not “fit in,” these individuals actively socialized with other international students or students from their own countries.

Eve, a student from The Gambia has been in the U.S. for two years. She reflects on her mindset before she left her home country and arrived to the U.S., “I was kind of prepping myself to know that there would be some challenges but just you know...trying to get in the mind frame that I would be able to work through whatever would come up.” Eve anticipated challenges she would face during her study abroad experience and she

used *preparatory emotion work* in order to prepare herself effectively on how to address these expected hurdles (Schrock et al. 2009). Eve, like the other women in this research, engages in emotion work in order to address certain challenges as previously described.

In the following quote, Eve describes her experiences with attempting to create new social networks in the U.S. She explains the breadth of her activities at the university when she first arrived to study abroad.

AG: How do you feel about living here and going to school right now?

E: For the first month I wasn't really interactive. I would go to class and then go home. I would interact with my friends that I came with but like to make close friends with others was really, really, really difficult. So yeah I think when I started going to [on campus charity club] is when that changed, is when I became more open and I started interacting with different people. I started to try more activities, more stuff.

Due to her difficulties in creating new friendships at her university, Eve isolated herself and only attended classes and returned to her home when she first arrived to the U.S. Her social interactions were restricted to fraternizing with other international students from her country. Eve's apprehension in creating new social networks at first, in this case manifested itself in restricted socialization. Research has shown that international students may experience "feeling confused, lost, lonely, helpless and [having] the desire for dependence" (Klomegah 2006: 304; Lin 2012: 334) brought on by culture shock within the first few years of studying abroad (Lin 2012: 334; Wang and Frank 2002). However, Eve does not specify how long her restricted interaction lasted but does state that she coped with restricted socialization by attending campus clubs and "trying new things." Eve's emotional strategy consists of *critical reappraisal* (Sung 2012) by accepting her study abroad situation and positively reframing it as an

opportunity to engage in new activities (Arluke 2007; Martini and Busseri 2010; Smith and Kleinman 1989).

Many of the participants stated they had experienced difficulties in creating new social networks with American students. A majority of participants declared that they resolved to create friendships with other international students or individuals from their home countries or regions.

Aiah, who has been in the U.S. the longest, five years, is a 24-year-old Psychology student from Morocco who shares some insight into why she believes it is challenging for international students to create new social networks.

Um it's very, very hard to start from scratch in a culture where you don't know anybody, you don't speak the language, or you're very intimidated to make friends. You have to face yourself because you will be by yourself for some period of time, a long time. It takes a good two years to make good friends.

Aiah explains that international students are at a disadvantage when pursuing new social networks in the U.S. due to their unfamiliarity with cultural practices and language. Furthermore, their efforts are complicated by their apprehension based on intimidation to interact with American nationals, thereby decreasing their social network prospects. Building new friendships and initiating conversations with native speakers are important for a student's social adjustment (Lin 2012; Myles and Cheng 2003). However, due to differing experiences and expectations, "many international students feel rejected, have the sense of loss (being away from homes) or feel anxious interacting with the local people" (Lin 2012: 334).

Aiah's statement echoes the idea that international students experience restricted socialization during their adjustment to a new culture and language and highlights *preparatory emotion work*, by preparing oneself to experience emotionally

disruptive encounters (Schrock et al. 2012). Furthermore, based on her own experience, Aiah believes that the length of time required to establish quality social networks is “a good two years.” Other participants, novices and veterans, agreed that creating new social networks is not instantaneous but rather develops over time. However, novices who were enrolled in English language programs stated that they believed social network creation to be contingent upon developing high level language proficiency. According to Aiah, students may have satisfactory social networks once they culturally adapt to their new surroundings but she may just be speaking of her own personal experience.

Hadij's response to this issue represents an exception regarding the creation of friendships in the U.S. When asked if she has American friends, she states that she is skeptical of the quality of social relationships in the U.S. and explains that she does not pursue friendships with Americans.

AG: Do you have any American friends?

H: Hmmhmm the thing is...I ...most of the times, my definition of a friend is someone that is like like...that is always there basically! And I feel like I don't feel...I'm not that connected to them.

AG: To all Americans?

H: Yeah even the Muslim [American] students, I speak with.

AG: Why do you think that is?

H: I don't know. I don't know why that's the case. I don't know. Maybe I have trust issues too to be sincere. It's hard for me to completely believe that this person is going to be there.

Research has shown that when individuals are faced with situations that could facilitate emotional discomfort, individuals will re-frame their experiences in order to alleviate inquietude (Arluke 2007; Martini and Busseri 2010; Smith and Kleinman 1989).



In addition, reframing of certain situations is performed in order to conform to the “status quo” and “an organization’s cultural values” (Schrock et al. 2009: 69; Scott and Myers 2007). Hochschild (1983) discusses how when flight attendants became frustrated with disruptive passengers, they reframed how they saw the individuals as children or as having a fear of flying. By reframing, flight attendants rendered their frustrations to be more manageable.

Hadij, like other international students’ perceptions of Americans altered their perspectives due to unsuccessful attempts to make friends with them. Hadij strategically minimizes the significance of failed friendships with Americans but she does not hide her disappointment (Rostomayn 2013). However, it must be noted that Hadij did not explain why she feels “not that connected” to Americans. Since it is hard to make friends, these women emotionally reframe this by stating that they do not want to befriend Americans, even Muslim Americans (Arluke 2007; Martini and Busseri 2010; Smith and Kleinman 1989). According to previous research, this explains why international students are more likely to socialize with other internationals due to a lack of shared experiences and culture with Americans (Lin 2012). Therefore, despite difficulties due to cultural differences, students’ perceptions may influence their social networking efforts and may direct them to associate with other international students rather than Americans.

The importance of having social networks is heightened because the women stated that studying abroad represented the first time they lived away from their families. Friends helped to fill the void. On the other hand, being away from family engendered more opportunities for daily independence. However, despite increased agency in daily

decision-making, many Muslim women international students remain financially dependent on their parents to support them. I discuss this in the following section.

### **Transition to Being an International Student**

The student role in higher education means that individuals attend college and accomplish their daily tasks independently without the aid of their families. Shanley and Johnson (2008) found that many first year university students are anxious about independent decision-making because they shift from very structured environments to a setting in which “they’re the bosses, making the choices” that will affect their daily lives (6). For some students, independence can be a new and daunting responsibility. Research has determined that college is a time that many students are “moving into adulthood with more expectations of responsibility” (Edwards-Joseph and Baker 2012: 716).

To navigate the student role necessitates reflection upon the women’s traditional family dynamics. Without the presence of their families, the student role allows for the women to diverge from traditional gender roles by which they are dependent on others and consistently accompanied by family members. Mimi is a 17-year-old freshman from Nigeria, who discusses her home environment and reliance on other family members,

M: Because mostly in Nigeria I’m with my family and all that. So I get to ...um do things on my own [in the U.S.] and become more...(little laugh) become more independent.

AG: Can you give me an example of something that you do here that makes you more independent?

M: Yeah like um...waking up every morning. Like at home I could over sleep and my mom could come and wake me up. But now I have to like do that myself all the time. And also my my like like...ok...what else? Like going shopping and all

that, at home, if I want to go shopping I just ask my mom and or my dad or somebody.

When asked about what she likes about living in the U.S., Mimi describes the structure of the family environment at home in Nigeria. She states that she is often with her family members and that she relies heavily on her mother and father to help her accomplish daily tasks such as awaking in the morning and transport to go shopping. Research has shown that Muslim women international students typically come from cultures where women are chaperoned by male family members when in public in an effort to insure the woman's sexual purity (McDermott-Levy 2011). It is possible that her parents are able to chaperone her because their daily schedules permit this interaction.

Nevertheless, her comparison of the home structure in Nigeria and in the U.S. highlights the importance of her newfound independence. Mimi strategically copes with increased independence by emotionally reframing its importance in daily activities and critically reappraising it to be a positive attribute of study abroad (Sung 2012). She stresses the importance of accomplishing daily tasks autonomously. Mimi is guided by the protective care of her family at home and has shed this dynamic to adopt a mandatory self-reliant approach during her study abroad experience.

In their new student role in the U.S., Muslim women international students direct their daily activities. Hadij, a 20-year-old Biology student from The Gambia explains how acquiring a student role in the study abroad context entails independence of navigating day-to-day activities on campus.

AG: How do you feel about living here and going to school right now?

H: Right now? It's great!

AG: Do you think your feelings have changed over time?

H: Let's see, feelings...eh, I don't know. When I first came here it was hard, it was hard.

AG: Why was it hard? Can you tell me more about that?

H: Because it was hard because I had never left home before and having to come here and stay in this university. It's big, getting around places and umm...just having to do everything for yourself like making decisions for yourself and getting around classes. I mean during my first and second semester I wasn't as busy, even though I thought I was at that time (laughs).

According to Hadij, her study abroad journey represents the first time she is leaving home to live away from her family. Hadij considers the time period of leaving her family and arriving in a new setting to be "hard." According to Edwards-Joseph and Baker (2012), this statement coincides with previous research that states that international students experience the most challenges within the first days of arriving to U.S. due to unfamiliarity with their new surroundings.

Hadij explains that she is responsible for her transport, decision-making, and coordinating her school schedule while at the university. During the first semester she believed that she had many responsibilities but as she continued in her studies she acquired more tasks to complete. Hadij's reflection on her first and second semester class schedules demonstrates her ability to adjust to her new role by emotionally minimizing the severity of her first semester challenges (Rostomyan 2013).

Minimization, or de-intensification, consists of actively creating the impression that certain emotions are felt with decreased severity than are actually experienced by the individual. In other words, minimization suggests that an individual's "true" emotion is "genuinely felt; its display is simply softened" (Rostomyan 2013: 6).

Johnson and Sadhu (2007) found that international students must "quickly learn to navigate through the demands of their day-to-day activities and adjust to new ways of

communicating and behaving” (Edwards-Joseph and Baker 2012: 716). Therefore, by adopting a student role during study abroad, Muslim women begin their transition to adulthood in which they must accomplish tasks and decision-making without the aid of their families.

Despite research that has found that international students struggle with the student role at universities (Edwards-Joseph and Baker 2012; Ward et al. 2001; Yakunina et al. 2011; Yoon and Portman 2004; Zunker 2006), their experiences cannot only be considered challenging but also rewarding and fulfilling. Aiah a 24-year-old Psychology student from Morocco shares her perspective on being a student in the U.S.:

So I feel very happy about my decision. And I love studying here because it gives you the flexibility to actually get to know yourself academically and what’s in it for you. And I love being a student here. The culture is very forgiving.

For Aiah, being a student in the U.S. can have positive attributes. She enthusiastically expresses her happiness that comes from studying in the U.S. due to the adjustability of the university programs, which she views as an opportunity for introspection in an academic context. In Aiah’s interview she shared that she already graduated with a business degree from an American university, which her family encouraged her to pursue, and was not satisfied with her job prospects. Faced with this situation, Aiah returned to the same university to pursue a second undergraduate degree despite her parents’ disapproval. In this case, Aiah, through critical reappraisal (Sung 2012) of her decision, emotionally reframes returning to undergraduate studies as a positive experience even knowing of her parents’ opposition to her decisions (Arluke 2007; Martini and Busseri 2010; Smith and Kleinman 1989). From her perspective, university culture allows individuals to pursue their aspirations in an

accepting environment despite parents' wishes for their children's academic pursuits. It must be noted that Aiah could experience a potential emotional fall out with her parents because she actively went against their wishes in pursuit of her own happiness.

Muslim women international students may face newfound daily independence and decision-making, which diverges from traditional gender roles from their home countries. However, adopting a student role while abroad in the U.S. allows for opportunities for academic growth.

### **Financial Issues**

In addition to adopting the student role, Muslim women controlled their personal finances for the first time. Shanley and Johnston (2008) identified financial struggles as a concern for all first year university students who are experiencing independence from their family units for the first time. However, international students' financial challenges may be compounded because they are away from their families that provide monetary support as they have to pay out-of-state tuition for the duration of their studies and they must manage an increased cost of living in U.S. (Bista and Foster 2011; Klineberg and Hull 1979; Lin 2012).

According to Lin (2012), international students' financial burdens could be substantial due to the factors mentioned above. Klineberg and Hull's (1979) research found that when international students do not have sufficient financial means to support themselves in a foreign country, their experiences may be disabling (Sam 2001). Eve, a 20-year-old Biology student from The Gambia explained her experiences with financial struggles.

AG: Are there any other issues or challenges that you have run into while studying at the university?

E: (Thinking) Well, I don't know. Maybe finances. Like I work part time and from that I pay my rent and I try to pay for my basic needs. Like my parents, they pay for my education. Um, sometimes it runs tight because let's say at the beginning of the semester because we miss some weeks due to vacation and I think how am I going to pay for rent? But then I talk to my dad and he...sent me some money and stuff like that.

AG: How does it make you feel about the tight finances?

E: It's hard...but like I could keep telling my dad and he'd send me money every month, but I don't want to do that cause he's already paying my fees. So as much as possible I try to make do with what I make. And if there's really any huge problems, I talk to him.

Eve's experience coincides with research demonstrating that a majority of parents pay for international students' undergraduate tuition (Bista and Foster 2011). She states that her parents pay for her university fees therefore she is financially responsible for her living expenses. In order to pay for her "basic needs," she holds a part time job as a tutor to other international students on campus. Eve, like other international students, has a university job in addition to attending school full time in order to pay for her out-of-pocket expenses (Lin 2012). However, her work schedule is subject to the times that the university is open. Therefore, her wage earning hours are not set in stone and periodically she is anxious about how to pay for her expenses.

Eve's earning capabilities are based on her nonimmigrant status. International students who enter the U.S. with a F-1 visa are not permitted to have federal work-study positions on university campuses. Furthermore, the type of work and quantity of work hours are strictly limited by federal regulations for international students (Bista and Foster 2011). About half of the participants stated that they were supported financially by government scholarships from their home countries, while the other participants'

studies were funded by their parents. So, wage-earning restrictions may have larger implications in an international student's experience abroad. Due to stress relating to financial concerns, international students may become worried and focused on paying their expenses thereby detracting their attention from their studies (Lin 2012).

Despite Eve's concern regarding making ends meet, she did receive financial support from her parents. Eve's awareness that her parents are financially able to aid her when she needs monetary support demonstrates that students of higher socio-economic standing are able to study abroad (Findlay et al. 2011) and they have a safety net should they need one. Yet in this case, Eve demonstrates a self-imposed pressure to earn money in order to help ease the financial burden that her parents bear because of her studies. She actively suppresses the severity of her unsettled finances in order to avoid relying further on her parents' financial resources, which she perceives to cause her to feel guilty (Schrock et al. 2009). Therefore, Eve may engage in surface acting in order to illustrate to her parents that she is "making do" with her paychecks and not in need of further monetary assistance.

