

AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF THE CHALLENGES OF LIVING IN AMERICA

AS A MUSLIM ADOLESCENT ATTENDING PUBLIC SCHOOL

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## ABSTRACT

A qualitative, exploratory study was conducted to investigate the challenges faced by Muslim adolescents who attend public school in America. Participants included four female and six male Muslim adolescents between the ages of 14 and 17, of varying ethnic backgrounds, who currently attend public high schools throughout central New Jersey. Participants were primarily recruited through the Muslim Center of Middlesex County Mosque in Piscataway, NJ. Focus group interviews were conducted separately, among the males and females, where the role of family, peers, and the practice of Islam in the public school setting was explored. Additionally, the study sought to examine the coping strategies and resources utilized by these Muslim teens. An interview with the imam from a local New Jersey mosque was completed to gain further insight on the obstacles faced by Muslim adolescents in America. Analysis of the focus group interviews was completed using the grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1997). Although results indicate some similarities to obstacles faced by typical adolescents, such as peer pressure and parental expectations to perform well academically, Muslim teens must contend with a host of other challenges largely due to the ethno-religious backgrounds of these individuals. The role of identity, peers, family, community, and school in relation to the challenges faced by participants are highlighted. More specifically, adherence to Islamic beliefs, experiences in dealing with peers, parental expectations, and the practice of Islam in a post 9/11 era, are revealed. Consistent with other work in this area, participants indicated that access to peers, especially Muslim peers within the community setting, are essential in providing a strong support network for coping with the aforementioned challenges. Other specific themes and commonalities are presented.

Implications of these findings are discussed and recommendations are made for parents, school, community members, and clinicians as well as for future research.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

*“And remember We took a covenant from the children of Israel (to this effect): worship none but Allah; treat with kindness your parents and kindred, and orphans and those in need; speak fair to people; be steadfast in prayer; and give alms.”*

*(Al-Quran, 2, Volume: 83)*

The religion of Islam is observed by between six and eight million people in the United States. Its followers, called Muslims, are growing in numbers and are projected to be among the three largest religious groups in the United States by the year 2010 (Ali et al., 2004). Muslims in America represent diverse backgrounds, including, but not limited to, individuals from the Middle East, Africa, Asia, and those who have converted to Islam. With nearly one billion Muslims, Islam is the second largest religion in the world, surpassed only by the Christian faiths (Esposito, 1998). In the United States, the Muslim population is divided between immigrants and non-immigrants, with immigrants comprised of Arabs (26.2%), South Asians (24.7%), Middle Eastern non-Arabs (10.3%), and East Asians (6.4%) and non-immigrants consisting of African Americans (23.8%) and Caucasian and Native Americans (11% ; U.S. State Department, 2004). As Muslim immigrants arrive in the United States, there is a need to assimilate and acculturate to the mainstream American society. The process of developing an identity that conforms to the individually-oriented society is not easy for Muslims who come from collective

societies, where family members and social groups are important components of one's identity (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). As such, there is a continual struggle for a definitive identity for Muslim Americans that is specific to each individual's belief in Islam and their newfound adherence to the American culture.

Given that Muslim communities are fast becoming a part of American society, it has become necessary for those who work with this population (i.e., school psychologists, counselors, therapists, and educators) to understand the cultural expectations of Muslim children—in particular Muslim *adolescents*, as they grow and develop into young adults. Adolescence is itself a journey, involving peer pressure, physical and emotional changes, and parental expectations. It is further confounded by Islamic beliefs and values. Islam presents a way of life for Muslims that may present significant additional challenges for Muslim adolescents.

Adolescence is the transition period between childhood and adulthood. For some, it may be marked by turmoil and uncertainty. For others, adolescence is the incipience of self-identity, transformation, and the “finding” of oneself physically, emotionally, and spiritually. Following the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks in New York City and Washington, D. C., it has become even more necessary to examine Muslim students closely, as these events have permanently altered how Muslim youth think about themselves and how the world views the Muslim population. For example, the post 9/11 climate in the United States has produced a heightened fear of discrimination among Muslims. In the year following the terrorist attacks, the Council of American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) logged over 700 discriminatory acts against Muslims (CAIR, 2002). Images presented by the media such as popular movies that depict Muslims as terrorists may also foster negative

images of Islam, with deleterious consequences for Muslim youth, who often face increased harassment or worse after such incidents (Hodge, 2002). Moreover, both the ongoing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and the terrorist attacks in Europe and the Middle East by fundamentalist Islamic groups continue to put the Muslim-American community under public surveillance, fueling an atmosphere of hate and fear (Bryan, 2005). Consequently, Muslim Americans may feel anxiety and concern over their own safety and may also question their allegiance to an Islamic faith that is linked publicly to actions that at the very least are highly controversial.

As they enter high school, adolescents face heightened concerns about their identity and sense of belonging to a group (Erikson 1968; Phinney, 1993). This process may be compounded by exposure to new perspectives, knowledge, and experiences from other students and cultures. In addition, this combination of internally-driven concerns and externally-based exposure to multicultural information may elicit a crisis phase regarding one's identity and search for a resolution (Giang & Wittig, 2006). For the Muslim adolescent, this so-called "crisis phase" of learning about themselves may be further confounded by their Islamic beliefs and values, as Islam is considered a "way of life" rather than simply one's "religion." The challenges faced by Muslim adolescents attending public schools in America and how they cope with these challenges are relatively unknown. With an estimated percentage of Muslim students in the public school system in the United States potentially exceeding 5 percent (Carter & El Hindi, 1999), the presence of Muslim youth in the schools will continue to be of significant importance to school psychologists who work with this diverse population.

Whether these challenges are similar to those faced by typically developing adolescents, or represent a unique quandary of negotiating the poles of being a Muslim and an American, are yet to be determined, conclusively. In a study completed by Ahmad and Szpara (2003), Muslim children and young adult students (ages 13-22) who attended public schools in New York City were asked how they felt about their personal experiences in the Western culture and how they reconciled Islamic and American culture. The study revealed several key findings. First, the study indicated that Muslim students believed that misperceptions and negative stereotypes about Islam and Muslim values are pervasive in schools, and they felt they were affected by them. In addition, the Muslim students stated minimal conflict between their loyalty to American culture and their beliefs in Islamic faith. Even though they may appear acculturated to the West, Muslim children are fully cognizant of their religious and cultural identity and would like to retain it while attending public schools.

Even more, the consensus concerning the sense of community that these students expressed in regard to the public schools was significant. Students stated that they would like to see schools fostering a positive image of Muslims by establishing connections with the larger Muslim community and celebrating Muslim holidays. It is evident, from the results of this study and other studies that will be discussed later, that Muslim students would like greater understanding of Islam and positive attitudes toward them. Thus, further exploration of these youth is warranted in order to ensure that these students are supported and encouraged within the public school realm.

## CHAPTER II

### THE CURRENT STUDY

#### *Rationale and Purpose*

The current dissertation research was designed to understand and document the challenges faced by Muslim adolescent boys and girls growing up in America and attending public schools. The cultural and religious background of Muslim students who attend public schools in America may have significant social, emotional, and psychological impact on their development during the adolescent years. Since Muslims represent a minority in America, there exists a pressure to adhere to the norms of North American society. Muslims have found it difficult to merge into mainstream U.S. society and maintain their identity as Muslims (Jackson, 1995). The Muslim students in public schools who face the greatest difficulties are those from more observant homes, regardless of their linguistic or ethnic affiliation. For these students, their cultural differences, religiosity, and values between school and home are in severe conflict (Al-Romi, 2000). It thus becomes essential to increase sensitivity to Muslim youth who attend public schools.

In order to understand what challenges these youth face, how their Islamic faith impacts these challenges, and how they cope with these issues, it is necessary to examine how Muslim adolescents deal with typical adolescent issues such as peer relationships, cultural gaps between parent and child, dress, dating and other challenges (i.e., substance

abuse). Thus, this study thus aims to explore the experiences of Muslim adolescents who attend public high school and how they cope with these challenges.

### *Research Questions*

In order to study the challenges faced by Muslim adolescents attending public schools in America, it is essential to perform an in-depth examination of the issues Muslim adolescents view as problematic, how they cope with these concerns, and their resources for seeking support when dealing with these obstacles. This study aims to explore the experiences of Muslim adolescents who attend public high school and how they may cope with these challenges. The following research questions will be examined during this study:

1. What are the salient issues that Muslim adolescents face while attending public school?
2. How do Muslim adolescents create a balance between their Islamic beliefs and expectations from family, peers, and the American culture?
3. How do Muslim adolescents cope with the stressors that they may face while attending public schools in America?
4. What resources (i.e., school psychologists, family, peers, prayer, consulting with an Imam, etc.) are available to Muslim adolescents in order to cope with the stressors they face while attending public schools in America and what is the likelihood these youth will access these resources?

## CHAPTER III

### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

#### *What is Islam?*

A brief description of basic Islamic beliefs and values are required in order to understand the nature and background of Islamic expectations on youth. As many of these beliefs are contrary to the mainstream American culture, the following information may shed light on the reasons Muslim youth may be presented with challenges in the public school system.

The word “*Islam*” comes from the Arabic word “*Salima*”, which means peace. Thus, Islam is a religion of peace. The word “*Islam*” also comes from the word “*Aslama*” which means to obey (Ali et al., 2004). *Islam* denotes the religion, and *Muslim* literally translates as “one who submits to the will of Allah” and signifies a follower of Islam (Lumumba, 2003). For Muslims, Allah is the word for God; Muhammad is the final messenger, or prophet, whose teachings convey the principles and beliefs that Allah wants individuals to obey. Muslims believe in the holy book, Qur’an (or Koran), which was originally recited in Arabic and then later translated into almost every major language in the world.

Many Muslims also learn about particular historical and contextual issues of 7<sup>th</sup> century Arabia to better understand the Qur’an. Islam is generally conceived of as a complete way of life, a worldview that unifies the metaphysical and material and gives structure and coherence to personal existence (Izetbogovic, 1993). Muslims seek to

follow the straight path of God's precepts: the *shari'a* (derived from the Quran), and the *hadith* (recorded collections of the sayings of Muhammad), where the *shari'a* provides guidance for all aspects of life (Waines, 1995). Muslims believe that verses contain broader universal guidance for future generations of Muslims and included in the broader guidance are the basic principles of the Islamic religion known as the five pillars, or *arkan*, of Islam (Esposito, 1998; Lippman, 1995). The following lists the five pillars of Islam:

1. The first pillar of Islam is the belief in one God (Allah) and Prophet Muhammad is his last and final prophet. Muslims must recite the *Shahadah*, in Arabic, which translates into "*There is only one God and Muhammad is his messenger*". This phrase is characterized as the phrase that not only declares one's faith, but also a socio-political statement that implies recognition that there is only one God for all humanity (Lang, 1996).
2. The second pillar of Islam is prayer, or *salat*, which must be conducted five times a day at specified times during the day.
3. The third pillar of Islam is the giving of *zakat*, or the alms tax, which is donating a part of one's savings to the poor and needy.
4. The fourth pillar of Islam is fasting (*sawm*) in the month of Ramadan, which requires Muslims to refrain from drinking any liquids, eating, and engaging in sexual activity for the entire period of sunrise to sunset. The month of Ramadan will vary according to the lunar calendar. During this month, Muslims are required to continue their daily activities (work, family obligations, etc.) but also to use this time for self-reflection and spiritual discipline. This is designed to

increase empathy for the poor and hungry (Esposito, 1998). Children are not required to fast until puberty; however, children may decide to fast with their families.

5. The fifth pillar of Islam is the pilgrimage to Mecca, *Hajj*, to be performed once in a lifetime if it is financially and physically possible. During *Hajj*, an individual must travel to Mecca, a city located in Saudi Arabia, and perform various rituals in honor of the prophet Abraham. Similar to the month of Ramadan, the date at which the *Hajj* falls is dependent on the lunar calendar.

#### *Other Compulsory Islamic Practices*

An overview of obligatory Islamic terms and practices are presented in this section. It is not meant to be a comprehensive view of all aspects of Islam. In many cases, indigenous cultural, social and class factors associated with the family's country of origin affect how Islam is interpreted and practiced and as a result, individuals may construct their reality from religious, cultural, and secular U.S. spheres (Hodge, 2002). This outline provides a basic foundation for non-Muslim school psychologists in their understanding of the Muslim population.

#### *Dietary practices.*

Muslims follow a dietary code called *Halal* that requires that meat be slaughtered in a certain way (Ali, 1996). *Halal* permits eating beef, lamb, fish, and other types of meat but prohibits the eating of pork, pork products (e.g., gelatin contained in products such as marshmallows and gummy bears), blood of dead animals, and the consumption of all intoxicants such as alcohol (Athar, 1999). Although there are different explanations for the prohibitions against alcohol and pork, most are speculations by Muslims and

Muslim scholars (Ali et al., 2004). Often Muslims choose a vegetarian diet to avoid meat that is not halal (Kemp, 1996). School lunches that include pork or pork products (such as hotdogs) will be problematic for many Muslim youth. When halal meats are not available, Kosher meals may be acceptable because Kosher meat is slaughtered in ways that match Islamic specifications (Kulwicki, 1996).

*Customary dress.*

Modesty is very important for both sexes but especially so for women (McKennis, 1999). Muslims generally perceive the Western secular emphasis on sexuality and portrayal of women as “sex objects” as both derogatory to women and to the family unit as a whole. The manner in which modesty is addressed by Muslims in the United States varies by cultural origin, local Islamic norms, the interpretation of the *shari’a*, and personal preferences (Hodge, 2002). In the West, some Muslim women have adopted Western style clothing. However, Muslim women who strictly adhere to Islamic customs will keep their hair, body, arms, and legs covered (Ali, 1996). The dress code is implemented for young girls as well, which may be dependent on parental discretion as to what their daughter may wear. In general, a female may not wear shorts, bathing suits, tank tops, or other such revealing clothing. For both men and women, Islam does prescribe modest dress, but the Quranic prescriptions have been interpreted many different ways (Ali et al., 2004). For boys, the standards of modesty may overlap with those of mainstream culture. Some Islamic cultures believe that women are to cover completely (*burqa*), whereas others believe that the meaning of modesty is open to interpretation and take these verses more liberally (Haddad & Lumis, 1987). Additionally, Muslim American females often choose, or by cultural or familial

expectations decide, to wear the *hijab*, or traditional head covering (Cole & Ahmadi, 2003; Inayat, 2002). It is important to note that Muslim girls who choose to wear the *hijab* as an expression of their spirituality may be particularly targeted for ridicule in the schools (Mahmoud, 1996), making this population especially susceptible to peer pressure regarding dress and modesty.

*Dating, marriage, and gender roles.*

Muslims place a high emphasis on heterosexual marriage (Almeida, 1996; Haddad & Lumis, 1987), where homosexuality and sex before marriage are not sanctioned (Halstead & Lewicka, 1998; Islamic Society of North America, 1999). Generally, unmarried men and women are discouraged from forming close ties, and intimacy between unrelated members of the opposite sex prior to marriage is discouraged (Ali et al., 2004). The concept of “dating” for Muslim youth thus becomes problematic. Whereas boys can simply refrain from asking girls out, girls who are asked out may have difficulty in providing an “acceptable” explanation for choosing not to date (Haddad & Smith, 1996). Many Muslim families in the present time endorse supervised or group dating, with an adult present as an alternative to secular dating, which may include sexual relations. Still, other families continue to adhere to the traditional “arranged marriage” for their child, where the suitor is picked by the family following a thorough “investigation” of the suitor’s family, educational background, and reputation among the community, and religious preferences. Whether arranged or not, Muslim families remain highly involved in the marital choices of both men and women and have the final input on who an individual marries. Men are generally allowed to marry non-Muslims provided the individual is a believer of monotheism (Christianity and Judaism), whereas

women are not supposed to marry a non-Muslim since she is considered vulnerable to oppression for her beliefs if she marries a non-Muslim (McAdams-Mahmoud, 2005).

In general, the union of husbands and wives in Islam is viewed as that of equals, but with each having complimentary roles (Corbett, 1994). For instance, men are viewed as the family head and providers for the family while women are responsible for child rearing and maintaining the home. Muslim men typically have the final word on general family affairs while women have the authority on making decisions for the children and household concerns. Although Muslim women are not prohibited from working outside the home, they are expected to maintain a nurturing environment for the family in the home. Divorce is permitted, but strongly discouraged. In general, Muslim youth typically grow up within intact homes with strong emotional ties between parents. Extended family members (i.e., grandparents, aunts, uncles) may live together in the same house and be called upon to help make decisions regarding the family.

#### *Parental Expectations of Muslim Youth*

Islam has ordained the parent-child relationship as one of the most respected and resilient ties that a child can possess throughout his/her life span. Muslim parents who retain devotion to traditional values in America want their children to adopt Islamic-oriented moral, social, and cultural values (Al-Romi, 2000). To ensure that children maintain their Islamic identity, parents often take their children to religious schools and conduct family activities in religious settings (Waugh, 1991). As with most religions, the extent to which parents will be observant of the practices to which they want their children socialized is variable. Some parents will adhere strictly to Islamic law and others, especially those who have acclimated to the Western values of the United States,

may choose to parent their children by creating a balance between Western and Islamic values. On the other hand, immigrant families tend to uphold traditional Islamic and cultural values that pose additional stressors for parents and children. Undeniably, immigrants from cultural, language, and social backgrounds that are different from those of the society into which they are moving experience higher levels of stress than those who come to societies with similar background characteristics (Cox, 1983). For South Asian families, for example, limited ability to navigate the American culture in order to help their children, finding suitable work, dealing with extended family members (i.e., grandparents) and a desire to form relationships with the Muslim community may further complicate the experience of parents helping children with the process of becoming oriented to the larger American society (Fong, 2004).

