A Phenomenological Study Exploring Arab Muslim Students at Community College and Islamophobia

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ABSTRACT

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF EXPLORING ARAB MUSLIM STUDENTS AT COMMUNITY COLLEGE AND ISLAMOPHOBIA

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Northern Illinois University, 2022
Dr. Carrie Kortegast, Director

Arab Muslim students continue to face various forms of islamophobia on campus despite efforts from the college to make campus more welcoming and inclusive. As Muslim students express concern about the rise of islamophobia on campus and bigoted rhetoric on social media, college leaders, administration, and faculty have an imperative role to play in curbing anti-Muslim sentiments, xenophobia, and racism across campus and in the classrooms. To address these concerns effectively and meaningfully, it is important for colleges to understand who their Arab Muslim students are and the challenges they face as college students amid islamophobia. This dissertation explored how Arab Muslim students experiences of islamophobia at a community college campus and how that shaped their sense of belonging on campus. Key findings included fear of islamophobia, invisibility on campus, feeling ignored and misunderstood from other peers, encountering islamophobic microaggressions, and engagement and student support.
A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY EXPLORING ARAB MUSLIM STUDENTS AT COMMUNITY COLLEGE AND ISLAMOPHOBIA

BY

DUSTIN FRENCH
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A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

DEPARTMENT OF COUNSELING AND HIGHER EDUCATION

Doctoral Director:
Carrie Kortegast
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I would like to thank my family, study participants, co-workers, my classmates, and doctoral faculty for making this dissertation possible and achievable. All of you have greatly contributed to this passionate research project in significant ways. I could not have succeeded without your encouragement, moral support, and honesty.
DEDICATION

To my son Rhenji and my daughter Maya, who are the best kids in the world!
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PREFACE

This dissertation examined how Arab Muslim students experienced islamophobia during their community college experience. To understand the impact and the perception of islamophobia from Arab Muslim community college students, this study used phenomenology as an approach to explicate one’s experience of the phenomenon. This approach to knowledge attainment allowed the participants to assess their own consciousness and seek meanings through intuition, reflection, understandings, and judgments.

The organization of the dissertation is as follows: Chapter 1 is the dissertation proposal where I proposed my intentions for the project examining Muslim college students. Chapter 2 provides a detailed background of each participant and their personal experience of being Muslim in the U.S. and on campus. This chapter also narrates the participants’ belief and perception of the campus environment. Chapter 3 uses a scholarly paper format to discuss findings from the study regarding how islamophobia shaped participants community college experience and sense of belonging on campus. Chapter 4 is a scholarly reflection on my entire dissertation experience and how I will incorporate what I learned into my own professional practice.
CHAPTER 1

DISSERTATION PROJECT PROPOSAL

Introduction

The events of 9/11 changed the social and political climate of many Muslims in the U.S. Due to the ongoing negative portrayals of Muslims in the media and public discourse, many Americans have adopted a racialized view of Muslims and Islam. Islamophobia, which can generally be defined as hatred toward Muslims and the religion of Islam, is not a new concept. Rather, it has deep roots in U.S. politics and immigration and has been used to justify policy implementations against Arabs for the sake of national security. The anti-Muslim rhetoric intensified when Donald Trump became president in 2016 (Williamson & Gelfand, 2019).

Intolerance among Americans worsened as the country continued viewing Muslims unjustly (Kalkan, Layman, & Uslaner, 2009). Further, Donald Trump’s “America first” agenda reinforced Islamic bigotry among his supporters and fueled anti-Muslim movements and biased policymaking (Khan et al., 2019; Nuruzzaman, 2017). Concerns about race relations and islamophobia overall reached college campuses nationwide. College students had risen in protest to speak out against racism and injustice, strengthening the national discourse on the institutional neglect of racialized minority students (Arellano & Vue, 2019).

In particular, higher education institutions felt the direct impact of Donald Trump’s discriminatory laws and publicized islamophobic statements, the mainstream media’s message that Muslims are inherently dangerous, and the stereotype that Muslims are un-American. All of
these concerns culminated in hostility toward Muslims on campus, which have made the college experience and college completion more challenging for many Muslims students.

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to understand the community college experiences of Arab Muslim students and islamophobia. Using a constructivist approach to exploring the lived experiences of Muslim college students, this dissertation looks at how islamophobia shapes belongingness on community college campus. My research questions are as follows:

1. What were Arab Muslim community college students’ perceptions of islamophobia prior to enrollment?
2. How do Arab Muslim community college students perceive islamophobia mediating their relationships with peers and faculty?
3. How do Arab Muslim community college students perceive being accepted on campus?

By exploring sense of belonging, campus leaders may be able to address the needs of their Muslim student population more effectively amid racial hostility affecting the campus.