Students may also receive financial support in the form of scholarships and stipends from their governments in their home countries. Laila, a 23-year-old woman who arrived two months prior to the interview from Saudi Arabia is currently enrolled in an intensive English program. She states that she plans to complete the English program and then pursue her undergraduate studies at the same institution. She doesn't share Eve's financial concerns because the Saudi government sponsors her studies in the U.S.

L: My government actually pay[s] for school.

AG: Can you explain that more?



L: Uh we have a program in Saudi Arabia. They um chose a student to study in another country... Australia, America, uh United Kingdom. So they [the Saudi government] pay for it.

Laila's experience is an exception among the current literature that states that international students struggle with financial resources while abroad (Bista and Foster 2011; Klineberg and Hull 1979; Lin 2012). In her case, emotionally, she does not have to stress about paying for her tuition costs and in addition, her living expenses, because they are guaranteed through a Saudi scholarship program. Because of this, Laila is able to focus intently on her studies and not be distracted by how to finance her study abroad in the U.S. It is possible that this scholarship will allow Laila to pursue higher education in the U.S. beyond the intensive English program.

But on the other hand, Laila's experience is paradoxical because she comes from Saudi Arabia where women are not allowed to drive, are required to wear an abbaya, (which is the full body covering), and do not have equal access to education and employment (Mtango 2004). These laws are supported by members of the Council of Senior Ulama, who are government appointed interpreters of the Qu'ran, who state that "equality between men and women is against God's law" (Mtango 2004:53). It is interesting that she comes from a country that legalizes women's inferiority as reified by religious leaders, yet she is permitted to study in another society whose culture drastically differs from her own. It is possible that despite dominant theological rule in Saudi Arabia, by allowing Muslim women to study in non-Muslim Western countries this may indicate a current disruption between religious and governmental leadership.

Some international students may experience financial struggles because of newfound independence in which they are responsible for their daily activities that include paying for their personal expenses. In this study, federal limitations constrict the

type of and quantity of work Muslim women international students can do, thereby restricting their wage earning capacity. Therefore, some women are still reliant on their parents for financial support. Research has found that international students who are afflicted with financial burdens are distracted from their academic pursuits (Lin 2012). However, some students may profit from government funded scholarship programs and parents who pay for their tuition expenses, thereby lessening their financial burden and allowing for increased focus on their studies.

## **Conclusion**

Research has shown that individuals employ emotion management strategies such as reframing, suppressing, and minimizing when they confront challenges such language proficiency, new social work creation, transitioning to a student role, and financial issues. While the above concepts are not the only emotion management strategies, they are used to analyze the experiences of Muslim women international students at American universities and their adaptation strategies. Interestingly, there are no significant differences in the experiences relating to the challenges of international students of Muslim women students who have recently arrived or have been in the U.S. for a while. Rather, for women who have been in the U.S. for a substantial amount of time, their time in the U.S. increases the possibility that they will confront these issues. One would assume that the longer an individual lives in the host society, the easier the experience would become. However, for the women in this study, the longer they remain in the host society, the more accustomed they become to the issues they confront which does not necessarily relate to an easier experience.

The following chapters discuss in further detail other challenges the women encountered as they relate to gender, race, and religion. Discussed are the kinds of strategies the women employ to contend with these experiences, which can involve emotion work.

## **CHAPTER FIVE:**

### **GENDER STRATEGIES**

In social science, and specifically Sociology, gender is defined as culturally determined ways of behaving and thinking that are attributed to being a man or a woman (Crawley et al. 2008). A gender dualism is dynamic due its ever-changing significance that includes socially defined behaviors and “self-concepts, social institutions and distributions of resources that result from their enactment” within a particular socio-historical context (Ridgeway and Correll 2000: 112). Therefore gender is pervasive in how individuals see themselves, their behaviors, and their location within social structures.

Recently, research in immigration has shown that gender is not static because “[m]igration, assimilation, and transnational life challenge dominant forms of relations between men and women and ways of thinking about gender” (Smith 2006: 95). This would suggest that gender constructions are subject to change based on differing cultural contexts and meanings that can be found during the course of settlement.

Guided by this research, this chapter discusses the gender strategies that Muslim women students employ during their study abroad experience to negotiate the meaning of gender in their lives. I will begin by arguing that these women balance family role(s) and obligations while abroad, and conform to gender norms, and at the same time, challenge conventional gender norms as well. These women challenge these

norms through constructing dynamic life plans that diverge from “traditional” paths for Muslim women; I show how the women engage in new identity formations. In this analysis, I illustrate how Muslim women international students engage in emotion work to process the negotiations that involve fulfilling obligations related to their family role(s) and diverging from traditional gender norms.

### **Conforming to Traditional Gender Roles**

Muslim women international students’ experiences are affected by their roles in their families. These family roles are directed by gendered expectations to maintain communication with family in their home countries, respect their family’s wishes, maintain familial loyalty and uphold their family responsibilities (Fong and Peskin 1969; Lee et al. 2009; Marville 1981). This section discusses how Muslim women international students enact their roles as a “good” daughter, wife, sister, spouse etc. during their study abroad experience.

Eve, a 20-year-old Biology student from The Gambia explains how her role in her family guides her comportment in the U.S.

[Asked about her goals for living in the U.S.] Um, um just making sure that ...that I’m on a path that I want to be because my parents have made a lot of sacrifices for me to be here. So I don’t want to take advantage of that. I want to be able to make them proud and that their investment in me is not a waste.

Eve actively acknowledges that she is studying in the U.S. as a result of her parents’ efforts. She feels that her family role is to appreciate what her parents have accomplished in order for her to study abroad. She reminds herself that she aims to validate her parents’ hard work and sacrifice. Eve’s acknowledgement of her parents’ efforts complicates her studies because she is not only striving for her own success but

also puts extra pressure on herself in order to keep her parents from regretting their sacrifices. Eve's experience coincides with Smith's (2006) concept of the "immigrant bargain" which is the idea that immigrant parents' sacrifices will be validated by their children's anticipated successes (125). Even though Eve's parents are not immigrants, the parent/child dynamic is similar because it involves parental sacrifice but in this case, within the context of the temporary migration of the child.

Gendered expectations deriving from a family role further affect women's experiences during their study abroad by motivating them to maintain contact with their families in order to demonstrate that they continue to be "good daughters" in a transnational context. Aiah, a Psychology student from Morocco has been in the U.S. for five years. Despite her extensive experience living abroad, she maintains contact through telephone calls because she misses her family and returns to Morocco to visit them:

A: We speak on the phone like two or three times a week.

AG: How do you feel when you talk to them?

A: I miss them, I miss them a lot. They're pretty much the only reason why I go back to Morocco, I miss my family. And uh I do miss them a lot and yesterday was Eid [traditional Muslim holiday]. . . And I was so sad that I wasn't there. And my dad was really sad that you know that I wasn't there, that my sister wasn't there. So I feel that really. And I feel like I miss them and that I'm not taking care of my parents.

Aiah maintains communication with her family in Morocco. She states that when she talks to them she misses them and that this sentiment intensifies during meaningful cultural holidays. Research has shown that in a transnational context, women are most likely to be responsible for the emotional well-being of their family members (Liu 2011).

Aiah describes her sadness regarding her absence during family orientated festivities and her inability to make her parents feel better.

She states that due to the manifestation of her absence through her father's own sadness that she believes she is not "taking care of her parents." Aiah becomes dismal due to her desire to be with her family during important traditional events. However, her studies in the U.S. prevent her from traveling so readily and this causes her emotional distress. She is further affected by this situation because of the effect it has on other family members' emotions, in particular her father. Liu's (2011) research of Chinese immigrants in Canada highlights that emotion work is gendered because women devote great effort to nurture their family's well-being to facilitate "positive emotions and closeness or to repair and manage negative feelings and interpersonal conflicts" (26). Therefore, by not participating in meaningful family-centered celebrations, Aiah interprets this as an indication that she has defaulted on the gendered expectations of the daughter role, thereby not successfully caring for her parents (Liu 2011). Unknown is if the same occurrence would happen if Aiah was a man. In addition, Aiah does not explain how she copes with this situation, which may be an indication of *in situ* (Schrock et al. 2009) emotional minimization of the situation's significance (Rostomyan 2013). Rather than discuss how she deals with her assumed guilt, she refocuses on discussing her tense relationship with her sister, who also lives and works in the U.S.

Gendered expectations of being part of a family unit are not limited to a daughter role. Junam, who is 31 years old, is currently a student in her university's English Language Learners Program (ELLP). She aims to finish her language studies and pursue a Bachelor's degree. She arrived to the U.S. three years prior to her interview

ago with her husband and two children from Kuwait. They came to the U.S. so her husband could pursue his Master's and then Doctorate degrees in social sciences. As a wife, mother, and full time student, she is occupied with her various responsibilities. She discusses her efforts in balancing her school and domestic responsibilities:

J: I told you that to take care of my kids and clean the house and cooking, all this stuff is hard. But, it's much easier now.

AG: So what did you do, what do you do to do all of that work? (small laugh)

J: Sometimes I cook in the night, for on Monday and then um I just um once a week because I don't have time because my kids have to study, so they study first and then I study, yeah I try to clean the house in the night when they sleep.

AG: How do you feel about all that work? Your school work? Helping your children? Cleaning? Cooking?

J: Lots of things, it's hard, yes it's hard.

AG: You have to balance right?

J: Uh huh, and with all this I have to smile. (nervously laughs)

AG: Ok why do you say that?

J: Um, because it's not, if I because if I became angry, it's not for my kids, it's not their problem that, I . . . I have to smile because what we want, is good. To finish the Master and the PhD is very good to our life in Kuwait. So, that's it. . .

Junam's responsibilities consist of caring for her children and accomplishing domestic responsibilities. She attempts to accomplish these tasks and also finish her schoolwork. In order to fulfill her roles, Junam must balance her time between her children and her studies therefore she actively organizes her personal schedule in order to accomplish mother/wife and student responsibilities. For Junam, this experience was "hard" but she states that this is no longer the case because she *critically reappraises* her situation as necessary to benefit her family (Sung 2012). This demonstrates that she may have adapted to her synthesized roles of mother/wife and student by



suppressing frustration with balancing her responsibilities and reframing her situation to be necessary for her family's well-being (Arluke 2007; Martini and Busseri 2010; Smith and Kleinman 1989).

Junam states that she understands that her children are not at fault for her busy schedule but rather these gendered expectations come with the territory. In addition, she does not explicitly state any frustration associated with her husband, who is the reason why her and her family immigrated to the U.S. She minimizes any possibilities of frustration by stating that she must maintain a pleasant disposition in alignment with display rules in order to avoid "misfitting feelings" towards her children and husband (Hochschild 1983; Rostomyan 2013).

Junam alludes that she is obligated to maintain a peaceful demeanor while going about her busy daily schedule. She engages in emotion work by surface acting in order to elicit a pleasant disposition when she is overloaded with responsibilities. Surface acting is a corporal performance in which an individual physically displays feelings that are not consistent with inner emotions through gestures, body posture and expressions. Hochschild (1983) states that surface acting is when "we deceive others about what we really feel, but we do not deceive ourselves" (33). Therefore, surface acting suggests a lack of authenticity intended for the benefit of others, or in this case, Junam does it in order to not displease her family. Junam's emotion management within her family is not exceptional, as research has shown that within strongly bonded relationships, emotion work is intensive (Hochschild 1983: 68).

In this situation, Junam has followed and supported her husband's goals believing that their efforts will benefit their family in the future. Even though Junam is

from a different country, her illustration of emotion work in the home demonstrates the global pervasiveness that “. . . women tend to manage feeling more because in general they depend on men for money” (Hochschild 1983: 165). In this case Junam is reliant on her husband’s graduate stipend to pay for their living expenses. Due to this financial arrangement, spouses “do extra emotion work—especially emotion work that affirms, enhances, and celebrates the well-being and status of others.” Therefore, Junam feels obligated to emotionally care for her family and manage her own feelings (Hochschild 1983: 165).

It must be noted that Junam’s perceived obligation to smile during this time abroad may suggest that she aims to avoid inappropriate feelings of anger or frustration towards her children and husband. Federico Besserer (1997) found that within Mexican immigrant communities, women were discouraged from demonstrating “inappropriate sentiments” such as “anger or disagreement” because they are interpreted as a lack of respect for their husbands and a reflection of a faltered sense of “female virtue” within a patriarchal household (Smith 2006: 97). So, it is possible that Junam’s emotion work is derived from a patriarchal context in which she suppresses expressing unfavorable emotions as an effort to not disrespect her husband and children.

Also, she reframes her current situation in regard to desired consequences that will hopefully benefit her family. She rationalizes that her current situation merits sacrifice because when her husband achieves his Doctorate degree, her family will reap the benefits. Junam’s surface acting and reframing represent emotion work as a critical reappraisal, which is “a combination of acceptance and positive reframing” (Sung 2012: 91). Studies have shown that medical students and animal shelter workers negotiate

their feelings when faced with challenging experiences and in order to remedy them, will reframe situations as being beneficial for the well-being of others (Arluke 2007; Smith and Kleinman 1989).

Despite leaving the contexts of traditional gendered expectations within their own countries, Muslim women international students are still subject to them. These women actively participate in maintaining their roles as daughters, wives, and mothers during their study abroad experiences. Even though they are in a different cultural context than the home country, they are still subject to self-imposed gender expectations from their home country's traditions (Fong and Peskin 1969; Lee et al. 2009; Marville 1981; Smith 2006). In addition, these women actively maintain these expectations and when they perceived that they have failed to uphold them, they become disappointed in themselves.

### **Challenging Conventional Gender Norms**

It is commonly believed that Muslim women are “oppressed” in their home countries and that by studying abroad in a Western country they are able to experience “freedom” from patriarchal traditions (Andrea 2009; Lutz 1997, 96; Ozyurt 2013). Novice and veteran participants in this study, however, did not explicitly report sharing this perception. Rather they reframed differing cultural experiences as being unique to the U.S. rather than as opportunities to “escape oppression”. The Muslim women international students in this study engage in gender adaptation strategies that populate a broad spectrum of experiences that are not limited to only the dualism of “oppression” or “freedom” but rather, in addition to conforming to some gender norms, also challenge conventional gender norms.