The experiences of each Muslim family living in America are undoubtedly unique; yet, the obligation for Muslim parents to raise their children with a firm Islamic upbringing constitutes the common fabric among most Muslim families. Ekram and Beshir (2007) describe the Muslim parent-child relationship as one of respect, kindness, and mercy. This is emphasized in many places throughout the Qur'an and the teachings of Prophet Muhammad:

*“Your Lord has decreed that you worship none but him and that you be kind to parents. Whether one or both of them attain old age in your life say not to them a word of contempt, nor repel them, but address them in terms of honor.”*

*(Al-Quran 17, Volume, 23, 24)*

Muslim parents carry the enormous responsibility of ensuring their teens strive to live as righteous, responsible Muslims who can contribute positively to the family, Muslim community, and humanity. For the purposes of understanding the Islamic perspective on

child-rearing, it is necessary to discuss briefly the basic Islamic tenets and expectations that Muslim parents hold for their children.

In order to accomplish the feat of “educating” their children in a non-Muslim world, Muslim parents are encouraged to emphasize to their children the concept of *tarbiyah*, or education, which is based on Qur’anic teachings and *Hadith*. The purpose of *tarbiyah* is to raise children with values that will help them to be righteous and happy. According to Ekram and Beshir (2007), the following concepts, listed in Table 1, are recommended to parents as a method of guidance for their Muslim youth in order to cope with temptations and deviating from the “straight path” of a balanced and moderate Islamic life:

Table 1  
Parental Expectations for Muslim Teens

Suggested Parental Islamic Tenets to their Children	Islamic Application to Muslim Youth
<i>Allah loves you.</i>	He [Allah] has equipped us with all tools, senses, and faculties we require to be able to live, perform, and fulfill our duties in this life in the most efficient and enjoyable manner.
<i>Our real home is in the hereafter.</i>	Every human being will live for a predetermined period of time on this earth and then die. Thus, our life on earth is temporary.
<i>Life is a test.</i>	Muslims are expected to show real love for Islam no matter how difficult it is for them. Muslims are reminded about the struggles that Prophet Muhammad ( <i>peace be upon him</i> ) endured during his lifetime.
<i>Allah is with you at all times.</i>	Allah is all-knowing, all-powerful, and a source of continuous support.
<i>Patience is a great virtue.</i>	Patience, as described in the Qur’an is required for all believers to stand strong in the face of hardship.
<i>Islam is a complete way of life.</i>	The teachings of Islam cover all aspects of life: social, economical, political, and spiritual.

Table 1 (Continued)

Suggested Parental Islamic Tenets to their Children	Islamic Application to Muslim Youth
<i>We will meet Allah as individuals on the Day of Judgment.</i>	The “Day of Judgment” is the day when all of humanity will be judged by <i>Allah</i> for all of their good deeds.
<i>We are accountable for whatever we hear, see, or can think of.</i>	This concept refers to one’s deeds that will be accounted for in the “hereafter”.
<i>Select friends carefully.</i>	In one of the <i>Hadith (i.e., Sahih Muslim)</i> , it is said that “A man follows the religion of his closest friend, so each one should consider whom he makes his friend.”

(Adapted from: *Muslim Teens: Today’s Worry, Tomorrow’s Hope (Beshir & Beshir, 2007)*)

As depicted above, parental expectations of Muslim youth are bountiful and reflect the transmission of the basic values of Islam throughout everyday life. Although parent expect that Muslim children remain practicing Muslims, it is important to note that Muslim adolescents differ in how they practice Islam and may choose to deviate or interpret Islam to their own desire. Even so, Muslim youth typically are bound implicitly by family and communal expectations, which is in sharp contrast to the U.S. standards of individualism. Recent trends, however, in raising children in the United States have lead Muslim parents to decide what their children should accept or reject from the customary American culture and values and make their children’s transitions in a secular society without effecting their religion or culture (Al-Romi, 2000).

Since the bond between parent and child in a Muslim household is apparent and respect for parents is paramount, the role of the Muslim family is therefore deemed the highest in importance, especially in terms of support during times of crisis or conflict

(Carter, 1999). This may lead Muslim children to spend more time with parents than many of their non-Muslim peers, which may in turn lead them to greater exposure to Islamic values. Muslim parents often assume a role similar to that provided by peer groups in North American settings, with girls participating in various activities with their mothers, and boys often accompanying their fathers (Haddad & Smith, 1996). This bond between parent and child, though, may become problematic when Muslim children desire to interact solely with peers their own age, especially in the pubertal, adolescent years. Nevertheless, Muslim youth are considered to be men and women upon completing puberty, but there is little expectation that post-puberty youth will differentiate from the family unit, because Muslims value interconnectedness among family members (Daneshpour, 1998; Haddad & Smith, 1996).

There is currently a paucity of literature available on Muslim youth and very little is known about what issues these adolescents face while balancing traditional Islamic religious values with the cultural norms of an American society. Yet, interest in the topic of Muslims in America is on the rise, as this population is gaining significant recognition for their needs within the mental health arena. One preliminary study, completed by Carter (1999), focused on several Muslim families, with children ranging in age from three to adulthood. These families were interviewed in order to identify possible issues that may plague Muslim children who attend public schools. The emergent themes expressed by the participants in the study (e.g., home/school relations, family issues, dating, self-identity, peer relations, dietary issues, and cultural events) were helpful in understanding the issues that Muslim youth may face while attending public school. A strong tie between parents and teachers, especially in times of conflict with the student

was viewed as an important factor for academic success for their children. As Muslim parents place a high value on education and hold educators in high esteem (Jackson, 1995), the fear of being misunderstood by school officials is a major issue for Muslim families. Prejudice from peers due to stereotyped images of Muslims and females wearing the *hijab*, the negative portrayal of Islam by teachers and in textbooks, and celebration of non-Muslim holidays were also revealed as stressors for the Muslim youth interviewed in the study.

Other issues presented in the study focused on self-identity. A strong sense of pride in being Muslim was noted by many of the participants interviewed. Furthermore, the dietary needs for Muslims, or eating *halal*, became an issue when school lunch menus were changed unbeknownst to parents and one child could only eat bread and dessert. It is important to note that the parents interviewed in the study expressed their hesitance to discuss family issues with a school counselor, as family issues are to be handled within the family, according to Muslim traditions and the Qur'an (Jackson, 1995). Overall, this study presented preliminary findings concerning relevant issues that Muslim families and school officials must grapple with in the school setting. It must be noted that this study, like most, occurred prior to the events of September 11, 2001.

A recent contribution to the study of Muslim youth and identity within America is the important empirical, mixed methods study completed by Sirin and Fine (2008). In their groundbreaking publication, *Muslim American Youth*, the authors provide a conceptual framework on the formation processes of Muslim American identity, or more specifically, on understanding how Muslim American youth negotiate their "hyphenated" (Muslim and American identification) identities. Through identity maps, surveys, and

focus groups, the authors garnered intimate revelations of growing up in America from various Muslim youth of varying ethnicities, degrees of religiosity, and ages. The findings from the study revealed the complexity of Muslim youth, who are continuously immersed within the throws of global conflict. Most importantly, these youth desire to piece together their divergent identities, whether it may be ethnic, religious, or American. For instance, certain participants chose to retreat into isolation or express anger about incidences of racism, whereas some chose to educate those who were ignorant of their Islamic beliefs. Regardless, the evidence lucidly depicts the social and psychological impact on these youth. With globalization, widening economic gaps between rich and poor, increasing anti-immigrant sentiment on the rise, and interethnic conflicts dotting the globe, the authors view the condition of hyphenating and perforating identities as increasingly normative, worrisome, and undertheorized as a political and a psychological project, relevant to youth well beyond the Muslim American community (Sirin & Fine, 2008). Furthermore, the authors assert that additional studies are necessary to study different Muslim populations in the United States.

#### *Adolescent Identity Development*

Perhaps one of the most influential theorists of identity development is Erik Erikson, who posited that identity formation is the major psychosocial task of adolescence (Erikson, 1968). His eight stages of identity, ranging from childhood to adulthood, describe a specific crisis that must be resolved in order to advance healthy development in the succeeding stages. The ways in which each stage is resolved has profound effects on later stage development. The initial stages of the Erikson model are as follows: 1) Basic Trust vs. Basic Mistrust, 2) Autonomy vs. Shame and Doubt,

3) Initiative vs. Guilt, and 4) Industry vs. Inferiority. For Muslim adolescents, the fifth stage of Erikson's model, the Identity vs. Identity Confusion stage, is regarded by Erikson as the stage that occurs in late adolescence. In this stage, adolescents build on the experiences of late childhood and foster the adolescent task of organizing skills, interests, and values into a core sense of self in order to apply it to present and future pursuits. The adolescent must, therefore, endure an "identity crisis", which may result from pressures placed on the adolescent as he/she tries to balance family/friends/society with personal uniqueness.

An expansion of Erikson's model, led by James Marcia's research on adolescents, further explicates that identity development is a more gradual process of various experiences that influence adolescent decision making, rather than a sequence of developmental stages. Marcia (1980) proposed that psychological identity develops along the following stages:

- Identity Diffusion - the status in which the adolescent does not have a sense of having choices; he or she has not yet made (nor is attempting/willing to make) a commitment
- Identity Foreclosure - the status in which the adolescent seems willing to commit to some relevant roles, values, or goals for the future. Adolescents in this stage have not experienced an identity crisis. They tend to conform to the expectations of others regarding their future (e. g. allowing a parent to determine a career direction). As such, these individuals have not explored a range of options.

- Identity Moratorium - the status in which the adolescent is currently in a crisis, exploring various commitments and is ready to make choices, but has not made a commitment to these choices yet.
- Identity Achievement - the status in which adolescent has gone through a identity crisis and has made a commitment to a sense of identity (i.e., certain roles or values) that he or she has chosen.

Statuses are not linked specifically with any age group and may occur at any time during an individual's life cycle and in any order, vacillating between Erikson's "crisis" and Marcia's (1980) concept of "commitment" (either an individual commits to an identity and devotes oneself to living accordingly or chooses not to).

More specifically, in regard to Marcia's statuses, a Muslim adolescent who fully concedes to following all practices and beliefs of Islam, is one who has an "achieved identity" as a Muslim, and thus any identity crises are resolved and the commitment to the selected identity is high (Al-Ghorani, 2003). A "foreclosed identity" status is one in which an individual has committed to a life direction or way of being without exploring other alternatives. A Muslim adolescent may uphold traditional Islamic values due to parental or societal norms, but not necessarily fully understand Islam or what it means to be Muslim. A Muslim adolescent with a diffuse identity is one who has little consideration or active exploration of a particular identity, and may integrate various forms of identity (i.e., Muslim, American, male/female, Pakistani) throughout life. The last form of identity within the Marcia model is the moratorium status, where there is a crisis of identity with no commitment. Achievement and moratorium forms of identity are viewed as more mature than diffusion and foreclosure forms (Alghorani, 2003).

With respect to Erikson and Marcia's identity formation framework, the literature pertaining to ethnic, acculturation, and religious identity will be addressed in the following two sections as these aspects are viewed as the most influential for Muslim adolescents growing in American society.

#### *Acculturation and Ethnic Identity of Muslim Adolescents*

Acculturation generally refers to how sustained intergroup contact changes the behaviors and psychological processes among members of interacting groups and typically applies to all participating ethnic group members from various age groups (Berry, 2001; Molina, Wittig, & Giang, 2004). For Muslim youth, many may vacillate between the extent to which they may become integrated to Western/U.S. norms versus those of Islam. From an acculturation framework (Berry et al., 1986), adolescents have four options in their search for a resolution. *Integration strategy* refers to adolescents who embrace the opportunity to interact with others and personally explore their ethnic identity. A *separation strategy* involves individuals who retreat from interactions with members of other ethnic groups and increase their attachment and involvement with their own ethnic group. In contrast, the *assimilation strategy* involves pursuing opportunities to interact with others but ignore one's own cultural heritage or ethnic identity. The most uncommon of strategies, a *marginalization strategy*, refers to individuals who neither prefer their own ethnic group nor search out interactions with members of other groups (Rudmin & Ahmadzadeh, 2001). Ethnic identity, subsequently, can be thought of as one aspect of the acculturation process. Additionally, having a positive sense of ethnic group membership is often expected of individuals who have an achieved ethnic identity and is highly correlated with ethnic identity achievement (Phinney, 1992). Further, in order to

reach an achieved ethnic identity, positive feelings toward one's group membership is necessary, but these feelings are based solely on accepting what one is taught by one's family, and not on the process of exploration, as was previously believed

Regarding Muslim adolescents, acculturation and ethnicity play an integral role on how Muslim youth function within the American society. Most Muslim communities in North America are diverse, including both immigrants and large numbers of converts (Al-Romi, 2000), and arrive for many different reasons. For example, Arab families have immigrated because of various wars (e.g., Gulf War, Iraq-Iran war, U.S. Invasion of Iraq), complicating their subsequent adjustment and acculturation in the United States (Nasser-McMillan & Hakim-Larson, 2003). Other Muslim immigrant families from Bosnia, Iraq, and Afghanistan have experienced wars and political strife (Weine & Laub, 1995), and have fled their countries as refugees, plagued by trauma and posttraumatic stress. Still, other Muslim immigrant families, such as from Pakistan or India, have come to the United States to find their version of the "American Dream", a better place for their children educationally and financially. Recent immigrants may be considered more religious than their American-born children (Haddad & Lumis, 1987), and conflicts between parents and children about Islam are likely to be common (Lang, 1996), making it imperative for psychologists to assess religiosity between both parents and children.

With respect to ethnic identity and the melding of cultures, compelling research has revealed that the important role that biculturalism plays in the positive adjustment of ethnic minority youth (Szapocznik, Kurtines, & Fernandez, 1980). Bicultural competence is described as the ability to function competently in various domains, such as identity development, cultural awareness and knowledge, intergroup attitudes, bicultural efficacy,

bicultural communication, role repertoire, and groundedness. Individuals who have a secure, integrated bicultural identity are more likely to exhibit adaptive coping in both culture of origin and mainstream culture (La Fromboise et al., 1993). Certain studies have explored the psychological advantage of a bicultural identity such as one study completed by Lang, Munoz, Bernal, and Sorenson (1982), who found that Hispanics with a bicultural identity indicated better psychological well being, less depression, and better academic achievement. Furthermore, the majority of the literature about acculturation suggests that biculturalism is the most adaptive form where individuals who have a secure, integrated bicultural identity are more likely to exhibit adaptive coping in both culture of origin and mainstream culture (La Fromboise et al., 1993).

#### *Religious Identity Formation of Muslim Adolescents*

Although research pertaining to religious correlates of identity status is on the rise, the roles of religion and spirituality among adolescents have not been explored widely in the research literature. Yet, available evidence suggests that religion plays an important role in the lives of adolescents and in their development (Benson et al., 1989). For instance, as adolescents develop formal operational thought, their capability for abstract and symbolic concepts, namely, ideas related to existential and transcendental realms become extended. Thus, exploration of spiritual and religious domains for adolescents is meaningful in the identity formation process for developing deeper meaning of themselves and the world around them (Markstrom, 1999).

For Muslim adolescents, the impact of Islamic faith has a profound effect on their day-to-day lives and school experiences where Muslim adolescents must struggle to stay on “the straight path”, away from the social pressures such as dating, premarital sex, drug

and alcohol abuse. In a study that examined Muslim youth and religious identity in Canadian public schools (Zine, 2001), Muslim students were interviewed in order to gather information regarding how these youth negotiate their religious identities with peer pressure, discrimination, and Islamophobia. The study focused on the interplay of ambivalence and role performance as well as the strategies of interaction and isolation. Namely, negotiating ambivalence and actively engaging in “role performance” or the commitment to an Islamic way of life, were found to be integral to students’ Islamic identification. In addition, it was concluded that negative social pressures contributed to the need for students to also stay grounded within the community and build systems of peer support among fellow Muslims in their schools. This solidarity of peer support appeared to provide an anchor for Muslim students to resist negative social pressures experienced within public schools. Moreover, the religious identification of the students was strengthened because of their ability to avoid assimilation into the mainstream Canadian culture, and instead, maintain their religious identity.

Religious identity of Muslim youth has been further explored in relation to factors such as mental health, Islamic practice, personal adjustment, and acculturation. Alghorani (2003) found that for Muslim adolescents attending Islamic schools in the USA, Muslim adolescent Islamic identity is most highly correlated with general Islamic knowledge, attitudes towards Islamic identity (affirmation and belonging), and moderately correlated with Islamic practice of appearance. More specifically, it was deduced that acquiring Islamic knowledge is instrumental to Islamic identity achievement where practicing the acquired Islamic knowledge is related to the achievement of Islamic identity. Moreover, in regard to Islamic identity and acculturation and adjustment, it was

concluded that Muslims with achieved Islamic identity (as derived from Marcia's identity statuses) tend to have Islamic cultural preferences and are less acculturated to the dominant culture than those who do not achieve Islamic identity.