## **Life Plans**

Of the 11 participants interviewed for this research, two of the women reported being married and having children. Of the remaining 9 participants, only one woman indicated that she actively dated men from different countries. Within a religious context, there is a large spectrum of Islamic beliefs relating to gender and sexual behavior because the “Qur’an forbids fornication and adultery and exhorts believers to observe chastity and modesty in behavior and dress” (Mir 2014: 127).

Except for the individual who actively dates, the other women in this study did not discuss intimate relations and relationships during interviews. However, the topic did arise at the end of all the interviews during the demographic questions. Participants were asked if they had a spouse or children and a majority of the unmarried participants were amused by this question. They quickly laughed at the question and then stated that they did not have a husband nor were they allowed to date. This reaction illustrates culture in action whereby these women enact their gender by abiding by Islamic traditions that prohibit pre-marital sexual or romantic behavior, such as dating and premarital sexual relations, and even “physical contact with non-related men, including shaking hands or hugging” (McDermott-Levy 2010: 273).

On the other hand, Muslim women did indicate that they envisioned their future plans consisting of lofty ambitions such as attending graduate school or medical school and not having their identities be solely defined by marriage. Laila from Saudi Arabia arrived in the U.S. two months prior to the interview to study English at a university English Program. She plans to work towards a Bachelor’s degree in Information

Systems and then possibly continue onto a Master's degree. She shares her ambitions with her mother, who has different future plans for her daughter,

L: My mother told me, "You must come to Saudi Arabia when you finish Bachelors and get married and....(laughing a lot).

AG: How does that make you feel when she tells you that?

L: Oooh, I tell that oh I am young, not married before four years (laughs).

AG: What does she say?

L: Hmm....nothing (laughs).

Laila's future life plans center around her academic pursuits. She believes that she will remain in the U.S. to study for at least four years. However, her mother wishes for her to return to Saudi Arabia upon completion of her degree to marry. Laila informs her mother that she believes she is too young to marry at 27 years old. Her life plans, that stray from tradition, suggest that some Muslim women international students prioritize education above gender expectations. Therefore, it is possible that for Laila to arrive at this future goal, it would require some level of internal negotiation by which she mediates her mother's wishes and her own pursuits. Laila confronts her "misfitting feelings" to not marry in response to her mother's desires (Hochschild 1983) by minimizing their significance by laughing repeatedly at her pleas as if to depict them as amusing and not seriously considered as valid (Rostomyan 2013).

In fact, none of the other unmarried participants discussed the idea of marriage when asked about their future plans. Even though these women are not dating while in the U.S., they debunk the gender stereotypes that they are passive and defined by patriarchal traditions because they put off marriage in order to pursue their professional

goals. However, it is possible that these women did not discuss marriage plans because it was too personal information.

In addition to forging dynamic future life plans, Muslim women international students engage in new identity formations by retaining traditions from their home countries and embracing aspects from the host culture during their study abroad experiences. This occurrence is not unheard of because “gender roles are being rapidly redefined by . . . young females and [strong-willed] girls [who] are not constrained by traditional gender roles” who have “strong egos, leadership and determination to succeed” (Lee et al. 2009:1217).

Aiah is a Psychology student from Morocco who has been in the U.S. for five years. She recounts how her arrival to the U.S. was a transformative experience and studying in the U.S. fostered a change in her perspective:

So it all basically happened when in my head. The shift became from doing what I’m supposed to do, what my parents have taught me what is the right thing to do, to actually creating my own beliefs and what’s in it for me. . . . And I think coming to America helped me a lot because I had the *récoule* in French, I had to step out from the culture and like observe it from an outsider’s perspective. So I was able to actually stop the thinking that was sacred and actually start questioning.

Aiah’s transformation started with altering her perspective in a new social environment. She believes that she had to leave her own cultural context in order to best critically view it. According to Aiah, she accomplished this change of perspective by studying the Qu’ran, the Islamic holy text, and comparing its claims to other spiritual texts. For her, she emotionally reframes this process as validation of her belief that Islam was not the only world religion and she believed that women’s inferiority was institutionalized in Islam’s holy text (Arluke 2007; Martini and Busseri 2010; Smith and Kleinman 1989). She states that her transformation consisted of discarding her parental

socialization and formulating her opinions independent of her parents' and culture's influence. However, it must be noted that other participants did not experience a change in perspective regarding their belief in Islam like Aiah, so her case is unique in that she completely questions the validity of the religion.

According to Aiah, after changing her viewpoint, she felt insulted and discontent when examining Islamic traditional beliefs surrounding women's perceived inferior status. Upon further exploration, Aiah self reflects and states that she was "very shocked" that she had condoned institutionalized gender stratification, thereby further distancing herself from her depiction of Moroccan traditions. It is possible that Aiah's display of feelings of shock may not occur when she is in Morocco because this would conflict with display rules, and she would be subject to sanctions by others.

Aiah's reflection coincides with previous research that found that women students learn of differing cultural gender ideals while abroad and these ideas were not accepted by a student's home culture and "thus [students] felt alienated from their parent culture" (Lee et al. 2009: 1218). So it is possible that, because of Aiah's newly formed differing cultural perspective, as a result, she feels disconnected from Moroccan culture. Aiah's experience is not representative of the other Muslim women international students in this study because other participants did not either share her sentiment or did not mention it. Lastly, it must be noted that Aiah makes claims that Qur'anic readings depict women as inferior, but she does not provide clear examples of her statements during the interview.

## **New Identity Formation**

Many women international students chose to pursue higher education internationally “to realize their full potential” (Lee et al. 2009:1217-1218). Aiah continues to speak about her new identity formation that is central to her study abroad experience.

I mean I think the US is a great country. But I would never be the person that I am now if I never came here. But I’ve learned to think for myself. I’ve learned to struggle, be independent and be myself and the culture in the US encouraged me to come out and validate my identity. And I think it’s a great country as far as freedoms compared to Morocco. I wouldn’t be riding a bike (motorcycle) in Morocco because I would have people get really angry at me.

For Aiah, like some other Muslim women international students, studying abroad is a metamorphic experience which allows for educational achievement in addition to “professional and personal growth” solidifying their exceptionality (McDermott-Levy 2010: 275). She equates the U.S. with greatness and freedom and identifies it as a location that nurtures independent thinking. Aiah states that due to studying in the U.S., she can express her “true identity” which includes riding a motorcycle, forming her own personal opinions, and being independent, all aspects that challenge conventional gender roles.

Laila, an English language student from Saudi Arabia, also engages in new identity formation while in the U.S. Despite being from Saudi Arabia where sex segregation begins in public education and expands to other aspects of social life (Baki 2004), Laila professes that she is comfortable interacting with un-related men in public spaces. She expresses a desire to learn to drive with the goal to drive her and her sister to the university without being shuttled around by her brother.

L: Uh, maybe I tell my brother I want to learn how [to] drive car because I don’t have a license yet. Maybe after Thanksgiving.



AG: So can you tell me more about learning how to drive a car? So for example, why do you want to learn?

L: Yeah because my brother pick us [Laila and her sister] up [at] the ELLP every morning and sometimes we get onto the bus and it's very hot, yeah.

AG: So how do you feel about the idea of driving in the US?

L: I'm so excit[ed]!

In Saudi Arabia, it is illegal for women to drive and it is not socially accepted for women to go into public spaces without a male relative chaperone (Bradley 2006).

Therefore, Laila's desire to learn to drive and in addition drive with her sister without male relatives demonstrates her changing gender identity formation in the U.S.

Interestingly, she does not explicitly explain if her family in Saudi Arabia or her brother objected to her wishes. She wants to engage in activities that are common for women in the host country and that are prohibited for women in her home country. According to Laila, she is motivated to learn to drive and acquire her license in order to help her brother so he doesn't have to drive and pick up her and her sister daily from the university. Therefore, she reframes driving in this context as a strategy to prevent inconveniencing her brother and not deviating too much from the "good daughter" role because she is being a "good sister" by helping out her brother (Arluke 2007; Martini and Busseri 2010; Smith and Kleinman 1989;). This then allows for her to be more independent in her transportation choices.

Muslim women international students frame the formation of new identities in the U.S. within a context of what it means to be "an American woman." This occurrence is not unique for women international students as "Matsui (1995) found that new gender roles in American culture made female Japanese students more self-confident, self-expressive, and self-assertive" (Lee et al. 2009: 1218-1219). Therefore, perceived

characteristics of American women, such as increased independence and egalitarianism, were interpreted as empowering. However, this is not the case for all participants.

Samar is a 24-year-old English language student from Jordan. She has lived in the U.S. for three years with her husband and young child. Samar enthusiastically holds the image of “the American woman” in high esteem and aims to emulate perceived characteristics of “the American woman.”

That’s why when I came here, I’m looking to make friends, make a new family and to study, to have a job . . . to live like this, to live like [an] American girl. Because American girls here, they go, they have a job. They go everywhere they want, they have a job, they [go to] school. [Their] family doesn’t help [them with] money. I want to feel that feeling. I want to be [a] responsible girl.

Samar interprets the life of an American girl to consist of having social networks, establishing a household, pursuing education, and seeking professional opportunities. She idealizes this lifestyle and wishes that she might emulate these “American girl” characteristics. She also states that because American women participate in many sectors of public social life, she interprets these characteristics to be indicative of a highly developed sense of responsibility. Samar’s comments coincide with Smith’s research of Mexican transnational migrants in New York City, wherein he discusses how the women in his study negotiate femininity. One archetype of femininity discussed is the “New York women, an Americanized vision of independent womanhood who works, supports herself, and does not really need a man but would be prepared to marry one who shares her egalitarian vision” (Smith 2006:97). Interestingly, Samar does not state that she is emotionally conflicted regarding her goals because she shares that her husband is highly supportive of them.

Samar's emphatic admiration for "the American girl" suggests that she believes this to be demonstrative of the host country and not pertaining to women in her own country of Jordan. Rather, Samar emotionally reframes these characteristics as positive attributes exclusive to women in the U.S. and applicable to her own ambitions (Arluke 2007; Martini and Busseri 2010; Smith and Kleinman 1989; Sung 2012). However, the notion of Muslim woman and career-minded women are not mutually exclusive as evidenced in Omani culture where "Omani women who work outside the home or seek education do so for the good of the family and national duty" (McDermott-Levy 2011). Therefore, the Omani case reinforces the notion that career-focused Muslim women reframe their professional goals as beneficial to the household rather than harmful to their families (Arluke 2007; Martini and Busseri 2010; Smith and Kleinman 1989). So in this case, Muslim women international students are justifying their educational pursuits and subsequent independence in order to benefit their families. However, it must be noted that even though Oman is within regional proximity to Jordan, Omani cultural values may not be shared throughout the area.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, Muslim women international students negotiate gender through their adaptation strategies while studying abroad by being active in their family role(s) but also by challenging conventional gender norms. The women in this study demonstrate that they engage in emotion work by reframing their experiences or surface acting while navigating their gender roles in a transnational context. There are no significant differences regarding gender roles and new identity formation between the women who newly arrived and those who have been in the U.S. for a substantial

amount of time. Rather, both are equally likely to develop new identity formations regardless of study abroad length. However, it is unknown if newly arrived Muslim women will continue these changes or not throughout the duration of their study abroad. This suggests that their strategies are dependent on the issues they confront while in the U.S. and not directly correlated with sojourn length. Although inevitably, the longer the women are in the U.S., the more experiences they will confront.

Muslim women international students engage in emotion work strategies brought on by navigating their gender roles while studying abroad. Contact with differing cultural gender patterns, such as the “American woman” or women driving, is manifested in challenging traditional gender norms deriving from their home countries related to determining future life plans that focus on career objectives and new identity formations. However, it should be noted that despite changes in gender roles during a study abroad experience, Muslim women international students are still subject to traditional gender beliefs from their home countries which illustrates the complexity of gender beyond the commonly accepted duality.

## **CHAPTER SIX:**

### **RACIALIZATION OF MUSLIM WOMEN INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS**

In order to better examine the racial strategies that Muslim women international students employ, first one must consider these women's experiences with racialization. This chapter discusses aspects of the women's experiences that illustrate what it means to be a Muslim woman international student in the U.S. I argue that the hijab is a racial/religious marker and it factors into U.S. racial schemas that mark religious symbols associated with Islam as racial markers of minority status. In response to experiences with racialization, women invoke strategies to address the challenges that will be discussed in the next section.

In this chapter I argue that Muslim women international students are identified by the hijab and also identify others that they perceive to be like "them." Furthermore, I argue that due to differing understandings of racial categories, Muslim women international students learn about U.S. racial schemas, "the bundle of racial categories and the set of rules for what they mean, how they are ordered, and how to apply them to oneself and others" (Roth 2012:12), which they use to racially categorize others and themselves.

## **Gendered Racial Constructions**

In a study abroad context, information about Muslims and Muslim women precede the women's arrival in the U.S. Through the viewing and consumption of essentialist stereotypes that are consistently portrayed in the media, these women enter environments where individuals have pre-existing social constructions of what it means to be a Muslim and in this case Muslim woman (Mir 2014). This section discusses Muslim women international students' encounters with pre-existing constructions of Muslims. I argue that these social constructions mainly consist of negative stereotypes that are diffused through essentializing media depictions. The women in this study engage in emotion management in order to confront these false depictions.

### **Negative Stereotypes**

In Mir's (2014) research, she found that Muslim identity is stigmatized in the U.S. Therefore, Muslim women international students enter contexts where a fundamental part of their identity is already socially constructed as something to be scrutinized and marginalized. Before arriving to the U.S., Aiah was concerned about potential social interactions with Americans based on pre-existing constructions of Muslims,

But here which is kind of weird what happened with 9/11, I was a bit afraid that people would be like actually not warm to me, not warm up to me, because I'm from Morocco, which may not mean anything. But there's Muslims in Morocco so people might mix things together. But I haven't had a problem here.

Before arriving to the U.S., Aiah experienced trepidation regarding anticipated social interactions with Americans. She felt that they would interact, or not interact with her based on the past events of 9/11, and that her being from Morocco would associate her somehow with negative stereotypes of Muslims. Regarding her concern, Aiah

believes that interactions with Americans would play out within the domains of an already established social construction of what it means to be a Muslim. Aiah's preemptive concerns illustrate that emotion work is subject to time. She engages in preparatory emotion work, which aims at "increasing the likelihood of achieving or maintaining desired emotional states" in preconceived situations (Schrock et al. 2009:703). Therefore, Aiah anticipated negative interactions with Americans that might associate her with the perpetrators of 9/11. But, rather than abandon her study abroad plans in the U.S., which she perceived did not ensure a welcoming environment to individuals from traditionally Muslim or Arabic regions, she saw through her plans and attended an American university.

Despite her worries, she had not experienced difficulties with Americans regarding a perceived connection between Morocco and the perpetrators of 9/11. However, it must be noted that Aiah is no longer practicing Islam nor does she wear a hijab. This aspect of her experience may have excused her from pre-existing constructions of Muslims because she already diverges from the stereotype of the covered, oppressed Muslim woman. Lacking a hijab, she is less subject to racialization based on stereotypes of Muslims.

Laila, a 23-year-old English Language student from Saudi Arabia wears a hijab and practices Islam. Before arriving to the U.S. she anticipated discriminatory treatment because of her choosing to wear the traditional head covering:

When I come to America, the people [who] talk to me [they're] very nice people and friendly. There's no racism or I never see any racism for me. And because I'm afraid [that] I [am] wearing the hijab and you know some people they uh didn't know about the Islam. And uh [they may ask] "Why this woman [is] wearing this (referring to hijab) and cover[s] her body and her face?"

Laila also speaks about her concerns coming to the U.S. to study. She states that she has not seen racism, equating negative treatment to racism. But she states that she anticipated negative treatment because she believed that Americans did not fully understand the reasons why a Muslim woman covers her body and face. Research has shown that Muslim women have many varied reasons for wearing the hijab, which have nothing to do with “what the host community has labeled, and demonized, as ‘fundamentalism’” (Afshar et al. 2006) but consists of solidifying their identity as women (Mir 2014). Due to this perceived lack of information, Laila anticipated that Americans would treat her negatively because they would view her hijab with negative connotations. Like Aiah, Laila was also concerned with negative treatment by Americans and engaged in preparatory emotion work.

Pre-existing social constructions of what it means to be a Muslim woman were not limited to the significance of the hijab or its association with terrorism, but also regarding past social interactions with non-Muslim individuals. Mimi is a 17-year-old student from Nigeria who knows other Muslim women on campus who go to the university recreation center. She speaks about how people are surprised when they find out that Muslim women who wear the hijab also are involved in physical activities,

M: I know of some Muslim women who go to the gym and all that. But people don't expect a woman in hijab to go and play sports and all that. So like sometimes when people ask me if I play sports and I'm like, yeah, they're like “Seriously?” Most of them are like so surprised. That's just all I think is different.

AG: Who is surprised?

M: No just when some people ask me.

AG: Why do you think they're surprised?

M: Uuuuh, I think because I wear the hijab and it's unusual, kind of to see a woman with a hijab playing sports.



In addition to negative associations attributed to stereotypes and a lack of cultural knowledge regarding Islam, social constructions of Muslims and women in particular extend beyond the limits of religious practices. Mimi explains how people have been surprised when she tells them that she practices sports. Individuals react in disbelief when Mimi shares that she is physically active and this indicates that people construct Muslim women to be passive because they wear the hijab, which is seen as limiting to a woman's mobility and activity. However, Mimi counters this idea by explaining that she and other Muslim women are physically active and simultaneously wear their headscarves during their activities. Therefore, Mimi even ponders their reasoning and attributes their beliefs to the traditional head covering which is interpreted as a sign of docility.

Negative stereotypes of Muslims are pervasive in social interactions between Americans and Muslim women international students. Negative stereotypes lend to the social construction of what it means to be a Muslim woman. Westerners perceive Muslim women to be associated with terroristic activities, vulnerable to racism, and physically restricted by cultural traditions, which solidifies their status as "other" within white Christian hegemony (Joshi 2006; Mir 2014).

### **Hijab as a Racial Marker**

The hijab is a traditional head covering worn by Muslim women. It is supposed to cover a woman's hair from the sight of strangers, which is intended to preserve her modesty (McDermott-Levy 2011; Tummala-Narra and Claudius 2013). Studies have shown that Muslim women believe that by wearing the hijab they are demonstrating strength in their faith and womanhood (McDermott-Levy 2011; Tummala-Narra and

Claudius 2013). Notably, the covering of a woman's hair is not exclusive to Islam but is also found in the Jewish and Christian faiths (Feder 2013). However, the hijab has become a symbol that is synonymous with Muslim women because according to Joshi (2006), cultural markers such as the hijab in Islam, the bindi in Hindu, or Sikhs' uncut hair, etc. are also religious markers. Despite a large global Muslim population that spans many continents, the hijab has been identified as a racial marker for certain groups, depending on the country (Joshi 2006; Mir 2014).

Muslim women international students who wear the hijab, the traditional Muslim hair covering, encountered non-Muslims' social constructions of the veil. Eve, from The Gambia, was asked if she's experienced any issues during her study abroad and then describes how others react to her and her hijab: "I don't think so. Not really. Sometimes I wear the hijab and stuff and sometimes people stare and ask questions but I don't really mind about that." Eve recognizes that onlookers focus on her hijab when she is in public spaces. Eve portrays a dismissive attitude when it come to others staring at her when she wears her hijab.

Her reaction would suggest that she is not affected by this behavior that draws attention to her hijab, which as a result, differentiates her from others. However, deeper analysis of Eve's response would suggest that she engages in "*in situ* emotion work," when an individual changes their emotions in the current moment (Schrock et al. 2009), in order to deal with uninvited attention by minimizing the significance of others' stares. Eve lessens her own emotions by stating that she doesn't "really mind" but yet still frames it to be an annoyance. This suggests that her annoyance is "genuinely felt" but

“its display is simply softened” (Rostomyan 2013: 6), thereby minimizing her emotions in relation to the significance of unwanted stares.

Research has found that individuals use *in situ* emotion work in order to suppress sexual desire, shame, and embarrassment (Schrock et al. 2009; Smith and Kleinman 1989; Wolkomir 2006). Schrock et al.’s (2009) research of male-to-female transsexuals found that these individuals became anxious that they would be categorized as inauthentic or different when they were stared at. In order to address these situations, individuals would adopt a dismissive attitude towards onlookers to minimize negative emotions.

According to Mir (2014), the hijab is comprised of many meanings and uses but most Americans view it “as having had a single, universal meaning for Muslim women throughout history” (90). Mir states that Americans believe Muslim American women are “oppressed, traditional, essentially *religious*, foreign, and fanatical fundamentalist followers of a creed that is inherently antithetical to modernity and gender equity” (90). Even though Mir’s research focuses on Muslim American women, aspects of the Muslim identity are essentialized by non-Muslims and applied to all members of Islam. Therefore, “Muslim women’s religious identities were hypervisible in their social encounters . . . and therefore were associated with “Muslim” rather than any other identifier” (Mir 2008:35).

Thus, the hijab is at first glance a religious marker because it is interpreted to be representative of Muslims. However, the hijab as a religious marker can be transformed to a racial marker because social meanings are attributed to it by non-Muslims and its use signifies a specific racial group. Joshi (2006) discusses how the racialization of

religion, which is “a process whereby a specific religion becomes identified by a direct or indirect reference to a real or imagined ethnic/racial characteristics” homogenizes diverse groups into one racial category that are “othered” when compared to heteronormative white Christianity in the U.S (216).

Muslim women in the U.S. also interpret the use of the hijab as a racial marker. The women interviewed stated that they initially identify another’s hijab as a signifier of membership to a specific social group. Then they note phenotypic traits of the individual in question, which verifies the person’s race.

S: When we see us [other Muslim women], we’re sitting anywhere, “Oh Salaam Malaikum!” We [say] our welcome in Arabic. “Oh! How are you? What’s your name?” (says very joyfully) “Where are you from?” (small laugh)

AG: So how do you know that they are from those countries?

S: Uh, first I I I see uh her when she wear[s the] hijab. I know [her] and her face [is] like Arabic people. Then I talk to her and she told me told where she [is] from.

Laila, a 23-year-old English Language Program student from Saudi Arabia describes how she identifies other Muslim women during her free time between classes on campus. In this case, hijab use signifies possible similarity and Laila engages in conversation with women she does not know based on their common use of the head covering. She approaches the women firstly based on seeing the hijab and secondly assuming that they are Arabic. According to her, her judgments are confirmed when she sees their faces and then asks where they are from. The women she approaches respond favorably and engage in conversation with her.

Laila has recently arrived to the U.S. and she proclaims that her English proficiency is low. So she attributes meaning to the hijab as a signifier of someone who may be similar to her in order to make social connections despite a lack of highly

developed language and cultural skills. Previous research has shown that the use of the hijab delineates a woman “externally as Muslim” but also strengthens her conception of cultural difference (Mir 2014:91). So, even to other Muslim women who use the hijab, it is a group identifier. Throughout the interviews, the participants did not explicitly state if these women intentionally wore the hijab in order to be identified by others. But as demonstrated by Laila’s enthusiastic reaction to seeing other *hijabis* with whom she forms new social networks, wearing the headscarf does fulfill this goal, intentionally or unintentionally.

Samar, a 24-year-old English language student who has been in the U.S. for a year and half echoes Laila’s sentiment of noting hijab use as a means of identifying others she perceives to be like her, “You know, I uh, when I see any girl who wear hijab, I feel oh my god! (says with big, happy smile) I found something, someone understand me!”

Again, the hijab is a religious marker that then manifests as a racial marker among non-Muslim Americans and Muslim women and is used to identify others as belonging to this group. In addition to being used by these women to identify others who are potential members of new social networks, the hijab is infused with meaning of expected group solidarity. This is the idea that someone who wears a hijab must be able to understand another who wears a hijab. A parallel can be found in Roth’s (2012) research of Latino migrants, who found that hairstyle and dress are important ways that immigrants demonstrate their race. She states: “hairstyles are a significant way of indicating identity and belonging” (154). Even though Muslim women are not displaying their hair per se, the hijab may be considered as a type of hairstyle. Samar experiences

great joy, in this case, because she perceives the hijab, which is as a type of racialized hairstyle, to signify belonging to a certain social group that somehow engenders perceived mutual understanding of group members.

However, not all Muslim women choose to wear the hijab. Hadij, from The Gambia, who wears the hijab, discusses the head covering's capacity as an identifier of Muslim women. She states, "But for the Muslim woman, not all of them wear the hijab. But the ones that wear the hijab, you can know oh that's a Muslim."

A Muslim woman's identity and wearing the hijab are constructed as synonymous even though not all choose to wear the traditional head covering to follow cultural or religious traditions (Mir 2014). *Hijabi* is socially constructed as the most pronounced characteristic of a Muslim woman's identity thereby segregating individuals based on whether they wear it. Previous research has found that Muslim women decide to wear the hijab at varying times of their lives and for different reasons (Afshar et al. 2006). However, "it is often adopted and worn as a badge of honour by the younger generation of 'white' and 'non-white' as an identifier that delineates a clear difference" whereby Muslim women construct themselves to be *mohajabehs*, wearers of the hijab, as the other (Afshar et al. 2006). Therefore even though internationally diverse Muslims around the world wear the hijab, its use still pertains to a specific social group and is used as an identifier of that group.

Interestingly, one participant conducted her own hijabi experiment during her study abroad in order to observe how others would interact with her. Aiah is a 24-year-old Psychology student who has been in the U.S. for five years. As discussed earlier, coming to study abroad in the U.S. has been a transformative experience in which she

chose to abandon her traditional Muslim beliefs and has actively decided to no longer practice Islam. In addition, Aiah does not wear a hijab but stated that when she is in her home country of Morocco, she wears the veil. Of her own volition, she decided one day to don a hijab in an affluent U.S. neighborhood and she describes her social interactions: “So I don’t feel like it was a racism thing, this is from my own little experiment. But people [Americans] did not know what to talk to me about or couldn’t relate.”

Aiah’s experience demonstrates how from a Western perspective, the body becomes invisible or “othered” because individuals may only be focused on the imposed meaning of the veil as oppressive and “weighing” down Muslim women. This displaced focus on the social significance of the veil may impede Americans’ ability to interact with Muslim women. Americans’ interactions are influenced by their perspectives that are imbued with “social values and political presumptions” connected with their interpretation of Islam (Joshi 2006:216). Thus, this results in Americans uncertainty regarding social interaction with Muslim women international students. Hence the reaction to the veil by Americans is immobilizing for Muslim women because their interactions become limited or restricted (Al-Saji 2010).

Aiah further explains that she doesn’t believe the interactions to be evidence of racism or social distance but rather a lack of connection between herself and others. In this case, Aiah’s reaction illustrates the emotion management strategy of reframing her social experiment. According to her, she believes that the individuals she encountered were not racist against her; instead, she perceived them as lacking social interaction knowledge. In this situation, Aiah is “othered” by people she encounters while wearing a

hijab, which may cause emotional discomfort (Arluke 2007; Martini and Busseri 2010; Smith and Kleinman 1989). As a result, she critically reappraises the significance of these interactions as not provoked by racism. However, research has shown the “[h]ijab [as] being the second highest “trigger” of discrimination (Ghumman and Jackson 2010), hijabis were the first to be recognized as Muslim and treated accordingly” as “othered,” oppressed, or with increased social distance (Mir 2014:7-8).

As shown in the U.S. context, the hijab can be identified as a racial marker of specific social groups. Wearing the veil is socially constructed to be synonymous with identifying as a Muslim woman. The hijab as a racial marker is used by Muslims and non-Muslims to identify individuals’ origins and may facilitate unity or segregation.

### **Learning U.S. Racial Schemas**

For Muslim women international students, the hijab becomes a racial marker in an American racial context. In addition to becoming knowledgeable of social meanings attributed to the veil in differing cultural contexts, Muslim women international students also learn about U.S. racial schemas and their “place” among them. Race or racial meanings are considered by scholars to be aspect of cultures. Roth (2012) states that societies understand race and racial phenotypes differently and that immigrants go through racial acculturation by which they learn about new *racial schemas* in the host country.

Hadij, a 20-year-old Gambian shares how she determines the origins of passersby she meets on campus. In this case, she speaks explicitly of how she identifies “Americans:”



From my perspective..., when I see someone coming towards me uh I don't really think "Oh where is that"...because most of the time I pay attention to skin color. Or the tonation. Because uuuh most Americans are white, most Americans are white. I know the African Americans or black Americans or whatever.

Hadij describes that when she perceives someone coming her direction, she primarily looks to skin color to determine where someone is from and then if able to, listens to how someone speaks. She states that she believes that the majority of Americans to be white and yet she recognizes the existence of black Americans as well. Hadij has learned about American *racial schemas*. She has acculturated to the idea that to be white is to be American. With regard to black Americans, she haphazardly recognizes their existence but disregards their contribution to diversity of what an American is by dismissing them as "whatever." This suggests that even though she states that Americans are black, this is not as significant as Americans who are white. Therefore, according to Hadij's perceived depiction of an American, she demonstrates her internalization of American racial schemas that are based upon and sustained on white racial hegemony.