Regarding Islamic identity and personal adjustment, Alghorani's study concluded that Muslims with achieved Islamic identity and knowledge and practice of Islam, tend to have positive relationships with parents, interpersonal relationships, and positive self-esteem and self-reliance. Although the study focused on Muslim adolescents attending Islamic schools in the U.S., the results reported have multiple implications on how Muslim adolescents view themselves as well how they relate to their environment in terms of adjustment and acculturation.

*An Ecological Framework on Coping with Stressors In Relation to Muslim Adolescents*

Consideration thus far has been given mainly to the factors that influence Muslim adolescents and their ability to possess fruitful, successful lives within the constructs of being Muslim and living in an American world (i.e., ethnic identity, acculturation, Islamic beliefs and practices, parental influences, and Islamic identity). The indecisiveness of "Muslim American", "American Muslim", or "Pakistani American Muslim", or "Palestinian American Muslim", remains a quandary for many Muslims who immigrate or are raised in America, where the realities of racial, religious, and ethnic identity in the U.S. reinforce this division in identity (Haddad, 1998). In order to assess how Muslim adolescents cope with these potential stressors, it is imperative to use an ecological perspective to examine coping and social support mechanisms upon which these youth may rely. Culture permeates the ecology of all youth, but is especially salient

for those of minority ethnic status, who are more likely to be aware of the power of culture on assumptions and daily behavior (Yasui & Dishion, 2007).

The basis of the ecological framework of coping begins with cultural and social environments. Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 1986, 1989) ecological systems theory describes the child as developing within a multilevel system of relationships, behavior settings, and more general community contexts. The model describes the child as embedded within "layers" of environment, which include the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem. According to Yasui and Dishion (2007):

"...this ecological theory is comprehensive in describing how various contexts can impact a child's development; however, when examining the developmental pathways of ethnic minority youth, the model does not fully address the presence of cultural influences that permeate each contextual level and that stimulate the developmental path of the child. In the ecological model, culture is described as part of the macrosystem, and its influences are experienced through the interactions of other layers." (p. 138)

The macrosystem of culture may be further explained through cultural factors that can influence coping and social contexts include social structure. These factors include ethnocultural traditions, beliefs, practices, and institutions especially socioeconomic class and other structures of power and status in a society (Dalton et al., 2001). Within the cultural and social contexts, the concept of stressors and resources exist. The term "resources" refers to the material, social, and personal factors that one may utilize in order to promote a healthy lifestyle. Stressors are shaped by cultural and social contexts and may influence resources or may be shaped by the presence of resources.

Much of the empirical and theoretical work about culture and ethnic minority status presumes the Bronfenbrenner framework that identifies culture as an external macrolevel influence on the development of the child; however, other models view

culture to be the central process of socialization for a child. For example, Garcia and Coll (1996) articulate that:

“Cultural influences are perceived as embedded within various contextual levels and directly experienced. As such, cultural influences are experienced by the child at each ecological level, from the immediate microsystem-level (e.g., racial, ethnic socialization within the familial context) to the larger macrosystem-level influences such as social, economic, or psychological segregation, racism, discrimination, and oppression. Thus, a fluid and dynamic process occurs between the individual and his or her culture, confirming the centrality of culture in child development.”

(p. 1895-1897)

For the purposes of the present study, “culture” is considered not only as the nexus for child development but also as an underpinning for coping with environmental stressors. In particular, culturally-linked resources available to Muslim youth, such as friends, family, school staff, natural mentors or helpers, self-help groups, spirituality and religion, will be explored as possible factors that may influence how Muslim youth cope with environmental stressors.

Although, there is limited research on coping and Muslim adolescents, several studies have focused on the perceptions that Muslim youth have of their public school experiences, which provide insight on what resources play a vital role in the support for Muslim youth in the schools. For example, a study completed by Ahmad and Szpara (2003) on Muslim children who attend New York City schools found that in general, both Muslim boys and girls maintain, that regardless of the lack of factual knowledge among the faculty and students about the Muslim community, over time they have developed mutual trust and friendly relationships within the community. On certain occasions, the participants also received moral support from school administration. In addition, the

participants expressed the necessity for schools to foster a positive image of Muslims by establishing connections with the larger Muslim community and celebrating Muslim holidays. The findings from this study were in accordance with one previous study mentioned earlier (Zine, 2001), in which Muslim adolescents who attended public schools in Canada had found it necessary to form strong bonds with each other in order to cope with challenges and politics of religious identity in their schooling experiences. This further emphasizes the theory that “culture” plays an integral role in the development of youth identity.

*The Role of School Psychologists and the Mental Health Needs of Muslim Adolescents in the Schools*

School psychologists are presented with the daunting task of providing a multitude of services to children, educators, and families. Psychologist and educator, Jane Close Conoley, implicitly defines the emerging role of the school psychologist in relation to promoting healthy development and learning for children where she states:

“We need to be experts about children: who they are, where they live, what they need, and what can go wrong. We need to be family and school systems experts because to fail to know families and school is to fail to know children.”

(Conoley, 1989, p.556)

Along with maintaining formidable home-school relations, the role of the school psychologist is emerging to include a comprehensive view of the cultural and ethnic diversity of children and their families. The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP), *Professional Conduct Manual for School Psychology* (2000), presents the following guidelines in regard to the ethical guidelines in working with culturally diverse populations:

Practice Guideline #5

- 5.2 School psychologists recognize (in themselves and others and in the techniques and instruments that they use for assessment and intervention) the subtle racial, class, gender, and cultural biases they may bring to their work and the way these biases influence decision-making, instruction, behavior, and long-term outcomes for students. School psychologists work to reduce and eliminate these biases where they occur.
- 5.3 School psychologists promote practices that help children of all backgrounds feel welcome and appreciated in the school and community.
- 5.4 School psychologists incorporate their understanding of the influence of culture, background, and individual learning characteristics when designing and implementing interventions to achieve learning and behavioral outcomes.

(p. 46-47)

In addition to these guidelines, the APA *Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct* (2002) and the APA *Guidelines for Providers of Psychological Services to Ethnic, Linguistic, and Culturally Diverse Populations* (1993), require that school psychologists respect ethnic and cultural differences and undertake activities that protect the rights of diverse populations (Haboush, 2007). As schools become increasingly multicultural and diverse, school psychologists play a crucial role in developing and implementing culturally competent mental health services in the schools. Working alongside educators and families, school psychologists help develop preventative mental health services for diverse students at the school-wide and classroom levels, foster problem solving strategies to promote social relationships in school, and develop interventions that concur with students of diverse backgrounds. School psychologists, therefore, play an integral role in bringing awareness of ethnic minority needs in the school setting.

## CHAPTER IV

### METHODOLOGY

This study examines the challenges of living in America as a Muslim adolescent attending public school. A qualitative hypothesis-generating approach was adopted in accordance with accepted standards for qualitative research. This study is investigative and exploratory. It is hoped that it will generate hypotheses and research questions that can be further investigated by other researchers who are interested in working with the Muslim adolescent population.

#### *Participants*

The participants in this study included five Muslim females and six Muslim males between the ages of 14 and 17, who currently attend public high school from various areas of New Jersey. Two female participants had initially signed informed consent forms to participate in the study; however, they chose not to participate in the study. One participant expressed interest in being interviewed for the study after the focus groups were completed, and therefore her responses to the interview questions were included in the study as a case study. Participants represented from differing ethnic backgrounds, which included Pakistan, Afghanistan, India, Bangladesh, and Egypt. Participants received a gift card to a bookstore as an incentive for participating in the study.

This may not be a representative sample and therefore the generalizability of the findings may be limited. However, this study is a qualitative, hypothesis-generating

study that attempts to illuminate and provide subjective knowledge and understanding on the challenges faced by Muslim teens who attend public schools in America will be emphasized rather than causal determination, prediction, and generalization.

### *Instruments*

A Demographic Sheet (See Appendix C) was administered to participants to gather information on the participants' demographics such as age, grade, country of birth, address, date of birth, ethnicity, public school attended. On the bottom of the Demographic Sheet were two questions containing a checklist of items that relate to level of religiosity and which factors, related to everyday activities (i.e., friendships, dress, parental relationships) are affected by Islamic beliefs and values.

A Focus Group Guide (See Appendix D) was utilized in order to elicit information from the Muslim adolescent participants. Focus groups have emerged as an accepted and widely used method of collecting qualitative data in social science research in the United States, Great Britain, and other countries (Morgan, 1997). Moreover, focus groups can be used with a variety of participants, including children and adolescents, ethnic and racial minorities, people with low income, and other special populations (Chiu & Knight, 1999; Green & Hart, 1999; Jarrett, 1993; Krueger, 1994). Moderators of focus groups are free to explore, probe, and stimulate discussion among participants (Patton, 1990). Thus, this approach was chosen because it provides flexibility in collecting qualitative data with a group of individuals at the same time.

The focus group guide for the present study was developed by the investigator, based on the review of the literature. The following content areas were explored in the focus group guide:

1. Exploration of typical adolescent challenges
2. Exploration of challenges that pertain to Muslim adolescents
3. Role of parents, peers, Islamic/cultural identity, American culture, and other resources on coping with challenges
4. Role of school, community (i.e., advice from an Imam), and professional resources for Muslim adolescents seeking help in coping with various stressors in the school setting.

Finally, a semi-structured interview (see Appendix E) developed by the investigator, based on the review of the literature was administered to the Imam (religious leader) of the Muslim Center of Middlesex County Mosque. The purpose of this interview was to provide a fresh, novel community outlook on Muslim adolescent challenges. The interview questions were derived in conjunction with focus group guide questions in order to elicit information on the challenges that Muslim teens face and the resources available to Muslim teens from the Islamic community, namely from the Imams who provide spiritual guidance to community members.

### *Procedures*

#### *Focus group interviews.*

Participants were recruited through advertisements placed at two mosques from demographically comparable locations within Central, NJ, Mosque A and Mosque B, as well as through the investigator's personal networks. The investigator worked closely with the President of Mosque A and the principal of the weekend Islamic school affiliated with this mosque. The principal was instrumental in actively gathering volunteers for the study. Participants recruited from Mosque A were gathered mostly through the weekend

Islamic school. These participants had served as either volunteer teachers or currently attended the school as students. Recruitment of participants from Mosque B was a challenge. Numerous attempts were made to recruit participants, including working with the weekend Islamic school officials, board members of the mosque, as well as the youth activities director. However, due to rigorous requirements in gaining access to youth from the Mosque B weekend Islamic school, the investigator was unable to acquire participants from this location.

Participants and their parents signed an informed consent form (see Appendix A) prior to completing the focus group interviews. They were offered a copy of this consent for their records. Participants were informed that the interview information was confidential and that it would be tape-recorded and transcribed later. The basics of the study were also explained. The informed consent forms were kept in a separate locked file in order to maintain confidentiality.

The investigator conducted two focus group interviews (males and females separately) at a designated location affiliated with the Muslim Center of Middlesex County mosque. The focus groups were conducted independently in order to ensure a comfortable, private, and convenient environment for the interviewees as well as to uphold the traditional Islamic value of interacting separately between genders. It was hoped that the participants would feel more inclined and relaxed in sharing their ideas in this setting.

Participants completed a demographic sheet (see Appendix C) to acquire information on their age, grade, country of birth, address, date of birth, ethnicity, public school attended. A brief checklist included on the bottom of the demographic sheet was

also completed in order to acquire additional information on religious connectedness to Islam and what factors (i.e. peer pressure, diet, dress code, etc.) may be affected by traditional Islamic values and beliefs.

The focus group interviews lasted approximately 3-3 ½ hours. Interviews were audio taped to contribute to the authenticity of the study. Participants were then assigned an “ID” number which was utilized as the sole means of identification on response materials. No identifying information was attached to the transcriptions or audiotapes. All transcripts, audio tapes, and other data collected were maintained in confidence by the investigator in a locked file and then destroyed at the end of the study. Upon conclusion of the interview, each participant was given a \$20 gift card in to a local bookstore as compensation for participating in the study.

*Interview with imam.*

The imam from Mosque A was administered an informed consent form (see Appendix B) which was subsequently locked in a file to ensure confidentiality. A semi-structured interview containing open-ended questions about challenges Muslim adolescents face, coping resources for Muslim adolescents, and the role of imams in helping Muslim teens was then conducted. The interview lasted approximately one and a half hours and was conducted at Mosque A in a private location. This interview was audio taped and later transcribed. All transcripts and other data collected from the imam was maintained in confidence by the investigator in a locked file cabinet and destroyed at the end of the study.

The role of the imam in meeting the counseling needs of Muslim communities in the United States has not been aggressively researched. However, a study conducted by

Ali, Millstein, and Marzuk (2005) indicated that, since September 11, 2001, there has been an increased need for imams to counsel Muslim persons due to discrimination. An increased need to counsel persons who were discriminated against were reported in the study by all imams with congregations in which a majority are Arab American, 60 percent of imams with congregations in which a majority are South Asian American, and 50 percent of imams with congregations in which a majority are African American.

While clergy typically play a vital role in the mental health services of minority communities, in the case of Muslim imams, this may not usually be the case as many are foreign born and struggle with new language and culture. This limitation has greatly restricted their resourcefulness and, as a result, most are limited to addressing the needs of their own linguistic group (D'Agostino, 2003). Currently, Muslims stand to gain much from integrating psychotherapy with religious thought and practice and some religious and community leaders are just beginning to take notice of this lack of integration and the value from it that their members are missing (Abu-Ras & Abu-Bader, in-press; Gorkin & Othman, 1994). Due to the emerging role of Muslim clergy in remediating the mental health needs of the Muslim community and given that imams serve as a support system on a macrolevel of the proposed ecological model of coping, it is imperative to explore their role in the support system of Muslim youth. Further insight gleaned from the community imam regarding potential stressors and coping strategies for Muslim adolescents were thus explored.

#### *Data Analysis*

The data collected were analyzed using the verbatim transcripts of the audio taped interviews with the eleven participants. It was anticipated that results from this study

would suggest hypotheses and themes which might later be tested in future qualitative and quantitative studies. Analysis of the data collected in this study was conducted according to the grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1997).

Data analyzed using the grounded theory approach is divided into three distinct, but related, processes of analysis: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. Open coding is the process by which data is examined and organized by similarities and differences. In this study, open coding entailed question by question analysis of the transcript as well as analysis of the document as a whole. The objective of open coding was to identify relevant categories and names for smaller groups of data. Categories were then collapsed under more abstract labels as a means of pulling together the groups or subcategories. Next, the data was grouped together in new combinations as part of the second stage in the process, known as axial coding. Similar to open coding, axial coding involves the continued process of defining categories. The process of axial coding was instrumental in further identifying properties and themes, which could potentially lead to theoretical formulations in future studies.

The final stage of the qualitative analysis, selective coding, was employed. Selective coding involves further collapsing of previously identified categories under main categories to form the major themes. The themes were explored to establish connections between them (Strauss & Corbin, 1997).

### *Reliability of Results*

A coding manual was developed by the investigator in order to ensure inter-rater reliability. Inter-rater reliability was assessed by an independent coder. The coder, an undergraduate research assistant, was involved in the study only for the purpose of acting

as a second coder. The coder was given a coding manual (see Appendix F) that was developed by the investigator and asked to code each question from the focus group guide. The investigator independently coded the same questions. The researcher and the coder then met to discuss discrepancies in the coding of the responses. Inter-rater reliability is defined by Huberman and Miles (2002) as the number of codes on which both coders agreed divided by the total number of agreements plus disagreements and expressed as a percentage. An 82% agreement level was achieved between the researcher and the second coder. Variability between coders is expected since certain words may be interpreted in different ways. Ultimately, all disagreements were resolved through consensus and appropriate modifications made in the coding manual.

The frequencies and percentages were computed for thirteen of the questions from each focus group. The categories used to compute these descriptive statistics were taken from the coding manual developed by the investigator.

## CHAPTER V

### RESULTS

#### *Participants' Demographics*

The participants for this study included a small sample size of four females and six males between the ages of 14-17. One subject was excluded from the data set because she joined the study after the focus groups were conducted. This participant was a female Bengali Muslim adolescent, aged 16, and going into her senior year of high school. She was born in the United States.

The median age of the rest of the participants was 15.5 years. Six participants (60%) were born and raised in the United States and four participants (40%) were raised in another country (i.e., India, Saudi Arabia, Bangladesh, and Pakistan) but migrated to the United States at a very young age. All participants were raised in an intact, supportive family environment. The ethnicities of the participants varied. Five out of the ten participants (50%) considered themselves to be of Pakistani heritage. The remaining four participants noted the following ethnic backgrounds: Two females of Bengali heritage, one female of Egyptian heritage, one female of mixed Pakistani and Afghani heritage, one male of Indian heritage, and one female of Pakistani and Indian heritage. Of note, all of the female participants in this study wore *hijab*. Three participants, two females and one male, were volunteer teachers at a weekend Islamic school for children. Seven participants were students attending weekend Islamic school classes.

Participants attended public high schools from varying areas in New Jersey. Three participants attended high school in Edison; two each were from Woodbridge and Piscataway, and one each from South Plainfield, Warren, and Scotch Plains-Fanwood. All grade levels were represented in this study. Four participants were in the 9th grade, one participant in the 10th grade, two participants in the 11th grade, and three participants in the 12<sup>th</sup> grade. In order to understand the participants better, a brief list of activities that each is involved in at school is listed below:

Participants were asked to rate themselves in terms of religious connectedness to Islam using the scale: “Very Religious”, “Somewhat Religious”, and “Not Religious At All”. Interestingly, seven of the ten participants (70%) answered “Somewhat Religious” as an approximation of religious connectedness to Islam, two of the participants (20%) answered “Very Religious”, and one participant (10%) answered “Not Religious At All”.

Participants were also asked to rate how often (Almost Always; Regularly, But Not Often; or Rarely, If At All) everyday activities, such as friendships, dress code, diet, peer pressure, sports, school activities, and parental expectations are influenced by the principles of Islam. All ten participants rated “peer pressure” as “almost always” by their Islamic beliefs. Nine out of the ten participants (90%) also rated their Islamic beliefs as “almost always” a factor when eating halal versus non-halal foods. All four female participants and two male participants (60%) rated school-related activities (prom, dances, etc.) as being “Almost Always” influenced by their Islamic values; however, four male participants (40%) felt that school-related activities were not influenced by their Islamic beliefs. Interestingly, parental expectations were rated as “Regularly, But Not Often” influenced by the principles of Islam by all six male participants and three female

participants (90%), with the exception of one female participant who claimed that parental expectations were always influenced by her Islamic upbringing.

In terms of friendships with boys, five out of the ten participants (50%), three females and two males, indicated Islam as “almost always” having an impact on choosing female friends whereas the remainder of the male participants (40%) felt that female friendships were not as often impacted by their Islamic beliefs. Of note, one female participant indicated that her Islamic principles “regularly, but not often” influenced her friendships with both boys and girls. In terms of participating in sports, two participants (20%), one male and one female, indicated that Islam was “almost always” a factor in deciding which sports to play; four participants (40%), two males and two females, indicated that sports were regularly, but not often influenced by their Islamic beliefs; four participants (40%), three males and one female, considered that participating in sports was “rarely” influenced but their Islamic beliefs. Participant responses are summarized below in Table 2:

Table 2  
Participant Rating of How Often the Principles of Islam Affect Decision Making in Regard to Everyday Matters

*Male Participants, (N=6); Female Participants, (N=4)*

Activity	Frequency								
	Almost Always			Regularly, But Not Often			Rarely, If At All		
	M	F	%	M	F	%	M	F	%
Nature of friendships with girls	2	3	50%	2	1	30%	2	-	20%
Nature of friendships with boys	1	3	40%	2	1	30%	3	-	30%

Table 2 (Continued)

Activity	Frequency								
	Almost Always			Regularly, But Not Often			Rarely, If At All		
	M	F	%	M	F	%	M	F	%
Diet (i.e., eating halal meat vs. non-halal meat)	6	3	90%	-	1	10%	-	-	-
Dress code	1	3	40%	4	1	50%	1	-	10%
Peer pressure (alcohol, drugs, dating, etc.)	6	4	100%	-	-	-	-	-	-
School related events (prom, dances, etc.)	2	4	60%	4	-	40%	-	-	-
Participating in sports	1	1	20%	2	2	40%	3	1	40%
Dealing with parental expectations	-	1	10%	6	3	90%	-	-	-

*%=Total Percentage of Responses for Each Activity per Frequency across Genders*

### *Results of the Focus Group Interviews*

This study sought to broaden and deepen our understanding of Muslim adolescents, the stressors they experience while attending public school, and their method of coping with potential challenges. The focus group data were coded and analyzed for content and themes for each questions posed to the participants.

#### *Typical Adolescent Challenges*

Participants were initially asked to discuss the challenges faced by typical adolescents who attend public school. In general, male and female participants concluded that “peer pressure” and “academic pressure” to be the most problematic experiences of the high school experience for any adolescent growing up in America.

Participant responses were categorized into major themes and then enhanced with participants' detailed responses.

*Peer pressure (drinking, drugs, partying).*

All ten participants named "peer pressure" as the single most challenging issue that teens experience during the high school years. As defined by the participants in this study, "peer pressure" includes but is not limited to, the pressure from peers to engage in drinking, partying, drug abuse, and being popular. For the male participants, peer pressure appeared to have the most impact on drinking and partying. Male respondent #2 depicted peer pressure as the following:

Peer pressure becomes a chain reaction. First, it's the partying, and then drinking, and then the drugs...it all accumulates into peer pressure...even if you explain to your friends you don't do it...they say, "Come on, man". Some of my friends understand though if I explain it [my beliefs] to them.

Respondent #4 also remarked that peer pressure is "Not just partying and drinking but also pressure to be cool...if you don't do it then people think you're not cool."

Similar to the male participants, all four female participants expressed that the pressure from peers to go partying and drinking presented as major stressors for all teens. As one female participant, Respondent #7, recounted, "Kids talk about what they do during their free time...some people think it's cool to sleep all day and say to their friends, "I went on a drinking binge this weekend."

*Popularity & self-esteem.*

Along with the pressure to engage in risky behaviors, the pressure to be popular among peers was also noted to be a major challenge for all teens, especially females. The four female participants discussed how teens are frequently concerned about what peers

think of them. In general, the female participants expressed the emotional impact of being judged by peers, especially female peers. One female participant, Respondent #10, summarized her feelings on popularity as the following: “Being cool and popular...is too much drama”. Respondent #1 noted, “I think people care too much about how kids view them....they try to change themselves to fit in or be cool or popular.” Respondent #3 also stated that “It’s harder with girls, I guess with finding themselves.”

Respondent #8 stated:

It’s harder with girls because they are way more critical...it affects your self-esteem. And the thing is...the whole boyfriend thing...it’s hard if you don’t have one.

Respondent #10 also commented that:

Girls have it harder...but boys don’t get judged...they just have to figure out how to date girls.

*Pressure for males to be in sports.*

Of the ten participants, one participant revealed how peer pressure directly affected his life in slightly different ways than mentioned above. One of the male participants, Respondent #2, commented that the added pressure on boys to excel at playing sports in his school district was tremendous. He stated that “boys are under a great deal of pressure to be good in sports and to have a good overall body...physique...so pressure to be in sports is big for guys where I go to school”.

*Pressure from media.*

During the discussion on peer pressure, one male participant, Respondent #6, expressed that the media play an important role in *indirectly* pressuring teens to engage in risky behavior:

The media is such an influential way for introducing children to drinking and drugs... There's a lot of heavy drinking in high school... and I think it's because the media influences kids... like movies portray drinking and drugs as funny so kids think it's a joke and it's okay to do... Also, I think music is very influential on kids... depending on what kind of music you listen to... it can easily influence you to do things because it makes it look okay."

### *Academic Pressure*

Along with peer pressure, all ten participants spoke of the pressures to do well academically. Academic pressure was described by the participants to include attaining good grades, getting high SAT scores, applying for colleges, dealing with teachers, and dealing with parental expectations.

### *Prioritizing.*

Of the ten participants, six respondents (60%) noted the difficulty of prioritizing academic workload with after-school activities. The female participants expressed that having to juggle school work, applying for colleges, studying for SAT's, participating in after school activities, and the overall demands of a teenager is complex and overwhelmingly emotional. One female participant, Respondent #8, who participates in various school-related activities, commented on how prioritizing her time around these activities is often a challenge:

Studying for the SAT's overwhelms you because you are dealing with other school work too... and I belong to ROTC, Model UN, and orchestra. Actually, a couple of my friends and I started a fitness club too... so it's difficult to prioritize.

Another female participant added that, "SAT's are very stressful. Your parents constantly ask you, "Did you open your SAT book?" You have to figure out what do to

and how important it is”. Female participant, Respondent #10, also summed up how the pressure to do well in school accumulates into “emotional issues”:

I think the emotional issues you go through...just dealing with the emotions in you...you are frustrated...overwhelmed, anxious, angry...overwhelmed by school work, SAT’s, parental pressure to do well academically, prioritizing homework...just everything in general is hard.

*Dealing with different teachers.*

The topic of teachers arose during the focus group held with the female participants. In general, the four female participants commented on teachers having different teaching styles and how that can affect a student’s grades. One female participant, Respondent #3, pointed out the following:

Some teachers are very bad...they don’t give a lot of work and stuff so one grade can affect your whole marking period and just in general, how they act in front of students....one of my teachers gossips with the students...teachers curse.

Respondent #7 spoke about dealing with teacher attitudes and personality styles in school, “Well in 11<sup>th</sup> grade and 12 grade they [teachers] curse... Teachers try to be cool but they’re really not... it’s unprofessional”.

*Being compared to older siblings.*

Out of the ten participants, two male participants (20%) related that parental pressure to perform well academically morphed into being compared to an older sibling. Respondent #4 related that he was constantly compared to his older brother because the elder sibling was “smart and listened to everything my parents said”. Respondent #5 indicated the overall impact of having older successful siblings produces negative influences on parents:

Older siblings are sometimes a negative influence because your parents want you to be just like your older siblings. My sister is in medical school and she's always done everything..right so...it makes it harder for me to do what I want.

In sum, when asked to name the most challenging experiences for adolescents in high school, both the ten male and female participants identified peer pressure and academic pressure. Furthermore, female participants added criticism from female peers, popularity, and prioritizing schedules as significant sources of stress for typical teens.

### *Muslim Adolescent Challenges*

When questioned about the challenges faced primarily by Muslim teens who attend public school, the ten participants in the study named issues dealing with peers, such as peer pressure, dating, popularity, and being judged by other Muslim teens as significant stressors. Most prominently, participants discussed the challenges faced when dealing with parental expectations, specifically the cultural values and traditions placed on Muslim teens. Additionally, a series of concerns pertaining to the current practice of Islam in the schools, regarding fasting, prayer, and wearing hijab, were highlighted by participants. Finally, the Muslim adolescents of this study shared their thoughts on encountering discrimination in the public schools.

#### *Peer pressure.*

As discussed earlier, the issue of peer pressure and the desire for adolescents to gain the approval of their peers is a challenging and daunting one. For the ten Muslim participants in the study, peer pressure, namely drinking and partying, was once again named as one of the most significant stressors for Muslim adolescents in high school. Largely due to the prohibition of alcohol in Islam, participants reiterated that resisting the temptation to engage in risky behaviors, such as binge drinking and partying, was a

significant challenge. As female Respondent #10 reported, “If you attend a public school, definitely partying and drinking is a problem”.

The topic of peer pressure slowly emerged into a discussion of other pressures related to peers and school-related activities, such as attending the prom. Although female participants expressed some discomfort in having to explain to peers why they would not be attending the prom, the male participants appeared less concerned over this event. Two female participants mentioned “the prom” as a school-related activity that may cause some issues between parents and Muslim teens who want to attend. Two out of the ten respondents (20%), both females, stated that the prom was “tough because everyone is asking”. In contrast to the four female participants who stated they would not attend their proms due to their Islamic beliefs and/or parental objection, the six male participants were, in general, unsure of whether or not they would attend. Three male participants (30%) discussed their experiences in attending previously school dances. One male participant, Respondent #5, stated that he had gone to his 8<sup>th</sup> grade dance, while, another participant, Respondent #3, noted the following:

My mom said “No” at first (to the 8<sup>th</sup> grade dance) but I told her I was going anyway....I told her I wouldn’t do anything...so I went. No one really danced...there was a volleyball court at the back of the school...so a lot of us just played volleyball instead.

As a follow up question on the prom, the investigator asked whether or not any of the male participants’ sisters would be allowed to go to a school dance. All six male respondents stated, “No”. Respondent #5 went on to state, “My mom would flip out if my sister wanted to go to a school dance”. Respondent #6 also remarked,

“No one really goes to dances...it’s kind of lame...but I went to my 8<sup>th</sup> grade dance and these kids were like twelve or thirteen and the way they were dancing...was not so good...it all comes back to the media.”

*Friendships.*

During the discussion of peer pressure, the issue of friendships with Muslim and non-Muslim peers arose. Four out of the ten participants (20%), all females, expressed the frustration of being judged by other Muslim teens. In fact, one female participant, Respondent #10 noted that she would rather not spend time with other Muslim girls from her school:

I don’t know why but the Muslim girls are always asking me a ton of questions. The Freshman Muslim girls in my school follow me around and talk behind my back...like they want to see me stumble.

Respondent #7’s shared her experiences and opinion of having Muslim and non-Muslim friends:

“In my school, there are only a few Muslims, not that many...I don’t know why but I kind of avoid the Muslims in my school...I don’t why.

My parents are more lenient with Muslim friends, I think non-Muslim friends have a negative influence on me...my parents make *me* influence other girls. I used to go out a lot with them [non-Muslim friends] all the time over the weekend but now I realize they do have an influence on me...they really do... I’ve tried to become a better Muslim and keep my distance from them...you know...less hanging out....Muslim friends are a better influence...in a good way.

Four out of the ten participants (40%), all males, shared their opinion about having Muslim and non-Muslim friends. Respondent #1 stated that:

Being friends with other Muslim kids...I would rather not hang out with other Muslim kids in my school...I have close Muslim friends...but not really in my school. I hate it when some Muslim kids try to act like someone they are not [referring to dressing a certain way or trying to be too American]. It’s better to hang out with different kids...it’s better...you have different interests.

Respondent #4 noted the following about having a variety of friends:

You do whatever is right in situations so in the future you can tell your kids what to avoid...I feel it's better to be part of both sides [have friends who are Muslim and non-Muslim]

Respondent #5 added that,

[Muslim] Guys don't judge other Muslim guys...but Muslim parents often judge other Muslim kids...parents want kids to hang out with Muslim kids...most of them are smart and annoying. My parents say, "Why don't you try to hang out with Muslim kids...why don't you hang out with the kids who are smart? Muslim kids are snobbish and preppy...they are smart but I don't want to hang out with them.

Respondent #1 noted,

My friends are mostly American [white]. I usually don't talk to people who are Muslim...there's one in my grade and he's so annoying.

I hate when parents want you to hang out with only Muslim kids...they're like the worse kids...and then you get compared...and your parents don't know who they really are...like my mom is always like, "Why don't you become friends with so-and-so?" But she doesn't know what these kids really do.

Lastly, Respondent #3 shared the following:

My brother participated in a speech competition [at the weekend Islamic school]...and there was this kid who won the speech competition... so my dad forcibly took us to his house because he won the speech competition...my dad said you should be friends with him. My dad did not know that this kid had later on gotten expelled from our public school. You can't force friendships...it's just the people you are friends with.

Later in the discussion, four of the participants (40%), all female, expressed their disdain for Muslim adolescents who have strayed from their Islamic roots in order to adapt to the American culture. For instance, one female participant, Respondent #8, commented on how certain Muslim adolescents undergo an "identity crisis", where they try to assimilate

too much into the American culture, which in turn, adds pressure to other Muslims who are trying hard to remain devoted to their Islamic upbringing:

They [Muslim adolescents] think they are cool and don't want to associate with other Muslims...their parents are strict and they want to let loose.... Muslim kids date all the time...but I don't know why. They are not supposed to be doing it...why are they doing it? It makes me mad because I can't date but others are doing it and then people are like, "Why can't you date? So and so has a boyfriend...so why can't you?" I doubt their parents even know.

I'm Muslim in my class and my other friend is Muslim and they try to be all cool and everything...they go and drink...I don't understand why they act like that in front of other Muslims...There are some who are religious and some who are crazy...I don't know...and it's like they don't want to be known by how they act...they just think they are cool.

Female participant, Respondent #10, further added that "Some [Muslim] boys and girls have boyfriends and girlfriends...Muslim kids are trying stuff...like having sex...and getting pregnant."

#### *Cultural/Religious Expectations of Muslim Parents*

When questioned about the challenges faced primarily by Muslim teens who attend public school, all ten participants remarked that interactions with their peers, especially the opposite sex, presents a considerable amount of stress for Muslim teens due to the cultural upbringing of Muslim parents. Participants described how their parents' cultural beliefs had played a significant role in Muslim teens interacting with their peers in multiple situations.

#### *Dating/arranged marriage.*

When asked to describe how male/female relationships had affected the participants, all ten participants shared how the cultural and religious views of their parents have impacted their lives. For the four female participants, the topic of "dating" did not entail the typical conversation of boyfriend and girlfriend. Although it was

agreed that not having a boyfriend in high school is challenging for Muslim females, the female participants firmly stated that the traditional concept of “dating” was not Islamic. Instead, “arranged marriages” or having a courtship, was the preferred method of finding a lifelong partner.

The four female participants offered an enlightened, “modernistic” explanation of how Islamic arranged marriages or courtships are representative of “dating” for Muslim teens. Two of the female participants described how they have tried to explain the concept of arranged marriages to the peers. Respondent #8 recalls:

When I was in third grade people were like, “Oh, you can’t have a boyfriend or anything ....I was like “No” and then they were like, “Well, how are you going to get married? Are you going to turn into a nun?” I was like, “No.” They’re like an arranged marriage is with a person you don’t know and then the first time you meet them is on the wedding night.... that’s what they think...I’m telling them that’s not what an arranged marriage is. They don’t get it...they think Muslim women can’t have boyfriends...they don’t get the concept....That’s why I explain, it’s no physical stuff.