Also it should be noted that Hadij does not mention the existence of Latino or Asian Americans, which demonstrates her digestion of the American racial binary of white and black. Furthermore, Hadij racializes an individual's speech as a way of determining if the person in question is American or not (Roth 2012). Within the higher education context, universities act as means for Muslim women international students to learn about race in the U.S. This is accomplished "through their lessons and curricula, in educating students about the nature of race" (Roth 2012:79) and completion of university demographic forms.

Just as Muslim women learned about others' race, participants of color in this study quickly learned about their own identifying race in the American racial landscape. Hadij and Mimi are both from African countries and have darker skin. When asked about their race, they both quickly responded "Black." This suggests that they are familiar and have internalized this label as the correct identification for their race in the U.S. People of color, especially those lower on the "racial hierarchy" are consistently reminded of their racial status based on phenotypic traits and their relation to others (Roth 2012). According to American racial schemas, Hadij's and Mimi's phenotypic traits are undeniably connected to a racial category without a possibility for racial ambiguity.

However, not all Muslim international students were certain about their American racial label. Aiah from Morocco describes her experiences with race and acquiring an American identification.

*AG: What do you consider to be your race or ethnicity?*

A: Um, I am Emesir, Berber, native Moroccan.

*AG: And your race?*

A: Oh that's my race. Is ethnicity different than race? Well...Well my ID says I'm Caucasian but I don't think I look Caucasian you know!

*AG: Why do you say that?*

A: Well Caucasian is a specific region and I feel like to put Europeans and white American and North Africans and Middle Easterns in that, you know, you might as well have human as a ra...we look very different.

Aiah's anecdote demonstrates that individuals who are not as easily identified as black may be subjected to racial ambiguity. Aiah is confused by the notion of race and ethnicity and uses them interchangeably believing that they describe the same thing.

This suggests that she has not fully acculturated to American racial schemas and may not fully be aware of the existing racial hierarchy. When asked about her race and ethnicity she states her ethnic background and nationality. For Aiah, ethnic background and nationality are synonymous with physical identifiers (Roth 2012).

Aiah then explains how her state driver's license states that she is Caucasian. She disagrees with this categorization because of the label's regionality and its homogenizing effect upon a diverse group of people. She does not agree with this label and feels that it does not efficiently capture her skin tone.

However, upon further research, the state driver's license does not show one's race or ethnicity. This is curious that Aiah would share this if it weren't true. It is possible that even though she may not be fully aware of her racial status, she has had past social interactions with other whereby she is racialized as white (Roth 2012). Aiah's case demonstrates that individuals may "pass" for white as their phenotypic traits lend to racial ambiguity in already established American racial schemas (Roth 2012).

During their study abroad experience, Muslim women international students reside in culturally different racial environments. As discussed, Muslim women may learn American racial schemas in which they become familiar with the racial binary of white and black. Participants of color quickly self-identified their racial classification suggesting that they have acculturated to American racial schemas. However, individuals who had racially ambiguous phenotypic traits were unsure about their racial classification; some individuals questioned the validity of the U.S. racial binary and its application whereas others were confused by the concept of race, which is defined differently in their home countries. To further demonstrate racial acculturation,

participants employed racial schemas to identify unknown passersby as American based on skin color.

Considering the context in which U.S. racial schemas are accepted, how do Muslim women international students navigate these patterns of racialization? The following section discusses how Muslim women international students construct the U.S. as a multicultural “paradise,” and engage in racial passing as ways of adapting to their new statuses as racial minorities.

### **Racial Strategies**

Based on the experiences of their friends and family members abroad, the women in this study decided where to enroll for their study abroad experience. Compared to other study abroad destinations, Muslim women international students construct the U.S. to be a multicultural “paradise.” I argue that individuals with ambiguous phenotypic traits who engage in “Americanized” behaviors and do not wear the hijab are most likely to be successfully integrated into the host society.

#### **U.S. as Multicultural “Paradise”**

When comparing the racial and religious dynamics of Europe, Muslim women international students constructed the U.S. to be a country that embraces equality and multiculturalism. A majority of the women in this study chose to study abroad in the U.S. due to the perceived construction of the U.S. as a “racial and religious paradise.” They stated that they believed the U.S. was very cosmopolitan and accepting of racial and religious diversity. Many believe that the United States is experiencing a “post racial” era as evidenced by the historic 2008 election of the nation’s first black president,

President Barack Obama. Post racialism is the idea that acts of racial discrimination are unusual and that individuals within American society are actively taking measures to ensure equality among diverse social groups (Barnes et al. 2010; Herndon 2013). However, the idea of a “post racial” American society that is free of discrimination and prejudice is an unfounded social construction (Herndon 2013).

Aiah, as discussed earlier, believes she’s less likely to encounter racism in the U.S. than in Europe:

*AG: So far, is there anything you particularly like about living in the US?*

A: I like that fact that I feel like I encounter less stereotypes and prejudice here than like if I went to Europe. So in Europe like, especially if you’re from North Africa, the French have dealt with North Africans a lot so it’s kind of like Latin people here. So if I go to France, I feel like I’d be more subject to racism. More like, the chances that people would be racist to more are more higher than here [the US].

Aiah believes she is less likely to encounter racism and discrimination in the U.S. compared to Europe. She explains that a North African origin is a basis for stigmatization in Europe. She also highlights France’s colonial history with North Africa, which overshadows social interactions between the two groups.

Aiah interestingly compares being a North African immigrant in a European context to being a Latino immigrant in an American context stating that the two statuses share similar experiences with the native population. Grosfoguel and Georas’s (2009) research of Latino Caribbeans in New York City states that the status of minority populations in the U.S. continues to be subverted due to “its roots in the racial hierarchies produced by centuries of European colonialism” (85). Aiah’s comparison demonstrates that during the five years she’s been in the country, she has observed how minority groups in the U.S. are subject to discrimination and negative stereotypes.

However, for Aiah, knowing that minority groups like Latinos face negative treatment does not detract from her assessment that the U.S. provides a more favorable racial environment than in Europe and specifically in France.

The women in this study not only perceived the U.S. as being a more favorable racial environment but also as a setting for religious diversity and understanding. Before studying at the English Language program in the U.S, Nourah, a 17-year-old woman from Kuwait had traveled to other countries. She recounts how every summer during her childhood she participated in a summer school program in Cambridge, England. Nourah was very fortunate that she was able to travel so frequently and that occasionally her family would accompany her abroad to England. However, despite such lofty travel experiences, Nourah decided to pursue a full-time English Language program in the U.S. rather than England because she perceived the former to be a more religiously tolerant society.

N: Some um British guys when I go there, they didn't respect me too much you know.

AG: *Oh really?*

N: Yeah, but here [in the U.S.] they respect me, my religion. They don't make any difference between us [Muslims].

AG: *And that's different in Cambridge?*

N: In [England] yes.

AG: *Huh, I didn't know that.*

N: And in [England], they are [like], "Who are you? You are Muslim." You know here they [Americans] don't see any difference between American people or Muslim people or anybody from anywhere, they respect you, just for you, you know. Not just because you are Muslim but [because] they respect you. You wear [the] scarf, they respect you.

During her travels to England, Nourah observed British individuals who would confront Muslims about their traditional religious practices. Nourah does not mention it, but she suggests that their confrontations were unprovoked and uninvited therefore demonstrating that she believes English people to be intolerant of Muslims. She compares social interactions with English people to interactions with Americans who she perceives to be more respectful towards Muslims. She emphasizes that Americans are respectful of all individuals and not just on the basis of religion. For Nourah, Americans are more courteous to Muslim women who wear the hijab.

Nourah's experiences abroad in two distinct English-speaking countries allow her to compare the perceived social dynamics of tolerance in each society. Due to a lack of explicit negative social interactions with Americans, she favors studying in the U.S. rather than in England. However, it must be noted that even though she views the U.S. to be tolerant of world religions due to a lack of obvious discrimination, there may be evidence of discriminatory beliefs which have not yet manifested during her study abroad experience.

Interestingly, even though the women do not explicitly mention their emotions, avoidance of discriminatory and emotionally charged interactions with Europeans motivated their study abroad decisions. Therefore, their pre-departure inquiry of the racial environment in a prospective study abroad location may be interpreted as a pre-emptive emotion management strategy by which they lessen their chances of negative interactions with nationals, which decreases the likelihood that they might have to engage in emotion work to combat stereotypes and prejudices.

## **Passing/Not Passing**

Individuals may also gain social advantages by engaging in racial passing strategies. As defined by Roth (2012), it “is a deception that allows a person to effectively present herself as different than who she understands herself to be, and to assume a role or identity that prevailing social standards would otherwise bar her from holding” (156).

Despite increasing diversity, racial categories represent a dualism of black and white in the U.S. (Roth 2012). Based on the premise of skin color, individuals may adopt “cultural strategies” of dominant groups in society in order to gain social advantages. According to Roth (2012), immigrant racial passing strategies “can be a deliberate decision, chosen as a way of avoiding discrimination and improving one’s position within a racially stratified society” (152). However, not all racial groups have access to these “cultural strategies” because certain traits, such as phenotype or dress, designate them as pertaining to a definite racial group rather than allowing for ambiguity.

Of the 11 participants in this research, two women in particular represent distinct experiences when compared to those of the other Muslim women international students. Aiah self identifies as an “open minded” woman from Morocco demonstrating her perceived break from her country’s traditions. She enthusiastically explains that she rides a motorcycle, which is prohibited for women in her country and in addition, she smokes, dates, wears Western clothing and surfs all within a context of no longer practicing Islam. In Aiah’s case, according to her, she engages in activities that are not representative of traditional Moroccan activities. Rather, her habits may be interpreted as Western activities by which women who engage in such activities are perceived in an



American context as being “free” from patriarchal oppression (Andrea 2009; Lutz 1997, 96; Ozyurt 2013) or may be considered as more “Americanized.”

In contrast, Angie is an 18-year-old Biology student from India who left her home in Dubai, where her family now lives. She had arrived to the U.S. two months prior to the interview. Angie is a self-proclaimed proud Muslim woman who engages in prayer daily, is active with Muslim campus clubs, and regularly attends the on-campus prayer room for weekly lectures by the local spiritual leader. Despite her fervent devotion to her religious practices and identity, Angie does not wear a hijab but does wear Western style clothing while studying in the U.S. Furthermore, of all 11 participants in this research, she is the only woman who chose a distinctly Western-sounding name as her alias, “Angie.”

These two women, Aiah and Angie, reported increased levels of positive adaptation, such as friendships with Americans, and engaging in activities that they would not be allowed to in their home countries (e.g., going to parties, driving a motorcycle, and dating) during their study abroad experience. From the researcher’s perspective, both women exhibit phenotypic traits that allow for ambiguity regarding racial categorization within the black and white duality. It is important to note, “where a person falls on the color spectrum influences what advantages can be gained from becoming more culturally American” (Roth 2012:152). In addition, Aiah, who’s been in the U.S. for five years, and Angie, who arrived two months prior to the interview, of all the participants, had the least prominent accents, wore Western clothing, did not wear the hijab, regularly socialized with Americans, and engaged in activities of a “typical” American college student. Therefore upon further analysis, many aspects of their

experiences suggest that their ease of adaptation is facilitated by racial passing strategies where they are both able to enact “the cultural strategies of White Americans [which] is likely to position them closer to Whites, and may lead others to view and treat them accordingly” (Roth 2012: 152). The following demonstrates how others can identify and treat Muslim women based on perceived racial categorization.

When asked if she has experienced difficulties while studying in the U.S., Aiah discusses a troubling event that occurred in one of her classes. A few weeks before being interviewed, Aiah was involved in a dispute with a female classmate. Aiah described the woman to be a Muslim international student who wore the hijab and believed her to be from a country in the Middle East region. She explains that she was participating by contributing her thoughts in class and that her peer approached her during the break to express disapproval of Aiah’s comments.

A: She was like, “People like you, racist people like you shouldn’t be in college.” It’s like wait a minute and *I’m Moroccan!* But she didn’t know that because I walked in with my helmet and I had my shorts on. I feel like she was very defensive you know? I wasn’t really trying to get her and I feel like it was all in her head.

AG: Was she American or was she from somewhere else?

A: She was an international student, maybe from Iraq I don’t remember. I was like, I’m sorry, I’m not a racist, I’m actually from Morocco. (laughs) I can’t really be, what am I going to be racist against?!

Aiah interprets this confrontation as a motion of aggression by a fellow woman classmate. Aiah did not share her classmate’s perspective that her classroom participation was racist or discriminatory and states that she automatically lacks the ability to be racist because she is from another country. According to Aiah, this confrontation was brought on by her contribution to classroom discussion that her classmate did not agree with. However, Aiah does not provide further detail of the

classroom discussion nor dialogue from the confrontation so only her perspective can be evaluated in this situation.

Aiah perceives the woman's confrontation to be motivated by a judgment of her Western dress code that is not indicative of her Moroccan origins and believes her classmate assessed her to be a white American. In Roth's (2012) research of Latino immigrants in the U.S., she found that aspects of performance such as hairstyle, dress, and posture associate individuals with certain social groups. The Latinos in her research actively altered their dress, hairstyles, and postures in order to signal or downplay their origins. Therefore, Aiah could pass as a white American because her Western style clothing downplays her Moroccan origins. Her classmate perceived her comments to be discriminatory against other social groups under the assumption that Aiah was American and not Moroccan.

However, by adopting certain cultural strategies such as wearing more Westernized clothing, this alludes to larger implications for Muslim women international students to conform to their new surroundings. By conforming to American cultural standards and therefore increasing the likelihood of racial passing, individuals may gain social advantages: "The American dream holds out a promise: 'Just conform, the dream whispers, and you will be respected, protected, accepted'" (Yoshino 2007: 20-21). This usually unspoken *demand* to conform—the reason why "outsiders" play down racial, religious, sexual, and gendered identities—is wrapped into a promise for better things" (Mir 2014:36). In this case, Aiah is conforming to an American context by means of relinquishing her traditional Moroccan identity that includes practicing Islam and by adopting Western clothing, behaviors, and habits. Her conformity is solidified through

internalizing the notion that other Muslim women international students do not accept her and therefore she feels victimized and/or possibly judged as culturally inauthentic.