Another participant, Respondent #9 discussed how a project in school that required students to research arranged marriages, led to her revealing to peers what Islamic “dating” entails:

I was in English class and my teacher said you have to write on a topic, a paper on “Is love science or an arranged marriage and stuff like that...she gave us an article and we watched a 20/20 episode on arranged marriages...and so I raised my hand and said I’m going to get an arranged marriage..so I spent like half the class explaining to them how we would meet...a lot of them were stunned... I tried to explain to them it hasn’t been decided from birth who I’m going to marry...I try to explain that I’m going to have suitors and stuff like that...I don’t know who I’m going to marry...but I’m going to get suitors...and they are going to come to my parents...then we meet...and then we’ll decide if we want to get married or not.

Everywhere you look there are boy/girls kissing, and girls/girls kissing in the hallways”...My friend says, I don’t know what to do...If you look down at the

floor you look like an idiot and if you look at them then...Just don't do it in public.

Respondent #10 shared her belief of “arranged marriages” as more characteristic of a cultural tradition than an Islamic decree. She goes on to discuss the importance of adhering to her Islamic values as well as parental guidance when dealing with dealing with the opposite sex:

It's more cultural than Islamic. My parents are kind of liberal...you're not allowed to date...but if you like someone...then tell me. You have to get to know the person through a chaperone, it's like a courtship.

I think kids that feel imprisoned make the religion seem weirder...they put a negative light on everything...for us who understand our religion we explain it in a good way...they make Islam look like something to try to escape from...for other girls they are so desperate to have a boyfriend so they make their parents seem not cool about it...If someone told me your parents would freak out if a guy calls you, I would say there are probably more guys in my phone book than girls...and my parents know every one of them...and I can even talk to my mom about my guy friends...and she would say maintain your distance...my mom would say “Fear Allah, Fear Allah”.

One male participant, Respondent #6, shared how his sister had found her fiancé:

My sister met her husband from an online dating thing...my sister didn't tell my mom that...they didn't do anything bad...they sat and talked...but they're getting married...it's dating, but as long as you know your limits, it's fine.

Three of the male participants (30%) stated not being allowed to date was a struggle.

More specifically, these three male participants shared their experiences in dealing with parents and their cultural expectations. Respondent #5, whose best friend is female and non-Muslim, revealed how difficult it is to dealing with parental restrictions on having female friends:

In a lot of ways dating is hard, for Muslims especially...we're not allowed to do as much as other kids are...not as if I want to...not bad stuff...I don't think there's anything wrong with it...I mean it's okay to talk to girls.

Why do [Muslim] parents over-exaggerate what kids want to do? In general, parents get all over about stuff...if I say, "Mom, my best friend is a girl"...she's like, "What have you been doing?" It's like, Mom, I was just at my friend's house...then it's thirty questions.

Respondent #2 also spoke of his struggles with wishing to date girls, and in a jovial manner described how parental restrictions have encumbered his life:

I'm not allowed to talk to Muslim girls, or girls, in general, and it's hard because it's natural. I'm a guy...it's supposed to be natural...it's tempting...but then again I don't want to be living in Pakistan for the rest of my life--my mom threatened that if I talked to girls or had a girlfriend she would send me to Pakistan to live. I just don't know what to do...when I have kids I don't know what I'm going to do about it.

In contrast, one male participant, Respondent #1, spoke poignantly about his outlook on dating and the importance of upholding traditional Islamic beliefs when interacting with females:

You shouldn't be in a relationship unless you are really serious [about marriage]...and going out with girls unless their parents are there...I wouldn't do that...my parents don't really trust me on this...but I don't [go out with girls]...I'm not going to judge anyone on this...but my high school friends know this...I'm not allowed to have a girlfriend and I just explain it to them and they're cool with it... if you try too hard to fit in it gets harder...once you explain it to them..they're fine...I have no pressure about this because I explain it to them...If it's a courtship and the girl's parents are there then that's better..if you are really in a serious relationship that's one thing...but to sneak out behind their parents backs...all these people I know who have girlfriends and boyfriends...their parents don't know...even the non-Muslim kids...if their parents knew they would kill them too.

*Going out with friends and reputation of girls.*

The "cultural clash" between parents and Muslim teens was further emphasized by the four female participants in the study, who felt that Muslim females are often prevented from having typical teen experiences, such as going out with friends, due to parental fear of a tainted reputation for their daughters. Female Respondent #8,

articulated her struggle to understand and abide by her parents and grandmother's cultural beliefs of upholding a girl's reputation:

My parents keep comparing me to my older brother and they don't get that he's a boy and I am a girl...and he's really lazy...he never goes out...I want to hang out with my friends...Then, with projects my mom says, "Well, your brother never had to do this...he's been through this too" ... and because he doesn't like to go out...it always happens to me..even with friends I have known for a long time...I'm never allowed to stay out that late. Every time I go out they're like, "You're a girl, you should stay at home". I really don't like that because I feel like it's too restricting...because if they want to trust me then I won't have the opportunity if they keep me at home.

Even if I'm at a Muslim's person's house and even though I'm getting older I can't stay out till 10:30 p.m. or 11 p.m. because then I get these phone calls...I don't get it...they're like it's culture and you shouldn't be doing it and I keep saying other Muslim girls do it [go out with friends].

Last year, there as a trip to Florida. It was a big trip and two Muslim girls that I have known for a long time were going on the trip and I told my parents and they were like, "No you're not going because it's too far and you have to stay overnight." They don't want me sleeping over anywhere. I was so upset and I cried because I would understand if there were no other Muslim girls going, but two Muslim girls were going and my parents know them and everything and I couldn't go. I kept asking them why I can't do the same things like other Muslim girls do. Their response is always, "This is how I was brought up so this is how you are going to be brought up. It's culture and Muslim girls don't stay out."

I hate one thing about my family...it's about the reputation of the girl...it's so big in my family and so annoying...My mom says your grandma is over and she's going to see you going out with this one...you should be at home...last week it was my friend's birthday..and my mom told my grandma it was a Muslim girl's birthday and it wasn't...I don't know...reputation is so big in their minds, that's why I guess they don't let me go anywhere....and my grandma has this thing, "A Muslim girl is like a diamond....like a treasure. You should stay like that. No one should be able to open it and see who you are."

My parents are so caught up on how other people think of you. Basically, my parents worry and say to me, "If other Muslim people find out that you go out with your friends then your reputation will be destroyed and no one will want to marry you". People aren't like that anymore; they don't want girls who are stuck in a closet. My grandmother says, "No, a girl should stay at home. They [suitors for marriage] are going to look at who you are if you go out a lot." I don't know why she's so concerned about marriage and everything.

Respondent #9, as well, described her experiences in dealing with the cultural gap of Muslim parents and reputation:

Culture plays a big role. I used to go out to the movies with my American friends and every time we went out they would want to have a little dinner afterwards...and it would be right around the movie theatre like to a diner to get something to eat but they [my parents] would want me home right the movie was finished. As soon as I walked out the door they would pick me up. I would find myself lying to them and say the movie is still going on and I would be sitting and eating.

Finally, Respondent #10 revealed her experience in dealing with cultural restrictions:

My parents worry that if I am out doing something then what if someone calls and asks “Why is she out late?” Sometimes I have to stay after school and my mom is like, “You have to come” and then I tell her, “No, I have to stay at school”. Usually they are okay but then they would say what if someone calls and wants to know where you are...and they say your daughter is outside. I say, “First of all, no one keeps tabs on me, and follows me to school, and knows everything I do.”

*Wearing hijab.*

Three out of the ten participants (30%) discussed how their appearance has impacted their lives. More specifically, two female participants described their first experiences in deciding to wear the *hijab*. Respondent #7 spoke about her struggles with deciding to wear *hijab*:

I don't know, to tell you the truth, I don't know why I've been going through a phase. I started [wearing hijab] when I was in 8<sup>th</sup> grade. I felt like once I started I was so strong...I know I'm right but sometimes I feel like I'm so young and I should show off my hair...especially for my friends too...every time they see my hair at my house...they say, “Why do you wear it, you're so much prettier without it.” That kind of gets to me and I should have more confidence that I look good in hijab too...but I don't know. I know I'm never going to take it off because I don't want to.

Respondent #9 also described how her teacher reacted on her first day of school with *hijab*:

I started wearing hijab last year, in the summer. I had this one teacher who I had two years ago and on the first day of school, when she saw me, she started yelling at me. She said, “No!! Your pretty face, I can’t believe you did this!” I was just standing there looking at her. I walked away and she came up to me again. She’s kind of a gossipy kind of teacher and everyone’s best friend...so I knew what she was going to say. She started laughing and was like, “Did your sister start wearing hijab too?” Are you going to come in with a burqa [full Islamic covering, that covers the face] next year?

One male participant, Respondent #6 commented on how being an individual is important:

I think dressing the way you want to...people judge you...like my hair is dyed in the front and my mom was really mad at me...but you shouldn’t care...you should just be who you are.

*Muslim teens lashing out against parents.*

In dealing with parental cultural clashes, three female participants discussed how certain Muslim teens feel trapped by the restriction placed on them by their parents and may, in turn, rebel or “lash out” against parents. For instance, Respondent #10 described how she has maintained an open relationship with her parents concerning her male peers:

Some kids are ready to lash out at their parents...about guys I am open about that with my parents..I tell my mom I talk to this guy and that guy...once she approves them...she approves them...at school I can talk to boys about school...like a project.

Respondent #7 noted that, “You know how you feel trapped....some kids feel trapped...and that’s why they go overboard.” As well, Respondent #9 reiterated that, “Because of [Muslim] parents’ strictness...they [Muslim teens] do whatever they can to lash out.”

*Post 9/11: Practicing Islam in School*

When asked to comment on how the events of 9/11 have affect their Muslims in America, the ten participants discussed personal experiences with racism among peers,

justifying Islam to peers, prayer, fasting, and dealing with teachers in the public school setting.

*Discrimination in the schools.*

The ten participants described their experiences with racism in the school setting and in general, offered their views about how Muslims are viewed by Americans. One male participant, Respondent #1, described how being called a “terrorist” had become “normal” for him:

You get used to it. People call me terrorist all the time. You hear it in class but it doesn't phase you after awhile. You just have to keep trying to explain yourself and explain Islam.

Respondent #10 shared her experiences with being called a “terrorist” during a class:

In 8<sup>th</sup> grade, someone made a comment about terrorism and then kids were whispering to each other. Then, someone asked me, jokingly, “Are you're a terrorist?” Then, someone said something like, “All terrorists speak Arabic, and then I said “Well, I don't speak Arabic”. You could tell from my expression that it offended me...and she noticed that and she apologized.”

Respondent #3 spoke about her experiences with racism:

I did a project in school about the Oklahoma City bombings where students had to choose a terrorist from two pictures, one picture was of Timothy McVeigh and one was of my brother who had a beard. I asked my classmates, “Who do you think is a terrorist?” and no one responded because everyone knew they would pick my brother because he had a beard and I said “Come on guys, really, who would you pick? And one guy raised his hand and said, “I pick that person” and I said, “Well, that's my brother”. You could tell that they all wanted to say my brother...but they didn't want to say it.

I experienced a lot of racism in middle school. I remember this one kid in seventh grade in my math class. He used to sit next to me and he would make fun of me every day and the teacher would not say a thing. He would call me a terrorist everyday...and the teacher would just walk by. I was really shy at that time and he would just make fun of me right in front of the teacher and she wouldn't say anything.

Respondent #7 shared her experiences with discussing Islam in the classroom:

If we talk about the Gaza strip in class and I defend Palestine and things like that, I get ripped apart. They [classmates] don't say it to my face, they really respect me a lot but I am sure they talk behind my back."

I had a history teacher and he would say, "We're going to learn about Islam." He should not even have been teaching about Islam...he doesn't know anything about Islam. These are the four daily practices of Islam...jihad...you can't marry more than four wives...you can't drink alcohol...and eat pork...it was four things that you know...that's not looked upon so good in America. I used to answer him back but in a nice way...he wasn't racist, but I don't know.

Three of the ten participants (30%) felt that the world has gained a better perspective of Islam and Muslims post 9/11. Respondent #6 expressed a more optimistic view of how Muslims teens are treated in public schools:

Usually, people have to say they're Muslim, because really, other people don't recognize it off the bat. Other teens wouldn't expect that you're going through any of these problems we talked about. I think that as we're going through the years, people in school are becoming more accepting of Muslims—they don't make fun of you.

Respondent #3: stated that, "People read more about Islam and understand it better now."

Respondent #1 noted that:

The events of 9/11 have attracted attention to Islam. Back then it was in the shadow. No one knew what Islam was. Now, there are more converts and more knowledge.

*Fasting and prayer.*

In general, most of the participants did not express significant problems with fasting or prayer in school. In regard to fasting, all ten participants expressed that staff and peers were supportive of Muslim students fasting during Ramadan. One female participant, Respondent #10, commented on how she responds to inquiries from peers on

whether fasting is forced on Muslim children. She stated that, “They don’t realize I want to fast...you know...they think that I’m forced to do it.”

Regarding prayer, eight out of the ten participants (80%) expressed that praying in school does not present with any conflicts and is supported by teachers and staff. Two female participants mentioned several incidents where they wanted to pray but could not.

Respondent #10 shared this story:

Some people don’t get it. I go to the nurse’s office to pray. She and I are really close. There’s a room in the back...so she just lets me walk in and go in there and pray. One day, a teacher walks in and she came in and saw me praying and gave me a dirty look. She kept asking, “Can I come in? I couldn’t stop my prayer so I didn’t answer. She got pissed because she couldn’t go in...you’d think she’d know.”

Respondent #9 stated the following:

Some teachers get angry because I have lunch and I can’t pray during lunch because it’s not Zuhur time. I would have to miss part of the same class everyday...and you know...they get kind of angry...They say you can’t miss class, they get angry because I have lunch during prayer, they think you are skipping class.

### *Coping Strategies of Muslim Adolescents*

Participants were asked if they had ever experienced feelings of depression, anxiety, or other feelings of distress when trying to cope with the issues discussed during the group interviews. Eight out of the ten participants (80%) stated that they have never experienced feelings of depression, anxiety, or major distress from the issues mentioned. However, two female participants stated that the process of wearing *hijab* had been a stressful time where varying levels of depression and anxiety had been experienced.

Respondent #7 stated the following:

That phase I was going through about hijab. I just kept on thinking about it

and always thinking...why should I wear it...I'm so young...and I was kind of feeling depressed...not really depressed but gloomy...and down...I would talk to my older sister.

Respondent #9 also spoke about the challenges of wearing hijab for the first time and how she felt after leaving the class where her teacher had expressed disapproval of her wearing the head covering: After wearing hijab...I started thinking...I hate all of you guys [classmates]...I just want to leave...I can't wait till I graduate...I hated everybody...the rest of the day you could tell...If I walked into the class after that period...I was the worst, bitter person ever...I couldn't wait till I graduated...I would talk to my little sister because we share a room and she could understand.

One male participant, Respondent #1 stated the following:

I have never really experienced depression or anxiety for any of these issues. It's kind of not permanent...you just take it as it comes.

Another male participant, Respondent #2 also noted, "I don't experience depression or anxiety ...not this stuff...I've gotten used to it."

#### *Role of Parents, Family, and Peers in Coping*

When asked to discuss the role of parents in coping with any of these issues, nine out of the ten participants (90%) stated that they would most probably not confide in their parents when faced with the challenges discussed. However, most participants stated that they could rely on their peers for comfort or advice. Siblings were also noted to be likely resources for the participants in times of need. Below are responses from the participants on the role of parents, siblings, and peers in their lives in coping with stressors faced while attending public school.

Respondent #1:

My parents trust me...I don't discuss things with them often...sometimes...I would tell them where I'm going...if it's a study group...I don't really offer information.

With friends who are non-Muslim...if you explain like the things...if I go to a friend's house and explain its prayer time and then they understand...it's

awkward the first time but by now everyone knows. I keep explaining it to my non-Muslim friends.

Respondent #2:

Parents are not an option...I keep everything hidden from them...but then they'll think of me more differently. If I tell them stuff they'll be more strict. I wouldn't really talk to my White friends but there's my friend [Muslim] who I have known forever... who is two years older than me...and he's more street smart than book smart and I can go to him...he's my main source of knowledge...like with girls and drugs...he's like wait it out...he just knows.

Respondent #4:

My parents trust me...they know I won't do anything...with my mom and dad...they would just be scared that I got hurt...I haven't had to deal with any of these things...I haven't been pressured to drink or smoke because I stay away from kids who are pot-heads...if there's something that's bothering me maybe I may hint to my older brother...but I mostly keep everything inside.

Respondent #5:

With us being Muslims and our parents being strict we have a lot to face against them...I don't want to go up to my parents...my friend [who is White] is like my sister...she is the only person who would listen to me...people would beat on me and were really cruel...she really listened a lot...she was going through the same thing...same house problems...I got really fed up with these kids...and I just kept it in...and my friends were always there for me...they told me to vent.

Respondent #6:

My best friend and sister. I can talk to her [sister] about anything and everything. I can also talk to my best friend who can make me think about it in a different way and think about things.

Respondent #7:

I can't tell my mom everything...because sometimes she says, "You know what, just say "Allah hu Akbar" and go read Quran, let's read Quran with each other right now... I just can't...Every time, for everything? It's true...I know she'll always be there and she's a really good mom but sometimes she's like...and I love her a lot but not to seek guidance.