Aiah's confrontation with another international student who mistook her to be a white American demonstrates her strategy to reframe this event. Rather than perceive that she was at fault in any way, she reframes this situation as being attributed to the classmate's lack of knowledge of her origins. Research has shown that individuals reframe experiences in order to address uneasiness (Arluke 2007; Matini and Busseri 2010; Smith and Kleinman 1989). It is possible that Aiah believes if the classmate knew that she was also from another country that she might have acted differently, thus rendering the situation to be more manageable (Hochschild 1983). However, she attributes her peer's actions to paranoia and states that she did not spur her classmate's reaction. Furthermore, she reframes the classmate's accusations as false because she is from North Africa and thus incapable of racism.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter I have argued that Muslim women international students engage in racial strategies to facilitate adaptation to their new surroundings. Muslim women international students demonstrate ingenuity regarding their strategies because they are created before their departure and during their study abroad experience. This is accomplished through inquiry by means of their social networks regarding the racial dynamics of prospective host countries before departing for their study abroad, resulting in constructing the U.S. as a "racial and religious paradise" and engaging in racial passing to gain social advantages and avoid discrimination. Differences in experiences for women who have been in the U.S. for a substantial amount of time and those who

were newly arrived depended on hijab use; those who wore it were often asked about its significance, whereas those women who did not use it were not racialized as Muslim. Women who chose to not wear the hijab while in the U.S. acculturated to U.S. norms and therefore increased their chances of racially integrating. But hijab use was not contingent on length of study abroad, but was found to be dependent on an individual's religious beliefs. Therefore, it is possible that frequency of racialized experiences depends on the use of racialized markers, such as dress, rather than phenotype.

## **CHAPTER SEVEN:**

### **RELIGIOUS STRATEGIES**

Muslim women international students' experiences are influenced by their religious traditions. Research has found that despite differing social surroundings, Muslim women retain and continue to engage in Islamic religious practices (McDermott-Levy 2010). Religious traditions such as daily prayer and wearing the traditional headscarf are important to Muslim women's identities and serve as sources of comfort during emotionally distressing times (McDermott-Levy 2010; Mir 2014).

However, Muslim women's experiences are influenced by pervasive media portrayals of Islam and their community and many Westerners believe these representations to be true (Abbas 2013; Mir 2014). Thus, Muslim women international students engage in religious strategies that may invoke emotion management such as when they must debunk stereotypes and justify religious involvement to address these false representations. However, the experiences of Aiah, from Morocco, and Angie, from India, represent exceptions to these notions as both do not use hijabs.

In this chapter I argue that during their study abroad experiences, Muslim women international students actively aim to debunk negative stereotypes by educating others and exhibiting "stereotype-contrasting" behaviors. I illustrate that the women in this

study engage in daily religious involvement as a means to display their pride in their faith and to retain cultural patterns from home. Finally, I argue that Muslim women international students retain traditional beliefs from home within a cross-cultural context by policing others to maintain compliance with conventional gender norms.

## **Debunking Stereotypes**

As I have argued thus far, the hijab is interpreted in various social contexts to be “a symbol of religiosity, fanaticism, victimhood, antifeminism, and/or affiliation with dangerous and xenophobic forces” (Mir 2014: 125). Many participants stated that strangers asked questions, stated observations, or stared at the hijab. These interactions facilitated exchanges between the women and people in the public to discuss the genuine Islamic significance of the hijab. Laila, from Saudi Arabia, speaks about an interaction she has had with people who inquire about her head covering:

AG: Has anyone ever asked you about your hijab?

L: Yeah, yeah.

AG: How many people?

L: Mmm a few people, not more.

AG: What do they say?

L: “Why you, why you wearing this cover?” Because I’m not very good in English I told them, “I follow my religion instruction, yeah.”

AG: And how do they react?

L: Mmm...nothing, [they] say, “Oh yeah”.

Laila says that a number of people openly ask about the reasoning behind why Muslim women wear the hijab. Interestingly, earlier in my conversation with Laila, she stated that she self-assesses her English proficiency skills to be unsatisfactory yet she

responds to their inquiries and tries to explain the hijab's significance to the best of her ability. She responds that wearing the hijab is religiously significant. Upon receiving this direct information, the inquiring individuals accept her response as valid and do not pursue any other details.

Even though Laila's response is linguistically limited, she does engage strangers' questions therefore allowing for the opportunity for the American public to be educated from a Muslim woman regarding the meaning of the hijab. In her research of Muslim American women at American universities, Mir (2014) found that women responded to the gaze of others "by resisting it, correcting stereotypes, avoiding negative encounters, confounding prior assumptions, covering Muslim identities, and enacting idealized Islam identities" (125).

Muslim women may feel compelled to acquire more active roles to educate their peers and the public within a campus setting. Eve, from The Gambia, enjoys being active on campus. She devotes her free time to volunteering for a local charitable organization and being active in her university's local Muslim Student Association. She speaks about her role as an educator on campus,

[Regarding a conversation about Islam she had with a woman at a bus stop] Um, it was ok because I've talked to a few people like around campus. We have events with [on-campus club] where people come out and we talk to them about stuff and we answer their questions, so it wasn't new to me. But I'm usually pretty open.

Eve actively participates in outreach events initiated by her university's Muslim Student Association. She helps to answer fellow students' questions relating to Islam and being a Muslim. According to Eve, she has experience educating others on campus and even off-campus when others ask questions about her religion and traditions and because of her willingness to diffuse this knowledge, she perceives herself to be open-



minded. Eve reframes inquiries from non-Muslims to be opportunities for “teachable moments” whereby she explains aspects of her religion and its practices from a first-hand perspective. This *critical reappraisal* of what potentially could signify ignorance of her culture facilitates positive emotions in which Eve believes she is helping others (Sung 2012).

Research has shown that some Muslim women do attempt to share accurate knowledge about Islam and Muslims but still many aim to avoid public attention (Mir 2014). Many women in this research stated that they actively educate others about Islam and its traditions, but others did not mention if they engaged in this as well. Also, individuals in this study did not state that they avoided attention but rather remarked that strangers in public would stare at them when they wore their hijabs and that this made them uncomfortable.

Muslim women international students aim to debunk negative stereotypes by educating the public and their peers but they also engage in private practices which address negative depictions of their religious practices. Angie from India, recently arrived to study in the U.S. She currently lives in the student dormitories on her university’s campus and shares a suite with three other white American girls. She describes how she practices her religious traditions in a shared space:

I don’t think I’m living any way differently like I have my own room so like I still pray, read my book. If I want to like do something religiously and my roommates support it because they understand it. And we don’t even have practices that interfere with other people’s life, I do my own thing. Like even if I pray, like we pray in a low voice. Like even if I read, I read in a low voice so. Like we don’t have any religious practices that interfere with anyone else. Like if someone tells me that that they don’t like it. I don’t know, probably I’d just go somewhere else and do it. That’s why I pick my own room so that no one has a problem even I’m nice, I’m safe. So that’s what I feel.

Angie describes how she engages in Islamic religious traditions in her shared living space. She states that she prays and reads within the tranquility of her room, which she believes does not inconvenience her roommates because according to her, they understand and support her religious practices. She emphasizes that Islamic religious practices do not inconvenience anyone because they are performed quietly and away from sight as if to allude that she actively accommodates the concerns of others. In addition, Angie emphasizes her acceptance of accommodation of others' concerns stating that if someone is uncomfortable with her practices, that she would "go somewhere else."

Angie's accommodating gestures allude to "stereotype-contrasting behaviors" (Mir 2014: 97) that debunk the stereotype that Muslims are violent and disruptive through their religious practices. Westerners perceive "authentic" Muslims to be individuals who fervently express anti-Western sentiment and support terroristic activities (Mir 2014). However, Angie demonstrates that this perception of Muslims and Islam are fundamentally not associated with the religious practices and therefore represent a radical minority and are not representative of the Muslim majority.

Angie's *preparatory emotion work* addresses the possibility of scrutiny by others of her prayer activity (Schrock et al. 2009). To solidify her "stereotype-contrasting behaviors" (Mir 2014: 97), Angie engages in surface acting in order to corporally represents herself through her gestures as calm, quiet, and "nice" while she practices (Hochschild 1983). This is not to say that Angie's feelings contrast with her calm disposition, but rather surface acting highlights the necessity to emulate socially acceptable emotional displays that align with feeling rules. This demonstrates that she

consciously makes efforts to diffuse negative perceptions of Muslims before they are expressed.

### **Daily Religious Involvement**

Muslim women internationals adapt to their differing social surroundings by engaging in everyday religious involvement. Even though they are studying abroad in a country that was founded on Christian values, they still adapt to living in a Christian society by carrying out their Islamic religious traditions.

Mimi, from Nigeria, arrived in the U.S. two months prior to the interview. When asked if there are any aspects of studying abroad in the U.S. that she doesn't like, she describes her current living situation in a mixed sex dormitory on campus.

M: And then also cause like I just stay in the dorm, I expected everything to be like (little unnerved laugh) how should I say? Like...um like I could...gosh...I hate when this starts to happen.

AG: No don't worry. You can describe.

M: ...Just like..um yeah and again I didn't expect the dorms to be like mixed because I'm Muslim and I don't feel comfortable wearing my hijab all the time. So sometimes I just feel like being free around my friends and all that. And now like I have to wear my hijab everywhere I go, even if I'm going to the bathroom.

AG: Right, because you can see men in the hall.

M: Yes yes. So it's kind of uncomfortable for me. But besides that I like the experience though.

Mimi chooses to wear the hijab as demonstration of her faith, which is very important to her identity. However, before arriving to the U.S., she did not anticipate living in a mixed sex dorm. She says that this is uncomfortable for her because she wants to "relax" and remove her hijab when she desires, but because of her co-ed living situation she has to wear hijab.

This situation is important and meaningful for Mimi because she must vigilantly wear her hijab in front of men that she doesn't know as a means of maintaining modesty in the Islamic tradition. However, when asked about her feelings regarding this situation, she explicitly states her discomfort without elaboration and then disregards its importance by saying that she enjoys the overall study abroad experience. In this case, Mimi is demonstrating minimization of the significance of daily accommodations she is obligated to do based on her religious beliefs. But yet, when discussing this issue, she frankly describes it and then detracts from its significance by expressing her contentment with her overall experience. Mimi's reaction is supported by research that found that individuals aim to minimize the significance of a situation when an emotion is "genuinely felt; [but] its display is simply softened" (Rostomyan 2013: 6).

Early on in Angie's interview, she shared that she is a devoted Muslim woman who takes pride in her religious traditions. She stated that she prefers to live in a "Muslim friendly" society due to the availability of *halal* products, the familiar sound of the *adhan*, the call to prayer, and celebration of Islamic holidays, *Eid Al-Fitr* and *Eid Al-Adha*. Yet she demonstrates continued devotion to her traditions in a society that lacks the above characteristics.

There's this one friend of mine, she's a sophomore right now, and she's a Muslim. And she had searched for me and [emailed] me, "Like hey if you have any questions"...So I asked her about her religious practices. So I asked her like, "How do you know when you have to pray?" And she told me to download this app and everything. So that really helped me a lot. So I think she did a good job. And she also she [emailed] my cousin too.

In Islam, all Muslims must pray five times a day facing the direction of the holy city of Mecca (Yosef 2008). In Muslim countries, individuals know what time they have to pray because they hear the *adhan*, the call for prayer that is projected via a public

loudspeaker. However, this tool is generally not available in the U.S. among communities where Muslims are a religious minority. Therefore, Muslim women international students must adapt in order to complete their religious obligations. So they engage in strategies not just to be accepted, but also to retain their culture, which demonstrates navigation of a hybrid identity by following a pattern of selective acculturation (Portes 1994; Portes and Rumbaut 1996; Portes and Zhou 1993), which is purposeful retention of “homeland culture” that is adapted to social life in the host country (Gibson 2001:20). To address this, Angie inquired through another Muslim friend how she knows when to pray throughout the day. Her friend recommended a social media tool that alerts the individual when it is time to pray during the day. Therefore, even though Muslim women international students may not be studying in communities that are accommodating to their religious obligations, they find ways to maintain their practices.

In addition to praying five times throughout the day, Muslim women international students demonstrate their daily religious involvement through maintaining a modest dress code. Even though she is living in the U.S. without any family, Eve still retains and upholds her religious tradition of wearing the hijab.

E: Um so the hijab is one of the commandments that was revealed in the Qu’ran for us to dress modestly and cover ourselves. But it’s something that you can’t force someone to do. So it’s a commandment but you have to choose to obey. So some Muslim women choose to do it and others do not. But, but for me it serves as kind of a reminder.

AG: A reminder of what?

E: Of, you know my responsibilities. Also, just because when you wear it, you’re kind of representing the religion because when people see you they know what you’re doing. And they associate it with the religion. So it’s like I feel it’s a good reminder to keep myself focused.

Eve describes the meaning of the hijab within Islam. She states that it is fundamentally important for a Muslim to cover her body and uphold her feminine modesty. Therefore, the hijab serves as daily protection of a woman's virtue. However, it is not obligatory for women to wear the hijab as she describes that some choose to embrace it or disregard it but most importantly a woman has a choice in the matter. But for Eve, daily use of the hijab serves another purpose. The use of the hijab is strategic in that by wearing the traditional head covering, she is reminded every day of her responsibilities to herself, in regard to how she represents the religion to others that see her. Eve reframes the wearing of the hijab in a study abroad context to be representative of her home culture and values. Therefore, the hijab's significance is imbued with meaning that reinforces a Muslim woman international student's sense of religious practice, their duties to remain a "good Muslim woman," and as a representative of Islam.

### **Policing Gender within Islamic Beliefs**

Muslim women international students negotiate their new social surroundings by retaining the idea of a "good Muslim woman" from their countries and policing others to insure their compliance with these gender beliefs. These beliefs are important because they "shape behaviors most powerfully by shaping people's sense of what others expect of them," and it is assumed treatment by others is based upon "society's hegemonic gender beliefs" and "this is a reality they must accommodate in their own behavior" (Ridgeway and Correll 2000: 113). This case demonstrates that retaining home values and acquiring new practices and identities are not mutually exclusive.

Haddij, from The Gambia, has been in the U.S. for three years and discusses how some Muslim women international students, over time, disregard traditional beliefs of gendered modesty.

So you have to always be serious, even more so than other people. Yeah. I guess, you just need to remember about what brought you here is the most important thing. And sometimes they [Muslim women international students] have religious challenges a lot around here [in the U.S.] . . . I wear like long skirts and hijab and everything and when I came here and I saw that all the women like wear tighter jeans and shorter shirts and that stuff and they still wear the hijab and everything, I mean when you come here, it's very important to stay in touch with the religion; try to review stuff and try to remind yourself of who you really are, like. Because you just come and . . . and with time it [a differing dress code] seems like a norm and you would normally change, most of the times you would try to adapt and look like them like all of the other people, the rest of the people here. And a lot of the times it's not ideal because it comes to a point where you go and go and go until you sit down like "Oh my god! I can't believe I'm wearing this! Like before I wouldn't do this, you know?"