Respondent #9:

I don't feel comfortable talking to my mom...about anything. Every time I try to talk to my mom about something...she says, "Just ignore it". That's the only advice she can ever give me...she ignores things...I can't get any info from her.

Respondent #10

I talk to my older sister. I can tell her things I may not be able to tell my mom. I can talk to each member of my family about different things. With my mom I can talk about girl stuff. With my brother I can talk about boy things. With my Dad, he studied here so he can understand the American phenomenon. What is this happening...so my Dad is totally happy to hear me rambling. I can talk to him about academic things because he went to school here.

One of the male participants, Respondent #3 stated that he does not rely on anyone to talk about his problems:

I don't really talk to anyone. I just bottle up everything. I've stopped caring...sometimes I pray...it's just a calming experience. I got pissed off at this guy once and I just...I pray when I am extremely...ready to explode...I wouldn't talk to an imam...I wouldn't talk to my mom or siblings.

The four female participants also noted that having female Muslim friends outside of the public school arena, particularly from the weekend Islamic school, are a positive influence and significant source of support. Respondent #8 stated the following:

When you come here [weekend Islamic school] there are other girls your age. You know, you're not alone. You've known them for awhile and they've gone through the same thing every day and you can talk about stuff with them...there are other people like you. You can talk to your Muslim friends.

#### *Influence of Islamic Identity on Coping*

When asked to describe what role their Islamic identity has played in coping with issues, nine out of ten participants (90%) stated that Islam has a positive influence on managing any challenges that may arise while attending public school. More specifically, four of the female participants stated that having a Muslim cohort of friends was instrumental in coping with these issues. Moreover, four of the male participants described the benefits of Islamic prayer and the solace in knowing that God exists as a means to cope with potential stressors. Below are the responses from the participants:

Respondent #1:

It's who you are...how does it not affect you...I think of myself as Muslim and I identify myself as Muslim then every decision I make and every problem I face I will think about it through an Islamic lens.

Respondent #2:

God is...being on your side and I figure that that stuff actually works, and when I'm feeling bad really bad, like when I thought I would fail Spanish class and I prayed all night, in the end it works out...then my Mom and Dad says "God knows best, so that's what I think too.

Respondent #3:

I think that no matter what you do, God's always doing what's best for you. So if you fail, maybe it's best for you.

Respondent#4:

Actually, Islam impacts everything I do. If I have to make a decision, I'll determine if its halal or haraam [prohibited in Islam]. Islam plays a really big part of my life...I'm Muslim. I can't deny it. If I have a problem, I'll pray extra nafl [prayers].

Respondent #5:

As a Muslim you have a lot of discrimination, a lot of propaganda...the government is brainwashing people against Muslims. Kids and teenagers mold it into their form of discrepancy....They say, "Oh you bombed this"...and when you tell them what goes on in your own country [Pakistan] they don't believe you...the government is showing what is happening to America...our kids watch that but everyone has to realize that Muslim kids are also affected...their families...are affected by the propaganda in America.

Respondent #7:

"It doesn't make it unbearable, having other Muslim kids makes it easier."

Respondent #10:

The more people you have the better [Muslim friends]...when you are alone you don't have someone to advise you.

One participant, Respondent #6, expressed that Islam was not influential in coping with stressors or in dealing with problems in school. He noted the following:

It doesn't have a big impact. I pray because I have to. It doesn't affect me that much. I will choose what I am comfortable with.

*Influence of American Culture on Coping*

When asked what role the American culture has played in coping with the issues mentioned, four out of the ten participants (40%) noted that the American culture had a minimal role in how they cope with these issues:

Respondent #3:

To me culture isn't really that important in coping, I just do whatever I feel like...American culture or Pakistani culture, none of it really makes an impact...but with my parents...I get into large arguments with my parents over culture because if it's not part of the religion it's not necessary...you can do it and it might make you feel better...but I don't particularly care for it.

Respondent #4:

Well, actually it doesn't really play a role but I will take it and use Islam to filter whatever is good and whatever is bad...then I'll use it...why not? The base will always be Islam...if anything goes away from that then I won't do it...if there's nothing wrong in it [American culture]...then why not?

Respondent #5:

The American doesn't play as big a role as it should. To me my Islamic culture is far more important than anything else. I'm always going to believe that my roots is Islam.

Respondent #6:

I don't believe that America has a culture...because America is so diverse...it's a mix of cultures...so you are always going to find something that is going to influence you and it can be any part of a culture.

American culture really pushes you toward having becoming like them. It pushes you toward being liberal and losing your culture. I don't know if that's helping but definitely influences you in one way or another.

Five out of the ten participants (50%) expressed that the American culture actually makes it more difficult to cope with the challenges discussed. All four female participants agreed that the American culture was responsible for the challenges they face, partly due to the negative perspective that the American media has put on Islam. Moreover, the female participants emphasized that their American peers are “spoiled” because they do not have the added stressors that Muslim teens have. The following observations were made from the female participants:

Respondent #7:

After a while American kids don't have limits...we're more ready for the real world than them...they are given everything...they are so comfortable because this is their country...but for us we have different backgrounds so we have to reconcile our lives.

Respondent #8:

I hate it when they [American kids] act like their life sucks. They don't have to worry about anything...they haven't gone through anything...they just do whatever they want. And then when they ask you something like, "Are you going to the prom?" I'm like, "I don't think I can" and they're like, "What?!" Like it's such a big shock and yet the littlest things bother them. They do anything they want...it's annoying sometimes...American kids are spoon fed. I hate when they say "my life sucks".

Respondent #9:

Some of my friends had to fill out college applications and their parents did the envelopes for them...I didn't know how to do those things...I have to figure it out myself...

Respondent #10:

American kids are spoiled...I would rather have limits..I would rather control myself. We have different backgrounds so it's harder for us.

One male participant, Respondent #2, also articulated that the stress of balancing his parent's cultural/religious values with his affinity toward being American made it difficult for him:

One part that I really differ from my parents is Pakistani culture versus American culture. I follow Islam but anything that's not in it...My parents always say, "All Pakistani people do this." I will argue with my parents all day about that.

In some cases it makes it worse...like with Islamic, Pakistani culture...and in some cases like peer pressure and the stuff we talked about before, the American culture makes it worse, and then parents don't make it better.

With socializing, the American culture makes it better but then Mom and Dad and Pakistan makes it worse...like talking to your friends, what you do in your spare time, how you dress, basically your everyday life.

### *Resources in School*

Participants were asked the likelihood of accessing a school professional, whether the person is a guidance counselor, school psychologist, teacher, or other staff member during times of stress, all ten participants stated that they would not seek help from a school staff member. Two female participants noted that they feared being misunderstood because of their Islamic background:

Respondent #7:

If I were to say I'm having a problem at home, they would say you are terrorists and call the police or DYFS or something....because they would be racist---they'd say your Dad is beating you up.

Respondent #10:

They [school staff] don't understand... they think because you're Muslim, your dad has this big beard and he's beating you up every day to wear hijab.

When asked to name who the participants would seek help from in the school setting if provided the opportunity, six out of ten participants (60%) stated that they would seek help from a teacher, but mostly for academic-related issues. Two participants (20%) stated that would seek help from a teacher for peer-related issues such as bullying.

Three male participants asserted that they would seek from a guidance counselor for

academic related issues but not for personal issues, such as the one discussed in the group interviews. Lastly, one male participant insisted that even when given the opportunity, he would not seek any help from school staff. Instead, he would talk to his friends.

#### *Resources in the Community*

When asked if participants would be willing to seek help from a professional (i.e, therapist, psychologist, social worker, etc.), nine out of ten participants (90%) stated that they would seek professional help for the issues discussed, but only if the professional was of Muslim background. Participants were also asked if they would seek help from an Imam in their community. Nine out of ten participants (90%) stated that they would not seek help from an imam because of lack of open-mindedness in discussing issues related to the American culture or typical adolescent related issues. One female participant, Respondent #10 stated;

I would seek help from an imam if the issue related to family or parents, because there are a lot of good things that the imam could say with family because he has one as well. I'm not sure if I would ask for help with problems in school though. I think those types of topics would be just kind of weird talking with an Imam, especially because I'm a girl.

A synopsis of the challenges distinctive to Muslim versus typical adolescents, as discussed by the participants, are summarized below in Table 3:

Table 3  
A Comparison of Challenges Distinctive to Muslim Versus Typical Adolescents Who Attend Public School

<p><u>Shared Similarities of Challenges Faced by Typical and Muslim Adolescents</u></p> <p><i>Academic Pressure</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Prioritizing school-related activities, homework, sports, clubs</li> <li>▪ Dealing with differing teacher styles</li> <li>▪ Being compared to older siblings by parents</li> <li>▪ Attaining good grades, getting into a good college, performing well on SAT's</li> <li>▪ Parental pressure to perform well academically</li> </ul> <p><i>Peer Pressure</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Resist engaging in risky behaviors such as drinking, drugs, partying, having sex, getting pregnant, etc.</li> <li>▪ Peer acceptance; popularity; "being cool"</li> <li>▪ For males, the pressure to excel in sports</li> <li>▪ For females, dealing with "harsh" criticism from female peers; issues with self-esteem</li> <li>▪ Media influence to drink, do drugs, and party</li> </ul>
<p><u>Challenges Distinctive to Muslim Adolescents</u></p> <p><i>Peer Pressure</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Additional pressure to resist drinking, drugs, and partying because of prohibition of alcohol and drugs in Islam.</li> <li>▪ Parental limitations on Muslim males and females attending parties and interacting with the opposite sex (e.g., prom, dances); may impact peer acceptance.</li> <li>▪ Identity negotiation issues experienced through assimilation of American and ethno-religious culture; may lead to rejection or scrutiny from other Muslim peers.</li> </ul> <p><i>Cultural/Religious Parental Expectations</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Muslim teens may become confused about cultural/religious expectations and reject their religious beliefs or rebel against parental expectations.</li> <li>▪ Muslim teens are generally restricted from dating, which may produce additional stress because of the desire to be popular and "fit in" with peers; instead, "arranged marriages" are later orchestrated by parents through supervised courtships between males and females; homosexuality is prohibited in Islam and therefore, very rarely discussed among Muslim families.</li> <li>▪ Females may be limited from spending time with friends or completing school projects outside of the home; preservation of a female's reputation is valued by Muslim families.</li> </ul>

Table 3 (Continued)

*Practice of Islam in School: Post 9/11*

- Muslim teens require designated area for prayer; may need special permission to miss portion of class
- Muslim teens who fast during Ramadan may require special accommodations when playing sports (e.g., limited practice time, missed practice) or other school-related activities (e.g., missing lunchtime and going to the library instead).
- Females who wear or contemplate wearing hijab may experience discrimination by peers/staff members and experience issues regarding self-esteem and appearance.
- Muslims teens are often targets of various forms of bullying where being called a “terrorist” by peers has become commonplace for some Muslim teens.
- The misrepresentation of Islam and Muslims in teaching about the religion in school may lead Muslim teens to feel discriminated against, mistrustful of teachers, and the need to defend their religion.
- Muslim teens must often explain or justify their Islamic beliefs to peers and staff members in school which may result in embarrassment or discomfort in having to defend their religion.

*Results from Interview with Imam*

An interview with the Imam from Mosque A was conducted to gain further insight, on a more global level, of the issues faced by Muslim adolescents who attend public schools. The Imam was asked similar questions as the participants, which included typical adolescent challenges, issues faced by Muslim adolescents, the coping strategies of Muslim teens, and the role of an Imam in the lives of the Muslim adolescent community. The responses from the Imam are summarized below:

*Typical Adolescent Challenges*

When asked what he thought were the most challenging issues faced by typical teens in America, the Imam spoke about bullying and lack of basic moral teaching to the youth in America:

Hearing from the news and with minimal contact with other children, I would have to go with the media, and that is bullying, which is coming out on the news.

Perhaps it doesn't reach the attention of authorities, but the schools don't seem to know how to stop them. This is because of lack of moral teachings and I think things are getting worse...like cheating on exams...all of these electronic devices makes it easier to cheat.

### *Challenges Faced by Muslim Adolescents*

When asked what he thought were the most challenging issues faced by Muslim teens in America, the Imam stated that the lack of basic Islamic teachings at home and a dual identity, or portraying themselves in one way at home but in another way when in school, were the most problematic for Muslim teens:

In school, religion is not taught. A religious void is there which is not made up for at home. It doesn't seem that there is enough religious instruction at home, which is not enough.

For other children [non-Muslim], if parents do take them to church, perhaps once a week, there will hear a sermon, which is not sufficient. Muslim children who attend public school, some parents bring them to weekend school, and there is not sufficient time to give them moral and religion training. The Muslim children do not get brought to the mosque regularly, so there is a disconnect with religious teachings.

That is one aspect of it...religious knowledge and moral and spiritual training, is not sufficient—in general. The way society is headed there is a spiritual and moral decline that kids are faced with. Generally, there is no guidance. So, very often Muslim teens are faced with moral dilemmas and see others involved in things...like peer pressure...and children are left without guidance and they experiment...it's not healthy for them.

Islam has definite teachings...how boys and girls relate to one another...some other teachings that are extended from that...like speaking...like how to dress...lowering of gaze. Even though many of our Muslim children...who attend Islamic [weekend] school...and learn from their parents...in a theoretical way, it's a difficult challenge. Unless there is a teacher present or adult...the kids are unsupervised. How they interact with each other is up to them. So they will be meeting and speaking to each other in an unsupervised way. What you see on TV, their minds are being programmed...it's a general reflection of society and it's not good. The programs on TV always have some kind of boy-girl relationship represented...even the Disney channel.

When asked if Muslim children are influenced by the media, the Imam stated the following:

Definitely. The extra challenge, at home, perhaps even in Non-Muslim homes, again is teaching a moral standard. The children, especially when younger, want to obey these standards, especially in front of their parents, but especially so for Muslim kids, they live a double life when they get older, a “split personality” at home vs. school...how they talk and interact.

For example, kids who curse outside of the home and not in front of their parents. Occasionally, it comes out at home...among siblings and parents may or may not get to know it. The difficulty is that parents don't know how to discipline their children...they can't beat them...that's abuse.

We have been failing in this [teaching morals]. It's primarily the responsibility for parents. Many [Muslim] parents cannot teach their kids, so they bring them to weekend of full-time Islamic school hoping that it can teach their kids what parents cannot teacher them. Most of the training still depends on the parents. The Muslim community lacks this, generally, and Muslim children are not forced to practice Islam or recognize the benefits. It's a big challenge for Muslim leaders.

Muslims teens don't have the basic knowledge that parents have given or they have learned from weekend school. It doesn't teach them how to deal with certain situations....doesn't give them skills...how to resist temptations (drugs, drinking, etc). Therefore, Muslim kids are at a disadvantage. Many end up conflicted with themselves.

The other thing we see is that Muslims kids have same desires that other kids have. Kids have phones, so Muslim kids want phones...MP3 players...all of the technology, shoes, clothes. Unfortunately, parents are not developing in their children the ability to say “No”. Kids want everything and parents give in.

When asked if Muslim teens face bias after the events of 9/11, the Imam stated the following:

Some of them [Muslim teens] do say that...but it doesn't seem to be widespread. Occasionally, they do encounter problems with racism and they are unable to respond in a proper way. They can't turn to parents or adults. If they find themselves in a group of Muslim teens, then perhaps they will be in a better position to respond.

We don't know what is happening to Muslim kids in the schools....at an earlier and earlier age there is pressure to date from the media...especially girls having to look nice for boys. Girls' clothing, even for little girls, look more like adult clothing.

When asked about the coping strategies of Muslim adolescents, the Imam stated that peers were the most important resource for Muslim youth. As a follow-up question, the Imam was asked about parental support as a resource for coping. He emphatically stated, much like the participants, that parents were the least likely source of support for Muslim adolescents when dealing with their problems:

Kids relate the best to their friends. They are able to relate better to other students than adults. I hear it from them...those kids who are in high school and college who have a good understanding of Islamic teachings and responsibility and help to keep the Islamic society alive. They help to organize activities for Muslim students there—organize facilities for prayer and activities. There may not be many who have an interest, but there are those who can motivate others to pray together and even organize interfaith activities. These are the ones who influence them in a positive way. It is not an easy task, but they are in a better position than most of us. Our role is to identify these youngsters and give them teachings so they can portray that role more efficiently.

The final part of the interview centered upon the likelihood of Muslim adolescents seeking help from an Imam, as well as, the role of the Imam in helping teens within the community:

I don't think Muslim teens are likely to come to me because most consider me to be just like their parents and/or another adult or authority figure. They would not want to confide in me.

In discussing his role within the Muslim community, the Imam shared the following:

I find myself inadequate...we need to have people who can help the Muslim community...most Imams don't have the training and they may make things worse. They may take harsh measures in how they speak to the kids so we need to have training.

This type of training is not available for Imams. Our training is really learning various aspects of deen [religion]. What has to happen is the practical experience. You need on-the-job training.

There are lots of problems in Muslim families...divorces...problems between Muslim husbands and wives ...kids growing here....but unless the training programs are there...and case studies are there...then we don't have appropriate training.