For some Muslim women like Haddij, their dress code is crucial to their identity because it is a symbol of "religious devotion, community membership, ethnic heritage, or a mnemonic device for piety . . ." (Mir 2014: 124-125). Specifically, the hijab is indicative of membership in the global Muslim community so "women who were not core members of Muslim communities usually did not wear hijab" (Mir 2014: 124-125). Paradoxically, women continue to wear the traditional Muslim head covering even though researchers have shown they reported experiencing discrimination and negative reactions to wearing the hijab (Tummula-Narra and Claudius 2013).

Haddij indicates disapprovingly that some Muslim women international students may adopt more "Americanized" ways of dress such as tight fitting clothing and "shorter shirts" while simultaneously symbolizing their membership in the Muslim community. Haddij interprets these two ideas as incompatible because for her, Americanized styles of dress are sexualized, which trumps the Muslim value of female modesty. She

equates maintenance of a modest dress code as remaining “serious” and emblematic of a Muslim woman’s “true” identity. Therefore, for Haddij any other dress code suggests inauthenticity of gender beliefs in Islamic tradition.

Haddij solidifies her devotion and compliance with traditional gender beliefs because she states that she aims to continually follow her dress code of wearing the hijab and long skirts: “. . .my dress code is very important to me.” She does not anticipate adapting to Americanized styles of dress because she indicates that a modest dress code is very important to her and she wants to “preserve it” even if she remains in the U.S. for another four or five years to attend medical school. Other women in this study did not explicitly indicate any change in their own dress code during their study abroad experience.

In addition to policing other Muslim women’s compliance with a traditional modest dress code, some may evaluate others’ comportment to determine if it is in accordance with traditional beliefs. Samar, a 24-year-old married woman from Jordan, when asked about things she does not like in the U.S., recounts a story she heard regarding a young Muslim woman who was intimately involved with an American man:

S: And another thing, I will be honest with you, um the relationship between women and men. In my religion, I can’t let anybody touch me before I’m married or [do] anything [sexual] with me. You know what I mean?

AG: Yes, I know what you mean.

S: But here, it’s ok, they [people] fall in love, they love each other, they make [are sexually active] anything like that . . . Ok, in this case I look to the woman. Ok, he takes everything he wants, you know. That’s not good for a girl, you know. But I think I don’t like the Muslim girls to do it, ok. [Mimicking a hypothetical Muslim woman] “I can do this because I have emotions, don’t we?” Ok, go mad but don’t hurt yourself like this.



Samar expresses her disapproval of pre-marital sexual relations because she has been taught to believe that a woman's virtue is valuable and must be guarded until marriage. She identifies with this statement by emphasizing that she cannot allow anyone to be intimate with her before she is married. She compares intimate relations in the U.S. by observing that individuals freely engage in sexual activity before marriage and states that a woman is at fault in this situation. She views sexual relations between two unmarried individuals as an uneven exchange where a woman has allowed a man to take her prized virtue. For Samar, this is damaging for women and attributes this action to emotional weakness and a lack of religious virtue. Interestingly, Samar's perspective regarding sexual relations between two unmarried individuals, one being Muslim, stems from traditional beliefs, but paradoxically, her other opinions regarding women in the work place or the "American women" appear to be more liberal.

She continues to describe the Muslim woman and the supposed love affair and how the woman is dealing with the consequences of her actions.

And you know, she's a Muslim she can't do that. And ok I don't put the responsibility for the man, no. The woman, she is all the fault because she let[s] anybody touch what she's feeling, she make[s] her[self] weak for this thing. But if he sees the result [the resulting pregnancy], he has to stay with her. He left her with her daughter.

Again Samar reinforces the incompatibility of pre-marital sexual relations and being a Muslim woman. However, it must be noted that it is unknown if this story is true or simply gossip, but according to Samar, this situation did occur. She emphasizes that the woman is at fault for this unfavorable situation that resulted in a pregnancy out of wedlock. Despite knowing that the man in this situation has abandoned his child and her mother, Samar is strongly critical of women's actions in a cross cultural setting and this reinforces the pervasiveness of gender beliefs where women must guard their virtue.

Research has shown that “despite changes in gender roles and ideologies” in a migration context, women “still felt attachment to a more traditional view of the world” (Smith 2006: 116). Despite differing cultural contexts during a study abroad experience, Muslim women international students are still subject to traditional gender beliefs from their home countries. This illustrates the complexity of gender beyond the commonly accepted duality within a religious context.

## **Conclusion**

In sum, Muslim women international students engage in religious strategies as a means of educating non-Muslims about Islam and its practices. They actively participate in student clubs and charities in order to debunk negative stereotypes of Muslims. However, not all Muslim women international students participate in active outreach. Overall, there were no significant differences between the experiences of Muslim women who newly arrived to the U.S. compared to those that had been established in the country for some time. But it must be noted that longer settled Muslim women international students did report more participation in on-campus clubs and organizations than newly arrived individuals. This suggests that it takes time in order to find on-campus clubs and organizations to become involved in. It is possible that the longer newly arrived students remain on campus, their chances of exposure to student clubs will increase and they will be likely to participate as a member.

Furthermore, they engage in strategies to help preserve their culture in a differing social context through their daily religious involvement. In addition, Muslim women international students “police” each other by which they measure one another’s adherence to Islamic prescribed gendered behavior. However, despite their enthusiasm

for their religious practices and outreach efforts, it appears that these women still must be aware of their “othered” status and aim to diffuse issues before they are expressed and continue to measure each others’ adherence to traditional gender culture norms.

## **CHAPTER EIGHT:**

### **CONCLUSION**

The goal of this thesis was to learn about the experiences and adaptation strategies of Muslim women international students by examining how gender, race, and religion affect their encounters at American universities. When the women's strategies were not successful, they engaged in emotion work in order to continue to navigate and negotiate their experiences.

The specific research aims of this study focused on broadening understanding of Muslim women international students' experiences at large public colleges in the southeastern part of the United States. In addition, this study focused on the range of emotions and emotion work the women experienced when confronted with new situations, which was not considered in previous research, and how gender, race, and religion affected their encounters. All specific research aims were met by examining the women's roles, activities, and goals in their families, university campuses, and within their religious beliefs. The following discusses in detail the key findings of this research.

#### **Key Findings**

The key findings in this study are consistent with previous research of international students' challenges; Muslim women face difficulties with English language

proficiency, new social network creation, transition to a student role, and management of finances during their study abroad experiences. In addition, these women actively synthesize traditional gender norms from their countries with new identity formations. But simultaneously, some Muslim women “police” others to ensure that they abide by traditional gender expectations. These women learn and apply American *racial schemas* (Roth 2012) within a context of constructing the U.S. as a racial and religious paradise. Paradoxically, these women still feel the need to actively debunk negative stereotypes of Muslim communities. Yet, they still maintain connected with their home countries through daily religious involvement such as prayer and wearing the hijab. Interestingly, unlike previous research, this study indicates that in addition to adaptation strategies employed to address the above issues, Muslim women international students engage in emotion work in order to render their circumstances more manageable.

This study is unique because the sample consists of Muslim women students from countries in the Middle East, Asia, and Africa. Much of the literature on international students has overwhelmingly focused on the adaptation experiences of students from Asia (Araujo 2011) and has not fully considered religion as an important aspect of the study abroad experience, rather than an ethnic identifier (Kagan and Cohen 1990; Rosenthal et al. 2007; Sharideh and Goe 1998). Furthermore, previous research has identified international students’ challenges but has not considered the individuals’ adaptation strategies relating to gender, race, or religion, particularly those that involve emotion management. This thesis fills this gap because it demonstrates these women’s attempts to adapt to the host society, and when their efforts are not

successful, it shows how they engage in emotion work in order to continue to negotiate and cope with their experiences.

Findings in this study are consistent with previous research of international students' struggles that indicate that Muslim women international students experience difficulties with creating new social networks (Alazzi and Chiodo 2006; Chittooran and Sankar-Gomes 2007; Edwards-Joseph and Baker 2012; Tummala and Narra 2013; Zhang and Goodson 2011), English language proficiency (Heikinhemo and Shute 1986), and transitioning to a student role (Edwards-Joseph and Baker 2012; Shanley and Johnston 2008; Ward et al. 2001; Yakunina et al. 2011; Yoon and Portman 2004; Zunker 2006). However, it must be noted that not all participants reported difficulties regarding social network creation in connection to their English proficiency level. When confronted with this challenge, participants with the lowest language proficiency reframe their lack of language abilities as a future goal that will aid them to make friends with Americans (Rostomyan 2013).

Most of the previous research on women international students explores changing gender roles in the host country (Fong and Peskin 1969; Lee et al. 2009; Marville 1981), however this study highlights how Muslim women international students synthesize both traditional expectations and aspects of the host society into new gender formations. This is accomplished by continuing their family role(s) as a mother, wife, sister, and daughter, and completing associated responsibilities. When individuals perceive their efforts to maintain traditional gender roles as not successful, they engage in emotion work such as surface acting or minimizing in order to live up to their gender obligations and nurture the well-being of their family members. Emotion work in this

context highlights management of private emotions in order to emulate socially acceptable public emotions as they pertain to gender.

A key finding of this thesis is that Muslim women international students also embrace new identity formations while in the U.S. Only two of the 11 participants in this study were married and with children. For those who were unmarried and without children, they constructed their future plans based on professional and educational goals such as attending graduate or medical school. According to many of the women, they were “too young” to be married despite pleas from their family members to find a partner. Even the two married women in this study indicated strong desires to pursue their own career by working outside of the home. In addition, some Muslim women international students forge new identities in an American context by engaging in activities that are prohibited for women in their home countries. The women in this study expressed a desire to or had already accomplished the following: driving a car or motorcycle, smoking, working towards becoming like the “*New York woman*” (Smith 2005), and dating non-Muslims.

Research has shown that Islamophobia and hate crimes against the Muslim community dramatically increased following the terrorist events of September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001 (Disha et al. 2011; Tummala-Narra and Claudius 2013). As a result, negative depictions of Muslims are based on stereotypes and are pervasive throughout the global media. This solidifies baseless notions that Muslims harbor anti-Western sentiment, are connected to terroristic activity, are primitive, and oppress women by making them wear the hijab, the traditional head covering (McDermott-Levy 2011; Tummala-Narra and Claudius 2013; Mir 2014). Therefore, the women in this study enter an American

context that is already saturated with pre-existing constructions of the Muslim community.

However, Muslim women international students engage in strategies to address the limiting social constructions of their community. A key finding in this research is that Muslim women international students, before leaving to study abroad, call upon their home social networks in order to inquire about the social environment of prospective study abroad locations. This inquiry demonstrates the temporal quality of emotion management; Muslim women international students engage in *preparatory emotion work* in anticipation of possible racial discrimination (Denzin 1984; Schrock et al. 2009: 703). In this study, participants stated that family members were treated poorly in England or France when strangers publicly confronted them. Participants indicated that others identified their family members, who were also women, as Muslim because they were wearing the hijab at the time of the encounter. In addition, this finding is consistent with previous research that religious items become racialized because they are interpreted as indicative of specific racial groups (Joshi 2006; Roth 2012). Based on their family members' experiences in Europe, the participants decided to study in the U.S. because they perceived it to be "more open" to diverse racial and religious groups, which is another major finding.

Despite viewing the U.S. to be a "racial" paradise, Muslim women international students learn about racial schemas and their place among them upon arriving to North America. Participants of color readily identified as black when asked about their racial category, whereas individuals with more ambiguous phenotypic traits were puzzled by



racial categories and race as a concept. This can be attributed to differing constructions of racial categorizes in different countries (Roth 2012).

Muslim women international students also engage in religious strategies to further address negative constructions of the Islamic community. The women in this study actively debunk stereotypes by addressing strangers' inquiries about Muslim traditions, such as the hijab, educate fellow classmates on their campuses, and engage in "stereotype-contrasting behaviors" (Mir 2014: 97). Many participants stated that they enthusiastically participate in Muslim student clubs on campus in order to educate others about Islam through charity work or club fairs. This finding is consistent with research that states that students actively engage in discourse to disprove false constructions of the Muslim community (Mir 2014; Tummula-Narra and Claudius 2013).

Future research should consider the role of campus clubs and organizations in the adaptation of international students as means for engaging in discussion and challenging stereotypes. But it must be noted that not all the women indicated participation in Muslim campus organizations. Therefore, it is possible that some Muslim women international students do not actively look for opportunities to engage the public in discussion of their community.

In order to reinforce their religious identity and maintain traditions, Muslim women international students engage in daily religious involvement such as use of the hijab and continue to pray five times a day, which is a fundamental practice of Islam (Yosef 2008). Some participants adapted to differing social contexts and time zones by using social media as a tool to know when they must pray throughout the day. Future research

should consider the use of social media as important tools for maintaining religious involvement and connection to home countries during a study abroad experience.

Furthermore, Muslim women international students embraced wearing the hijab and maintaining a modest dress code as a symbol of strength in their faith and staying connected with their traditions. However, some Muslim women international students “police” others to ensure that other individuals are abiding by cultural expectations to maintain modesty. When Muslim women do not follow these traditional gender norms, they are categorized as ‘weak’ and at fault for their moral undoing. This key finding demonstrates that despite differing social contexts, Muslim women international students are still subject to traditional gender norms deriving from their home countries.

This research challenges the notion commonly held by Westerners that Muslim women are “oppressed” and they experience “freedom” during study abroad (Andrea 2009; Lutz 1997, 96; Ozyurt 2013). The stories of the women in this study represent a spectrum of experiences that consists of embracing traditions and aspects of the host society instead of adhering to a duality of “oppressed” and “free.” It is not suitable to categorize Muslim women international students into the mentioned categories because their experiences are highly diverse because they synthesize aspects of their home culture within their experiences in the host country. Furthermore, the women in this study did not perceive themselves to be “oppressed” or “free” but rather in control of their own decision-making processes regarding their adaptation strategies. So, in their attempt to adapt to their new social surroundings during a study abroad experience, they engage in strategies that address gendered, racial, and religious challenges. In their attempt to integrate, if their aforementioned strategies were not successful, Muslim

women international students then engaged in emotion management in order to negotiate the complexities of their experiences.

This research provides an important contribution to studies on emotion work by examining it in within international populations. Sojourners, in this case international students, immigrate temporarily to new host societies without the intention of permanent residence (Gullekson and Vancouver 2009). This context implies uncertainty of future plans because sojourners may return to their home countries or continue to reside in the host society. Therefore, international students could engage in emotion work in order to navigate uncertainties of their time abroad, post study abroad plans, and their social location within the host society. Furthermore, this research contributes to studies on emotion work among racial and religious minorities. The Muslim women participants in this research negotiated their social locations within the American demographical landscape on college campuses in the U.S. This study highlights that even within higher education contexts that aim to value diversity, Muslim women international students are racially and religiously “othered” amongst their peers. This demonstrates that in order to facilitate their adaptation, international populations engage in emotion work to negotiate their racial and religious minority statuses.

### **Limitations**

A limitation of this study is that it is based on a small sample consisting of 11 participants from a select few countries. Islam is a world religion that can be found on every continent, however, the women in the study come from primarily the Middle East and Africa. Therefore, their experiences are not generalizable and applicable to Muslim women from other geographic regions and continents. In addition, research has shown

that individuals who are able to study abroad come from higher socioeconomic backgrounds (Findlay et al. 2012). Therefore, participants in this study represent a privileged population who has the resources to live and study in another country for an extended period time due to financial support from their parents and/or governments. Furthermore, participants were interviewed in English, which is their secondary or tertiary language. Therefore, it is possible that language proficiency represents a limitation by which Muslim women international students are restricted in how they were able to engage with the questions, including those who might not have had the English to be able to participate at all in this research.

Another limitation of this study is that it is based on data gathered from international students studying in a particular context (i.e., two public colleges/universities in a diverse metropolitan area of the southeastern part of the United States with a surrounding ethnic and religious community). It is conceivable that the experiences of Muslim women international students who have chosen to study in other contexts may be different. For instance, women international students of a minority religion like Islam may have different experiences, and hence may adopt different strategies of adaptation, when they choose to study at religiously affiliated colleges or universities, or other private colleges or universities. Future research should consider further investigation of international students studying in a wider variety of contexts, which might shed light on the ways in which the educational context itself might influence how women adapt and the emotion work that accompanies those strategies of adaptation.

Lastly, I consider my own positionality as a white, non-Muslim American woman to be a limitation to these findings and analysis. Research has shown that individuals alter their behavior based on the situation in which they are engaging (Goffman 1959), and it is possible that I may have adjusted my own perspective to favor certain responses from participants over others.

### **Future Research**

This study's findings represent insights into the experiences of Muslim women international students and their gender, racial, and religious strategies for adaptation. Questions remain regarding the experiences of Muslim women international students in relation to their future plans after they finish their undergraduate studies; what factors increase the likelihood of staying in the U.S. to pursue further education or employment or returning to their home countries?

Future research also could attempt to expand the sample to include students who have chosen to study at different types of institutions (e.g., private or religious)) or at institutions in different settings (e.g., suburban or rural) as well as students who have different goals in terms of whether to return to their home country or remain in the United States. The current study, by focusing on undergraduate students, is largely about the adaptation strategies and emotion work of international students who plan to return to their country of origin. However, it is possible that future studies, if they were to include in their samples graduate students whose goal is to remain in the U.S., may discover different strategies and emotion work among those who seek to remain in the U.S. In particular, future research should examine Muslim women international students' experiences longitudinally and focus on how the experiences they have during their

studies directly affect their future plans. Also, research should explore how Muslim women employ agency in defining their own identities through their roles in their communities, families, and/or other arenas of social life.

### **Policy and Programmatic Implications**

Ideally, this study would serve as insight for international student services on American campuses that would aid university administrators to effectively address Muslim women international students' issues encountered during their study abroad. This study aims to inform international education proponents and university administrators of the scope of experiences international students encounter. Therefore, instead of university administrators encouraging international students to take action to resolve their own issues, campus leaders can begin to develop strategies in order to better support students' needs through effective programming and university planning. Application of research findings can be employed to improve campus internationalization efforts by making campus administrators aware of the issues these women face in their classrooms, dining halls (such as difficulties finding food that coincides with religious traditions), finding spaces for daily religious involvement (such as an on/off campus mosque), navigating campus, and negotiating mixed-sex residence halls.

In order to effectively internationalize American campuses that foster the adaptation of international students and this case, Muslim women, certain policies must be uniformly implemented. As illustrated in this study, cultural and religious sensitivity should be a component in residential education policy in order to be aware of issues that may arise for individuals living in mixed sex dormitories on campus. One

participant, who wears a hijab, shared her surprise and discomfort that she was assigned to live in a dormitory with men and women residents. Therefore, residential education should include policies that are aware of religious beliefs that restrict living arrangements with non-family members in order to nurture a comforting environment for all residents.

In addition, cultural and religious informed policy on-campus should extend to students' dining options. Participants in this study that lived on-campus without access to dormitory kitchens stated that there was a lack of food options that coincided with their cultural and/or religious beliefs. As a result, participants stated that their only options were to eat nutritiously deficient food. On-campus dining policy should aim to include food options that do not violate religious and cultural diets, for example, providing non-pork options for Muslim students. If this suggestion is not possible to implement, then universities should provide spaces for students to store and cook their own foods so that they may continue to follow their cultural and religious dietary traditions.

Also, this research found that despite having a designated on-campus prayer space for Muslim students, there was no building structure in close proximity for the university Islamic community. This is surprising because even though they were not on college property, a student organization Christian church, Catholic church, and Jewish synagogue were located directly across from the school. University policy should encourage building an Islamic mosque alongside the aforementioned religious organization structures so that Muslim students will have easier access to community involvement. Furthermore, by encouraging the presence of the Muslim religious

community in close proximity to college property, this illustrates the university's commitment to diversity and to Muslim students' religious well-being.

Policy can be effective to set goals for fostering international student adaptation; however university programming is important for implementing the desired aims. Many participants in this study indicated they experienced difficulties creating new friendships with American students. University administrators should provide more opportunities for international and American students to co-mingle in social situations. Programming possibilities can include language tables where native speakers interact with English language students in order to practice their skills and to learn first-hand about other cultures. Also international and American students can attend university sporting events together such as American football, soccer, and basketball together through campus organized sports clubs in order to foster college wide solidarity based on school pride. Students could, as well, participate in an international cinema series where individuals present and discuss socially relevant films from their home countries. Furthermore, students may desire to live in an on-campus space that is globally focused such as an international dormitory. International and American students can choose to live together in on-campus housing in order to increase their exposure to different cultures, languages, food and traditions. Thus, the previously mentioned activities provide more opportunities for international and American students to socialize together and learn from each other, which foster mutual understanding.

However, it is important to emphasize that these research findings are not just applicable to Muslim women, but can provide further insight into the experiences of other international student and minority populations as well. Therefore, the key findings



of this study can be instrumental in the facilitation of a diverse university community that fosters ease of transition for all students.

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## APPENDICES

### Appendix A: Participant Demographics

Name	Status	Age at time of interview	Country of Origin	Hijab	Married	Children	Time in U.S.
Angie	Novice*	18	India	No	No	No	2 months
Nourah	Novice	17	Kuwait	Yes	No	No	2 months
Mimi	Novice	17	Nigeria	Yes	No	No	2 months
Laila	Novice	23	Saudi Arabia	Yes	No	No	2 months
Samar	Veteran	24	Jordan	Yes	Yes	Yes	1 ½ years
Fatema	Veteran	20	Oman	Yes	No	No	2 ½ years
Maryam	Veteran	19	Oman	Yes	No	No	2 ½ years
Eve	Veteran	20	The Gambia	Yes	No	No	3 years
Hadij	Veteran	20	The Gambia	Yes	No	No	3 years
Junam	Veteran	31	Kuwait	Yes	Yes	Yes	3 years
Aiah	Veteran**	24	Morocco	No	No	No	5 years

Note: \* “Novice” status signifies that participant has been in the U.S. from two months to one year.

\*\* “Veteran” status signifies that participant has been in the U.S. for more than one year and one day.

## Appendix B: Document of Consent

### **Consent to Take Part in Research and Authorization for the Collection, Use and Disclosure of Health Information**

It is up to you to decide whether you want to take part in this study. If you want to take part, please read the statements below and sign the form if the statements are true. I freely give my consent to take part in this study and authorize that my health information as agreed above, be collected/disclosed in this study. I understand that by signing this form I am agreeing to take part in research. I have received a copy of this form to take with me.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Person Taking Part in Study

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Name of Person Taking Part in  
Study

### **Statement of Person Obtaining Informed Consent and Research Authorization**

I have carefully explained to the person taking part in the study what he or she can expect from their participation. I hereby certify that when this person signs this form, to the best of my knowledge, he/ she understands:

- ☐ What the study is about;
- ☐ What procedures/interventions/investigational drugs or devices will be used;
- ☐ What the potential benefits might be; and
- ☐ What the known risks might be.

I can confirm that this research subject speaks the language that was used to explain this research and is receiving an informed consent form in the appropriate language. Additionally, this subject reads well enough to understand this document or, if not, this person is able to hear and understand when the form is read to him or her. This subject does not have a medical/psychological problem that would compromise comprehension and therefore makes it hard to understand what is being explained and can, therefore, give legally effective informed consent. This subject is not under any type of anesthesia or analgesic that may cloud their judgment or make it hard to understand what is being explained and, therefore, can be considered competent to give informed consent.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Person Obtaining Informed Consent

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Name of Person Obtaining Informed Consent

## **Appendix C: Interview Guideline**

### **I. Background**

1. Can you tell me a little about your background? When (year) and where were you born? Where did you grow up? Do you have siblings? Do you practice Islam?
2. What kind of schooling did you go through? Did you already attend college elsewhere or take college courses? What's your major? How did you decide?
3. How come you decided to study abroad, and how did you decide on coming to USF?
4. Now tell me a little bit about arriving in the US and at USF. Have you been in the US (or a foreign country) before (if yes, tell me about it)? When did you arrive in Tampa? Did you know anyone living in Tampa before moving here?
5. What are your goals for studying at USF and living in the US? How long are you planning to stay?

### **II. Current Experiences**

1. What were your expectations when you arrived in the US, in Tampa? So far, what meets your expectations, and what is different?
2. How do you feel about living here and going to school right now? Has this changed over time, since you arrived? How so?
3. So far, is there anything you particularly like about living in the US? In Florida/Tampa? (Can you give me an example? Another one? Can you say a bit more?)
4. So far, is there anything you particularly dislike about living in the US? In Florida/Tampa? (Can you give me an example? Another one? Can you say a bit more?)



5. Let's talk a bit more about being a student at USF. Is there anything that you like about it (so far)? (Can you give me an example? Another one? Can you say a bit more?)
6. Is there anything that you dislike about it (so far)? (Can you give me an example? Another one? Can you say a bit more?)
7. Have you ever had any problems with a professor, a classmate, or anyone else? What exactly happened? (And what did you do? How was the situation fixed? How did you feel about that? Can you give me another example?)
8. Are there any other issues or challenges that you have run into while studying at USF? Or, more generally, living in the US? How do/did you deal with that? What do you do, at home or at work, to manage or overcome these issues? (Make sure to ask this question separately for each issue or challenge described.)
9. Do you share your experiences with anyone? Who do you talk to about important matters? Where do you go for support if you need help? Have you ever asked someone at the university for help or advice? Who was it? Where were they? For what reason?
10. Typical Day (during the semester). What did you do yesterday? Was it a typical school day? Please walk me through it, and let me know when and where you did what, who you talked to, and so on? Are you satisfied with this routine? If no, why?
11. Social Networks: Tell me a bit about your friends. Are you in contact with people from your own country? People who speak your language? How do you feel when you talk to them? How often do you see or talk to them? How about your family? Do you have any other international friends or acquaintances? Do you have any American friends? Where are they from? What is their race? When do you usually see them, and

what do you do? Have you ever felt alone? Or would you say that you're always surrounded by people?

12. If you previously studied, how is studying in the US (Florida, Tampa) different from where you studied before?

13. What do you think is different for international students, compared with US students? Are there any specific differences for women? For Muslim women?

14. What tips or advice would you give to a student from your country/another female Muslim student who is planning to come to USF to study? What else?

15. Is there anything else I should know about your experience as an international student at USF? Is there anything else you would like to tell me that I didn't ask about? What else would be important or interesting for me to know?

### III. Final Questions

Lastly I'd like to ask you a few more demographic questions.

1. What year were you born?
2. What do you consider to be your race or ethnicity?
3. How many people live in your household here in the US? (family, roommates)
4. Do you have a partner or spouse, do you have children?
5. What are your sources of income or financial support? (list and describe)

Last question; is there anything you would like to know about me? (ask for referrals)

## Appendix D: IRB Approval



RESEARCH INTEGRITY AND COMPLIANCE  
Institutional Review Boards, FWA No. 00001669  
12901 Bruce B. Downs Blvd., MDC035 • Tampa, FL 33612-4799  
(813) 974-5638 • FAX(813)974-7091

August 29, 2013

Amber Gregory  
Sociology  
Tampa, FL 33612

RE: **Expedited Approval for Initial Review**

IRB#: Pro00014299

Title: **Female Muslim International Students at American Universities: A Qualitative Study**

**Study Approval Period: 8/28/2013 to 8/28/2014**

Dear Ms. Gregory:

On 8/28/2013, the Institutional Review Board (IRB) reviewed and **APPROVED** the above application and all documents outlined below.

**Approved Item(s):**

**Protocol Document(s):**

[Female Muslim International Students at American Universities: A Qualitative Study Version number 1 August 22nd, 2013](#)

**Consent/Assent Document(s)\*:**

[Female Muslim International Students at American Universities Informed Consent form Version number 1 August 22nd, 2013.pdf](#)

\*Please use only the official IRB stamped informed consent/assent document(s) found under the "Attachments" tab. Please note, these consent/assent document(s) are only valid during the approval period indicated at the top of the form(s).

It was the determination of the IRB that your study qualified for expedited review which includes activities that (1) present no more than minimal risk to human subjects, and (2) involve only procedures listed in one or more of the categories outlined below. The IRB may review research through the expedited review procedure authorized by 45CFR46.110 and 21 CFR 56.110. The research proposed in this study is categorized under the following expedited review category:

(6) Collection of data from voice, video, digital, or image recordings made for research purposes.

(7) Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

As the principal investigator of this study, it is your responsibility to conduct this study in accordance with IRB policies and procedures and as approved by the IRB. Any changes to the approved research must be submitted to the IRB for review and approval by an amendment.

We appreciate your dedication to the ethical conduct of human subject research at the University of South Florida and your continued commitment to human research protections. If you have any questions regarding this matter, please call 813-974-5638.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "John A. Schinka, Ph.D.".

John Schinka, Ph.D., Chairperson  
USF Institutional Review Board