We, as clergy (imams, rabbis, priests), only have moral authority, no other training besides that. If I can develop that skill and convince them [Muslims] that this is the problem and get commitment that the individual can accept their problem then we (Imams) can't do anything about it unless we have the commitment. Otherwise, the only choice a person has is to seek help from elsewhere.

Overall, responses from the imam revealed distinct similarities and differences in challenges faced by Muslim youth, as well as coping resources. Both the imam and participants stated that peer pressure (e.g., around drinking, drugs, dating) presented a significant challenge to Muslim youth. The imam also noted that the media played an influential role in the decisions and behavior of teens in America across all types of backgrounds. In regard to coping, peers were cited by both the imam and participants as being the most resourceful in times of stress. Adult figures, such as imams and parents, were also noted by both the imam and participants as the least desirable resources for Muslim adolescents when dealing with problems.

While the imam stated that Muslim teens face minimal incidences of racism based on their religious beliefs, the Muslim participants of the study shared numerous experiences with bias in the schools. Lastly, the imam stated that a fundamental lack of moral, Islamic teaching at home and by teens attending, at best, only a once weekly Islamic class, was the root source for Muslim teen issues in America. This is in contrast

to the participants' responses that reflect strong Islamic teachings by their parents as well as a fervent desire to continue to attend the weekend Islamic school.

## CHAPTER VI

### DISCUSSION

This study explored the challenges faced by Muslim adolescents who attend public school in America. The role of peers, family, community, and school in relation to the challenges faced by participants are outlined. More specifically, themes related to adherence to Islamic beliefs, experiences in dealing with peers, parental expectations, and the practice of Islam in a post 9/11 era, are revealed. Utilizing an ecological framework model, the coping strategies utilized by participants in relation to the role of peers, family, community, and school will be discussed. This section concludes with limitations of the study, implications for future research, and implications for parents, schools, community members, and school psychologists are explained.

#### *Who Are These Participants?*

The primary goal of this particular study was to explore the lives of Muslim adolescents and their experiences in the public school setting with a focus on the influence of Islamic beliefs on their everyday functioning. Who are these youth? Muslim youth have typically been described as a conglomerate of identities: Muslim, American, and/or ethnic identity shared with their parents. Previous studies have explored the negotiation of these identities. In this study, the participants viewed themselves first, and foremost, as Muslim. Participant responses, for the most part, generated strong allegiance toward their Islamic identity throughout the interviews. While this study did not focus on identity formation or level of religiosity, responses

provided from the participants on “Islamic connectedness” presented insight on the influence of Islam in the participants’ daily lives. The influence of Islam as a way of life is well documented in the literature on Muslim youth (Almeida, 2005; Carter, 1999; Sirin & Fine, 2007; Sirin et al., 2008). Participant responses from the demographic sheet checklist regarding Islamic principles on daily activities provided striking findings that corroborate the significance of Islam on Muslim youth. Ninety percent of the participants rated themselves as having at least some level of religious connectivity to Islam, with the exception of one participant who expressed being “not religious at all”. Interestingly, even this participant later specified that four of the daily activities listed (diet, peer pressure, school-related events, and dealing with parental expectations) were impacted by his Islamic beliefs. Regardless of the magnitude of their religiosity, the basic premise of Islam was apparently prevalent in the lives of these participants and corroborate that Muslim students living in the American society are still bound by traditional Islamic practices (Al-Nomi, 2000). Hence, these participants should be viewed as having complex, multifaceted, fluid identities, impacted by their desire to function as Muslims in an American society and bring to school their whole selves.

Regarding their Islamic identities, participants revealed that their Islamic beliefs were strongly linked to decision making when it came to everyday teen activities such as peer pressure, peer relationships, school-related activities, dress code, and diet. Through their stories shared, these participants have highlighted how their Islamic beliefs have affected their everyday lives and whether they have received extensive Islamic training, yearn to share their religion with others, or simply solidified their religious beliefs as a consequence of being targeted minorities, their apparent allegiance to Islam attests to the

notion that they possess strong Muslim identification. As stated by Sirin and Fine (2007), Muslim adolescents in America deal with a considerable amount of discrimination in the larger society, and deal with intergenerational tensions at home and within the community; despite this, they may enjoy a proud sense of their global expertise which for these participants, serves as a catalyst for upholding their strong Islamic beliefs.

### *Challenges Faced by Muslim Adolescents*

The primary goal of this particular study was to explore the challenges faced by Muslim adolescents growing up in America. How do these Muslim teens fare while attending public school in a post 9/11 era? When asked to name the challenges faced by typical teens in America, these participants noted that academic and peer pressure were common stressors that all teens face in public school. Of significance, peer pressure as defined by participants to include drinking, partying, drugs, and being popular was named the most difficult and challenging for Muslim adolescents attending public schools. Participants also reported that parental cultural/religious expectations and practicing Islam in school as challenging experiences. These challenges have been previously documented (Ahmad & Szpara, 2003; Al-Romi, 2000; Carter, 1999; Zine, 2001), which further corroborates the negative light in which Muslims are regarded in America.

Interestingly, Muslim youth are not the only groups to witness acts of bias in the schools or struggle with peer acceptance. For instance, observant Jewish youth who attend public school settings have been found to experience distress because they must often assimilate into Christian/secular peer groups (Zlatin, 1982) and may often feel that the observance of practices of Judaism (e.g. Sabbath, dietary restrictions) interferes with

peer-related activities (Rubin, 1994). In addition, it was found that Jewish adolescents are likely to face anti-Semitism in the public school setting (Bershtel, 1992), similar to the bias and discrimination experienced by the participants of this study. Still, Muslim adolescents are growing up in a time of extreme global and political unrest, where Muslims continue to be targets for hate crimes and discrimination. For the participants of this study, the challenges they face are multi-faceted, much like their identities. The way in which these adolescents cope with these challenges warrants exploration.

### *Peers*

It is widely accepted that peer relationships serve as an important source of social support, especially during in high school. It is not surprising that the participants in this study, therefore, named peers as their central source of support. First, both Muslim and non-Muslim peers were identified as instrumental resources in dealing with the stressors mentioned. More specifically, male participants tended to value friendships with non-Muslims because of their varied experiences. One participant stated, "It's better to hang out with different kids; it's better because you have different interests". For the female participants, Muslim female peers within the community were noted as vital resources for sharing experiences and gaining advice when presented with problematic school situations. The importance of staying grounded within the Muslim community in order to evade negative social pressures has been documented as a benefit to forming positive peer pressure for Muslim teens (Ahmad & Szpara, 2003; Al-Romi, 2000; Hodge, 2002). As well, current research involving positive peer pressure derived from strong social networks has been shown to be effective in resisting peer pressure and other behaviors traditionally proscribed by Islam, where Muslim student organizations (MSA's) in high

schools have constituted a form of positive peer pressure and guidance to Muslim students in both religious and academic matters and has been instrumental in maintaining role performance and appropriate Islamic behavior (Zine, 2000).

A number of studies have found that forms of coping involving problem-focused, instrumental efforts to understand the stressor, use available resources, and attempt to alter the stressors or situation directly often are adaptive (Cohen et al., 1997; Hobfoll, 1998; Holahan, Moos, & Bonin, 1997). Several participants noted that explaining Islam to peers as many times as needed was helpful in countering some incidents of bias in school. However, this was not employed by most participants, who stated that bias experiences caused great distress and negative feelings toward their American peers. This finding suggests that Muslim students require additional strategies to help them cope with problems in school. Coping strategies that incorporate decision making and problem solving (Elias & Arnold, 2006) can help Muslim adolescents, who are vulnerable to a variety of stressors, effectively problem solve and deal with peer-related issues in a positive way.

### *Family*

The role of family has been affirmed to play a significant, underlying role in the lives of Muslim youth. The desire for Muslim parents to teach and instill their cultural values onto their children is cause for significant conflict for Muslim teens in America. Most “cultural clashes” that occur between Muslim teens and their parents often stem from Muslim parents, both voluntary and involuntary immigrants, wanting their children to adopt Islamic-oriented moral, social, and cultural values (Al-Romi, 2000). Moreover, parental allegiance toward the Muslim community, or *ummah*, at large, may cause great

rifts between parents and teens, as evidenced by participant responses in regard to adults' view of the importance of preservation of reputation and their worry about their children being compared negatively to other teens within the Muslim community. The Muslim community is viewed as an extension of the Muslim family where individual freedom is often circumscribed to protect other members of the community (*ummah*); it is this same community that safeguards and empowers the individual (Jafari, 1993) and a reciprocal relationship generally exists between the individual and community (Haynes et al., 1997). This relationship may pose conflicts for teens that are not being adequately recognized or addressed by the adult parental, educator, or religious communities, as evidenced by the participants of this study.

The burden on Muslim teens of having to abide by “what the Muslim community thinks” is problematic and a significant source of distress for Muslim teens. Adding to this is the cultural generation gap between Muslim adolescents and their children are of great concern, especially since most of the participants expressed that they would not seek help from their parents. Thus, the need for additional supports, especially from the home is greatly needed. As noted by one participant, “The more people you have the better. When you are alone, you don't have anyone to advise you”. Muslim parents need to form better relationships with their children where they employ frequent communication, active listening, and an open mind when discussing issues of cultural conflict in order to form stronger bonds with their children. Since these teens already face judgment from peers, teachers, and other Muslims, it is vital that parents take an objective standpoint and pay attention to their needs. Additionally, keeping open lines of communication with teachers and other staff members at school (e.g. guidance

counselors) may be helpful for families and teens in times of stress. Home-school collaboration remains an important partnership for promoting positive mental health for all children.

Finally, since the Muslim community plays an important role in most Muslim families, programs and services that provide support and guidance for minority families are helpful. Such programs may be offered at local mosques or community organizations that are sensitive to the needs of minority families. With these additional supports in place, Muslim adolescents can access a host of resources available to them.

*Practicing Islam in School: Post 9/11*

For Muslim youth living in the U.S., negotiating their identities across different cultural terrains became decidedly more challenging after the events of 9/11 (Cainkar, 2004) and misperceptions and negative stereotypes about Islam and Muslim values have become pervasive in schools (Ahmed & Szpara, 2003). Participants in this study mentioned experiences of bias and discrimination in school, ranging from innuendos to adult-enabled harassment. Not surprisingly, when asked if participants would seek help from school staff if they had a problem, all of the participants stated that teachers would be the least likely source of support. These participants noted that school staff members are generally racist, hold negative stereotypes of Muslims, and do not understand their Islamic backgrounds. Of note, participants stated that they would seek help from a person of Muslim background in the schools, which further suggests the need for school psychologists, clinicians, and school staff to be knowledgeable of Muslims and Islam or at least in a position to connect to Muslim teens in their schools with appropriate cultural resources in the school or, more likely, in the community.

The implications for schools regarding the treatment of Muslim adolescents are significant. First, school districts must ensure that students of ethnic and diverse backgrounds are treated fairly and objectively, especially in the classrooms (e.g., during lessons taught on Islam, discussion relating to 9/11, and class assignments). As well, creating nurturing, caring environments that incorporate tolerance, promote social and emotional competence, and develop students' character are tools that schools can implement to promote positive school climate and student mental health.

School psychologists play an instrumental role in facilitating the implementation school-wide programs that foster tolerance for ethnic and religious observant youth. Moreover, school psychologists can serve as a valuable resource for school staff members, who often have very little knowledge of Muslims. Teachers are often the first to acknowledge changes in behavior with their students, and being aware of the challenges faced by Muslims teens can be helpful in recognizing and problem-solving issues. This is evidenced by one participant who revealed, "My English teacher approached me because she realized I was out of it. I had a lot of things on my mind and I talked to her about some of it, but not everything".

Further suggestions to promote inclusion of Muslim youth in the public schools involve the acknowledgment of Muslim holidays and observances on school calendars and inviting parents or students to speak about their holidays and customs. Moreover, furnishing public schools with accurate information on Islam has become available to school districts via Islamic organizations such as, The Council on Islamic Education. Publications such as *Teaching about Islam and Muslims in the Public School* (Shaikh, 1995) and Smith's (1999) *Islam in America* provides an overview of Muslims in the

United States and other related issues. Recently, the Islamic Center of North America (2009) has issued a series of pamphlets related to dispelling common myths of Islam and providing information on basic Islamic practices, which may provide additional understanding on this subject area.

### *Community*

Clergy play an instrumental role in providing mental health support, especially serving as liaisons between professional mental health and community-based services among minority communities (Milstein et al., 1999; Williams et al., 1999). For Muslim families, however, Muslim clergy do not possess the background and training often required in dealing with the mental health needs of the Muslim community, a finding corroborated by the imam interviewed in this study. Nevertheless, since the community is often the first line of support for some Muslims and their families (Al-Issa, 1990, Al-Krenawi, & Graham, 2000; Hodge, 2005), gaining perspective of what resources are available to Muslim teens was necessary. In review of the responses provided by the participants and the imam, several similarities were found. First, both the participants and the imam named peer pressure as the most difficult challenge for both typical and Muslim teens in America, pointing out the potentially negative influence that media has on this population. Additionally, both groups noted that Muslim teens were most likely to seek help from peers rather than an imam. The imam pointed out that Muslim teens generally view imams as authority figures, similar to how they view their parents. Participants, on the other hand, stated that cultural differences played a big factor in not seeking help from an imam, which further attests to the need for culturally appropriate resources within the community.

Of significance, imams noted the lack of basic Islamic teaching, especially by parents at home, as the root cause of the problems facing Muslim adolescents in America. This observation contradicted the strong Islamic upbringing and values held by most of the participants. As well, these participants regarded prayer and belief in God as an important coping factor. In fact, several of the participants noted that the merely knowing that God exists and “things happen for the best” was enough. Religion and spirituality have been documented as positive resources for coping with stressors. Spiritual-religious coping plays a distinctive role in the coping process, especially with uncontrollable stressors, and have been found to include prayer, perceiving a loving relationship with God, and religious reappraisal promoting growth from stressful situations (Pargament, 1997).

The implications for communities and community-based organizations are tremendous. Developing and implementing youth-based programs and activities that provide peer social support systems for Muslim teens is needed. These groups can be helpful in providing social, emotional, and spiritual support as well as fostering empowerment, which has been beneficial in helping teens access resources within their community as well as contributions. In addition, continued collaboration with Islamic-informed psychologists, imams, and organizations to which imams belong are necessary in providing adequate mental health resources for Muslim adolescents. With these resources in hand, imams can become strategic change agents, community organizers, and advocates for the interests of Islam and help foster acceptance of diversity in both their secular and religious communities.

*Implications for School Psychologists and School Mental Health*

School psychologists play an important role in providing appropriate mental health services to culturally diverse students in the school setting. It is imperative that school psychologists utilize their training and knowledge of diverse cultures to foster and implement evidenced based, culturally competent mental health services in the schools. Best practice in working with culturally diverse students includes knowledge of family systems (e.g., economic, political, ecological, and social) in order to respond sensitively and effectively to families whose cultural practices differ from the mainstream (Ortiz and Flanagan, 2002). Moreover, the current literature on the mental health needs of Muslim youth in the schools, although limited, indicates various approaches that are useful to school psychologists when working with Muslim families and children. For instance, the preservation of family cohesiveness is emphasized where school psychologists should exercise caution when employing interventions that might be perceived as threatening family stability (Dwairy & Sickle, 1996; Erickson & Al-Timimi, 2001). An example of this is exemplified when working with Arab families, where the concept of open expression of emotions are looked down upon, as opposed to the Western cultural emphasis on being independent and assertive, developing interventions that may challenge parental authority or minimize family stability, may cause rapport between the clinician and family to be terminated. Instead, Dwairy and Van Sickle (1996) suggest it is more effective to suggest solutions that maintain family stability and respect for parental authority. This is especially important when dealing with adolescents who may be questioning their Islamic beliefs or desire their “freedom” to make choices for themselves. In cases when Muslim youth have deviated from traditional Islamic values to the extent where parental conflict has ensued, it is recommended that interventions be

made where the family's framework of autonomy and interconnectedness (Almeida, 1996), in order to remain consistent with the family's values.

Additionally, school psychologists must provide interventions that support Islamic values and are appreciated by Muslim youth and families, especially when adolescents may feel pressured to forgo traditional Islamic values for more of the Western cultural norms. Ethnic minority adolescents, who experience "being different" physically and culturally from other adolescents, may struggle with establishing positive self-esteem (Choi et al., 2006). Therefore, linking Muslim youth with Islamic organizations that provide peer social support can help mediate the oppression that Muslim youth may encounter in the secular setting (Byng, 1998). In fact, Ross-Sheriff (1986) found that adolescents' participation in Islamic summer programs resulted in an increased level of comfort in self-identifying as Muslims. Moreover, since Muslim youth are often hesitant to express their emotions outside of the Muslim community, cognitive interventions based on the youths' spiritual beliefs may be more effective than approaches that focus on the affective dimension of human personality (Carter & El Hindi, 1999). In other words, counseling that is focused on unproductive beliefs and then replaced or modified by *shari'a* (Islamic law) has been found to be as effective as traditional forms of therapy. Lastly, group counseling, a form of therapy frequently used in school settings, may not be appropriate for Muslim youth, as it may be viewed as a violation of family privacy, particularly if the group is not restricted to one gender (Shaikh, 1995).

Finally, the role of school psychologists in educating school personnel about Islam and Muslim families is vital in producing safe learning environments for Muslim

adolescents. School psychologists can work proactively in disseminating information about Muslim youth by collaboration and consultation with teachers and administrators through school-wide efforts, such as in-service trainings, programs that teach diversity and interventions that create and promote tolerance in the school setting. In turn, the incidence of bias and discrimination of Muslim adolescents in the schools can be prevented.

#### *Implications for Future Research*

There were a number of limitations to this study. First, the sampling of Muslim adolescent participants were derived through both a randomized and networked sample, in which most participants were recruited from the central New Jersey area, thus limiting the generalizability of findings. Second, the small sample size does not allow for generalization of findings to other Muslim youth, as such factors of socioeconomic status, immigration status, educational levels, and individuals who are conflicted about Islam were not taken into account. Third, utilizing a control group consisting of non-Muslim teens to gather their views on everyday teens challenges as well as challenges facing Muslim youth would have provided a comparison of both Muslim and non-Muslims perspectives on challenges faced by Muslim teens. Fourth, utilizing other mosques and interviewing additional imams to gather data and create a larger sample size for cross comparisons would have been beneficial. Fifth, the study was vulnerable to examiner bias because the researcher developed the questions, located individuals for the sample, analyzed the data, and developed the findings, recommendations, and conclusions. Finally, this was an exploratory study and readers should be cautioned about generalizing from these results.

Still, the richness of the ideas generated from this study may be examined in future research. This study has explored the challenges experienced by Muslim adolescents who attend public school in America. Emerging studies have explored identity formation in Muslim youth, Muslim youth who attend Islamic schools in America, working with Muslim families, and counseling Muslims in America. These studies have recognized the plight of Muslim youth today, post 9/11, and the struggle of dual identification with the Western and Islamic world. However, few studies have focused on the challenges that Muslim teens face who attend public school, and more importantly, how they cope with these challenges. For the most part, participants in this study revealed various coping strategies such as prayer, forming positive peer relationships, particularly with other Muslims, and confiding in siblings. These strategies may be viewed as potential factors for resiliency in these youth, and is a factor that warrants further attention in future research.

Other avenues of research worthy of exploring include interviewing school personnel to determine their knowledge and understanding of Islam. Such research is best focused in communities where there is a significant and/or growing Muslim populations. These results can later be utilized for training purposes. Additionally, since most of the participants referred to parental support in a negative light, studies that explore the viewpoints of Muslim parents and child relationships in America would be useful in helping these youth cope better with problems that occur within the family network. Namely, studies that focus on differing parenting styles of male and female Muslim adolescents may provide further insight on how Muslim parents can better understand their Muslim American teens. Finally, studies that focus on how community resources,

such as mosques, can better facilitate communication between Muslim youth, families, and religious leaders in America will be momentous in helping these youth cope with current and future stressors.

### *Conclusions*

Muslim adolescents, especially those that hold their Islamic beliefs in high regard, experience obstacles that permeate all aspect of their lives. The Muslim teens of this study are representative of an ethnic minority group under scrutiny for a religion that must constantly be defended. Although these participants noted challenges that teens are typical of many teens growing up in America, a host of other obstacles unique to Muslim adolescents were revealed. Despite these difficulties, these teens appear to be thriving, in part due to their fundamental beliefs in Islam and the unwavering support received by peers, Muslim and non-Muslim alike.

Studies such as this one are important, because they offer insight into the experiences of the ethnic minority youth in the schools. This study was instrumental in highlighting not only the strengths of these individuals, but also the experiences endured by these youth. Moreover, this study shed light on the need for additional resources among the home, school, and community settings. If school psychologists are to service this underserved population in the schools, it is vital that they are cognizant of the culture, traditions, and values that encompass Muslim youth and their families. The conclusion of this study is best summarized in the poignant words of one Muslim teen participant:

All of these problems we have talked about...more people are becoming aware of this...more people are becoming Muslim because of the increased popularity of Islam...and I'm glad we're having this because now, we're showing everyone that

Islam is actually something to talk about...we face the same problems you do....we don't just pray five times a day...we have lives too.

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- Zlatin, D.S. (1982). Coping as a Jewish teenager: A curriculum. St. Louis, MO: Central Agency for Jewish Education.

*Additional Resources:*

Council on American-Islamic Relations: <http://www.cair.com/>

Teaching Tolerance: <http://www.tolerance.org/>

Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL):

<http://www.casel.org/>

Safe and Civil Schools: <http://www.safeandcivilschools.com/>

## APPENDIX A

PARENTAL CONSENT FORM

Dear Parent/Guardian:

Your child is being asked to participate in a research study by Maliha Sheikh, from the Graduate School of Applied and Professional Psychology at Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey. This project is a part of the requirements for a doctoral degree and is being conducted under the supervision of Dr. Maurice Elias. Please review the following information below:

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study is to examine the current challenges that are faced by adolescent Muslims between the ages of 14-17 attending public high school. These challenges may revolve around such issues as peer relationships, cultural and/or religious conflicts while growing up in an American society, and parental conflicts.

Description of Procedures

Your child will be among approximately 10-15 youth asked to participate in this project. Your child will be asked to complete a background information questionnaire and then participate in a focus group, which will involve an open discussion along with the other participants about the current challenges that face Muslim teens growing up in America and how they deal with these issues.

The focus group will take no more than two hours. The focus group discussion will be recorded by audiotape, which will be heard only by the investigator of this study, Maliha Sheikh. The audiotape will be used to insure accuracy of information gathered from the discussion. The audiotape will be destroyed once the dissertation has been completed.

*I understand the above procedures regarding audiotape usage in this study and agree to allow my child to be audio taped during the focus group discussion.*

Signature of Parent or Guardian \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Printed Name \_\_\_\_\_

Risks and Discomforts

This research is not expected to involve any risks of harm greater than those ordinarily encountered in everyday life. However, some minor discomfort may arise from discussing issues that teens find personally challenging. In such an instance, the researcher, who is of Muslim background, will proceed with care and understanding to minimize any potential discomfort.

Benefits

Your child may not receive any direct benefit from this study. The knowledge gained from this study may eventually benefit parents, educators, and others who work with Muslim teenagers, to help them become more sensitive to the unique challenges of growing up as a Muslim youth in America at this time.

Financial Considerations

There will be no cost for participating in this study. Your child will receive a gift card in the amount of \$20 from Barnes and Nobles as a participant. If your child withdraws early from the study, he/she will not receive the gift card compensation.

Confidentiality

Participation in this study is confidential. When reporting the outcomes of the study, your child's name will not be used. Furthermore, in any publications that may result from this research, neither your child's name nor any information that might allow your child to be identified will be used.

Voluntary Participation

Participation in this study is voluntary. You or your child may refuse to participate in this study. Your child may withdraw from this study at any time. There are no other alternatives to participation in this study if you or your child decides not to participate.

Participant's Rights

If you have any questions about your rights and those of your child as a research participant, you may contact the Sponsored Programs Administrator at Rutgers University at: Rutgers University Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects:

Office of Research and Sponsored Programs  
3 Rutgers Plaza  
New Brunswick, NJ 08901-8559  
Tel: (732) 932-0150 ext.2104  
Email: [humansubjects@orsp.rutgers.edu](mailto:humansubjects@orsp.rutgers.edu)

If you have any questions regarding any aspect of this research project, please contact Maliha Sheikh Psy.M., graduate investigator, at (732-742-9530). You may also contact Dr. Maurice Elias, faculty supervisor and principal investigator, at (732-445-2444). Upon signing this form, you will receive a copy.

*I willingly consent to allow my child to participate in this research.*

Signature of Parent or Guardian \_\_\_\_\_

Printed Name \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

*The parent/guardian has had the opportunity to have questions addressed. The parent/guardian willingly agrees to allow his/her child to be in the study.*

Signature of Investigator \_\_\_\_\_

Printed Name \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

### ASSENT FORM FOR MINORS

I have read the description of the study titled, "An Exploratory Study of the Challenges of Living in America as a Muslim Adolescent Attending Public School" that is printed above, and I understand what will happen to me in the study. I have received permission from my parent(s) to participate in the study, and I agree to participate in it. I know that I can quit the study at any time.

Signature of Minor \_\_\_\_\_

Printed Name \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Witness \_\_\_\_\_

Printed Name \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Parent/Guardian \_\_\_\_\_

Printed Name \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

## APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW CONSENT FORM FOR IMAM OF MOSQUE

*A research study is being conducted by Maliha Sheikh, a graduate student at the Graduate School of Applied and Professional Psychology at Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey. This project is a part of the requirements for a doctoral degree and is being conducted under the supervision of Dr. Maurice Elias. Please review the information below before signing this form:*

The purpose of this research is to examine the current challenges that are faced by adolescent Muslims between the ages of 14-17 attending public high school. These challenges may revolve around such issues as peer pressure, cultural and/or religious conflicts while growing up in an American society, and parental conflicts. It is important to know what issues these teens are facing in order to better meet their needs and prevent difficulties that might otherwise arise.

I understand that as a participant of this study, I will be interviewed only once in which I will be asked certain open-ended questions concerning my personal views regarding Muslim adolescents who attend public schools in America. I understand that the process may take up to one hour. Furthermore, I understand that the results of this research may be published or otherwise reported to scientific bodies, but that, I will not be identified in any such publication or report.

I understand that this research is not expected to involve any risks of harm greater than those ordinarily encountered in everyday life. In any circumstance resulting in discomfort being experienced through answering any of the questions, the interviewer, who is of Muslim background, will proceed with care and understanding to minimize any potential risks.

I understand that my participation in this research study is voluntary, that there is no penalty for refusal to participate, and that I am free to withdraw my consent and discontinue participation at any time without any adverse consequences.

If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the Sponsored Programs Administrator at Rutgers University at: Rutgers University

Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects:

Office of Research and Sponsored Programs  
3 Rutgers Plaza  
New Brunswick, NJ 08901-8559  
Tel: (732) 932-0150 ext.2104  
Email: [humansubjects@orsp.rutgers.edu](mailto:humansubjects@orsp.rutgers.edu)

If I have any questions regarding any aspect of this research project, I can contact Maliha Sheikh Psy.M., graduate investigator at (732-742-9530). I may also contact Dr. Maurice Elias, faculty supervisor and principal investigator, at (732-445-2444).

Upon signing this form, I will receive a copy.

*I acknowledge by signing below that I have read the above mentioned information, understand the nature of my participation in this research project and consent to participate. This consent will be valid upon the below signed date.*

Name of Mosque \_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Imam \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Name \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Investigator \_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Name \_\_\_\_\_  
Date \_\_\_\_\_

## APPENDIX C

DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION SHEET

The questions below are for the purpose of gathering personal information as well as a brief assessment of your cultural identity. Please choose the answer that best describes you. Remember, your answers will be held confidential.

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

Age: \_\_\_\_\_ Date of Birth: \_\_\_\_\_

Country of Birth: \_\_\_\_\_ Ethnicity: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_ Telephone #: \_\_\_\_\_

Public School You Attend: \_\_\_\_\_ Grade: \_\_\_\_\_

1) How would you rate yourself, in terms of religious connectedness to Islam? Please check one.

- Very Religious
- Somewhat Religious
- Not Religious At All

2) How often do the principles of Islam influence your decision making in regard to everyday matters such as these? Check all that apply.

	Almost Always	Regularly, But Not Often	Rarely, If At All
Nature of friendships with girls	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Nature of friendship with boys	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Diet (i.e., eating halal meat vs. non-halal meat)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Dress code	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Peer pressure (i.e., alcohol, drugs, dating, etc.)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
School related events (i.e., prom, dances, etc.)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Participating in sports	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Dealing with parental expectations	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

## APPENDIX D

FOCUS GROUP GUIDE

The following questions will be used as a guide for discussion:

Opening Question:

1. Please tell us your first name and what school you attend.

Introductory Brainstorming Question:

2. What kinds of problems/issues regarding family, peers, and identity do you think most teens face while attending public school? (Generate list of issues and write them on flip chart. Have group agree on which issues are most challenging.)

Transition Questions:

3. What issues are Muslim teens faced with in the public school system? (Generate list of issues and write them on flip chart. Have group agree on which issues are most challenging. The list should include dating, bias in school, diet, friendship between boys and girls, prayer in school, participating in sports, etc.)
4. Which of the issues listed from both groups do you think are the most difficult to deal with?

Key Questions:

5. Please describe your experiences in dealing with these issues. How have you dealt with them? (Discussion should include at least one example of a coping mechanism for each issue outlined).
6. Have you experienced feelings of depression, anxiety, etc. when trying to cope with these issues? If so, how have you coped with these feelings?
7. What role do your parents play in coping with these issues?
8. What role do peers play in coping with these issues?
9. What role does your Islamic identity play in coping with these issues?
10. What role does the American culture play in coping with these issues?

Ending Questions:

11. How likely would it be that you would seek help from someone in the school setting for these issues?
12. Who would you seek help from in the school setting if you had a problem?
13. Which issues might you be most/least likely to seek help with? Would you be more or less likely to seek help on the Muslim-related issues?
14. Would you be open to seeking counseling from a professional in order to cope with these issues? Why or why not?
15. Would you seek help from an Imam? Why or why not?

## APPENDIX E

INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR IMAM

*Instructions:* I am a doctoral student of School Psychology and I am conducting a research project to explore the challenges of living in America as a Muslim adolescent attending public school and how they cope with these challenges. In this regard, I am interviewing the imams from several mosques and I would like to inquire from you about your experiences and thoughts about Muslim teens and the possible challenges they may be facing today.

*Challenges Faced by Muslim Youth*

1. What is your understanding of the challenges faced by typical adolescents who attend public schools?
2. Which of these challenges do you think are faced by Muslim students?
3. Which of these challenges are the most problematic for these teens?

*Coping Strategies of Muslim Adolescents*

1. What resources do you think Muslim adolescents have in terms of support and coping with the above mentioned stressors? Who do you think would be the best resource for these teens and why?
2. How likely are Muslim teens willing to seek help from imams?
3. What has been your role in helping Muslim teens within the community?
4. How have Muslim teens incorporated Islam and their desire to function within an American society?

## APPENDIX F

CODING MANUAL

The following manual was derived from the thirteen questions used during the focus groups. Participant responses are first categorized into major themes. Supporting detailed responses are then grouped under corresponding over-arching themes.

2. What kinds of problems/issues regarding family, peers, and identity do you think most teens face while attending public school?

1. Peer pressure
  - a. Drinking/drugs
    - aa. Influenced by media
  - b. Partying
  - c. Popularity
  - d. Self-Esteem
  - e. Emotional stuff
  - f. Sports pressure
2. Academic pressure
  - a. Parents
  - b. Being compared to older siblings
  - c. Prioritizing
  - d. Teachers
  - e. SAT's

3. What issues are Muslim teens faced with in the public school system?

1. Peer pressure
  - a. Drinking/Drugs/Partying
  - b. Being cool, popular
  - c. Identity crisis in Muslim adolescents
  - d. Being judged by other Muslim adolescents
  - e. Parents want their kids to be friends with Muslim kids
2. Cultural/Religious Expectations of Muslim Parents
  - a. Hanging out with friends
  - b. Being compared to siblings
  - c. Parents want their kids to be friends with Muslim kids
  - d. Girl/Boy Relationships
    - 1e. Interacting with opposite sex
    - 2e. Arranged Marriage

- e. Kids lashing out
  - f. Stay out later
  - g. Cultural Clashes
3. Dress Code
    - a. Wearing hijab
    - b. No individuality
  4. Post-9/11: Practicing Islam in School
    - a. Explaining religion to peers
    - b. Prayer
    - c. Teaching about Palestine/Islam
    - d. Fasting
    - e. Racism
  5. Have you experienced feelings of depression, anxiety, etc. when trying to cope with these issues? If so, how have you coped with these feelings?
    1. No
    2. Yes
      - a. Wearing hijab
  6. What role do your parents play in coping with these issues?
    1. Supportive
    2. Unsupportive
    3. Supportive Siblings
  7. What role do peers play in coping with these issues?
    1. Muslim Peers
      - a. Supportive
      - b. Unsupportive
    2. Non-Muslim Peers
      - a. Supportive
      - b. Unsupportive
    3. None
  8. What role does your Islamic identity play in coping with these issues?
    1. Islam as a way of life
    2. Prayer

3. Muslim identity/post 9-11
  4. Having supportive Muslim peers
  5. Minimal role
9. What role does the American culture play in coping with these issues?
1. Minimal role
  2. American culture is the reason for problems
  3. Perspective of Americans on Islam/Muslims
  4. Culture clash with parents
  5. Americans have easier life/spoiled
10. How likely would it be that you would seek help from someone in the school setting for these issues?
1. Not likely
  2. Very likely
  3. Depends on the situation
11. Who would you seek help from in the school setting if you had a problem?
1. Teacher
  2. Friends
  3. Guidance Counselor
12. Which issues might you be most/least likely to seek help with? Would you be more or less likely to seek help on the Muslim-related issues?
1. Bullying
  2. Academics
  3. No—for Muslim related issues
  4. Yes—for Muslim related issues

13. Would you be open to seeking counseling from a professional in order to cope with these issues? Why or why not?

1. No
  - a. Cultural gap
  - b. Age gap
  - c. No rapport
2. Yes
  - a. For religious help
  - b. Family issues