Community college, in particular, plays a central role in educating first-year students, minority students, and non-traditional students (Cohen, 1990; Pascarella et al., 2004) and provide educational programs and training that meet the needs and goals of these students (Kane & Rouse, 1999). They also enroll a large percentage of immigrants and students with immigrant backgrounds (Teranishi et al., 2011), which further indicates that the community college environment is an important area of research to examine.
In the following sections, I will first review the literature regarding the Arab Muslim identity and how they are socially, politically, and educationally situated in the United States. I will then discuss the theoretical and conceptual framework for this study, which is a sense of belonging. This will be followed by the research design section where I outline the methodology, methods, and other research elements. I will conclude by discussing the significance of this study and why it is critical for higher education scholars to expand research on Muslim students in higher education institutions.

Literature Review

The terms Arab and Muslim are often conflated when describing Middle Eastern individuals. Telhami (2002) explains that, while it is natural to interchange Arab and Muslim in everyday conversation or in the media, Arabs are not always Muslims and Muslims are not always Arabs. Arab is an ethnicity that includes different religions, subcultures, nationalities, practices, and customs (Kumar, Warnke, & Karabenick, 2014). Whereas, Muslim refers to someone who practices Islam (Telhami, 2002).

Terms like Muslim, Arab, Arab American, Muslim American, and Middle Eastern will be used interchangeably throughout the dissertation as different authors use different terms. However, individuals of Middle Eastern dissent, whether they are Muslim or not, are often perceived as Muslim and are subjected to islamophobia. This misconception of Middle Eastern identity is further provoked by negative rhetoric and misinformation of Islam and Middle Eastern culture (Ahmadi et al., 2019; Sekerka et al., 2017).
Muslims in the United States

Arab Muslims have been part of the American fabric for many generations. A sizable number of Africans who were brought to the U.S. as slaves were Muslims but were stripped from their religious identity because of their subservient status (Ghayur, 1981; Simmons, 2008). The earliest voluntary migration to the U.S. happened in the late 19th century, a number of whom were Europeans who assimilated into the larger society unattached to their Islamic faith and practice (Ghayur, 1981). It was not until the period after World War II when the United States saw an uptick of Middle Eastern migrants, most of whom were Arab Christians (Moore, 2007). Arab and Muslim immigrants from Southern Asia were not only concerned with the undisciplined practice of Islam by the first wave of Muslim immigrants but also had reminded them that Islam was a way of life that shaped behavior and lifestyle (Malinovich, 2006).

Bartkoski et al. (2018) refer to ethnic identity as cultural characteristics that include language, nationality, and physical features, while religious identity is based on doctrine and adherence to a particular system of belief. According to Alibeli and Yaghi (2012), 26% of U.S. Muslims are Middle Eastern Arabs, 24% are South Asian, 23% are African American, 10% are non-Middle Eastern Arabs, 6% are East Asian, and 11% are different ethnicities. In regards to their racial background, 41% are white (i.e., for those who identify as Arab, Middle Eastern, Persian/Iranian, and others are classified as white), 28% are Asian, 20% are black, less than 8% are Hispanic, and 3% who identify with another race (Pew Research Center, 2017). Despite the anti-Muslim rhetoric and American public sentiment, 92% of Muslims in the U.S. are proud to be American as well as 97% of them are proud to be Muslim (Pew Research Center, 2017).
The Muslim population in the United States is unclear since the U.S. Census Bureau does not collect information on religious identification (Mohamed & Smith, 2017; Telhami, 2002). However, Pew Research Center estimated that there were nearly 3.4 million Muslims living in the U.S. in 2017, and that number could reach 8 million by 2050 (Mohamed, 2018). Others estimated that there are 2.15 million Muslims in the country with 58% of them being first-generation immigrants (Lipka, 2017; Mohamed & Smith, 2017). Comparatively, 35% of U.S. Muslim adults are much younger than American adults, and a larger share prioritizes marriage and family, which has attributed to the growth of the Muslim population in the U.S. (Lipka, 2017). Finally, the majority of Muslims tend to settle in metropolitan areas, like New York, Los Angeles, and Chicago (Duran & Pipes, 2002).

U.S. public opinion polls have indicated that Americans are unsure if they should support Islam as part of mainstream society and whether Islam is compatible with democratic values (Mogahed & Mahmood, 2019; Sahgal & Mohamed, 2019). In the next section, I discuss some reasons why Americans may struggle to accept Islam as part of U.S. society. I frame this discussion through the concept of islamophobia and how it has not only played a role in the U.S.’s national security measures but also how it has negatively impacted Muslim communities. From there I will place islamophobia in a higher education context to deepen the discussion on the college experiences of Muslim students.
The emergence of islamophobia predated 9/11 and the 2016 presidential election of Donald Trump. In fact, it is rooted in earlier laws and policies such as the first Muslim ban from 1790 to 1944 when Muslims were deemed inassimilable and a threat to American society and therefore banned from becoming naturalized (Beydoun, 2017). With mischaracterizations and misrepresentations of Islam through images, ideas, and ideologies, Beydoun (2017) argued that islamophobia is undergirded by Orientalism, a theory that positions Islam as the primary threat to the U.S., and thus increasingly formed bigoted perceptions from non-Muslim Americans. The Runnymede Trust, which is a Commission for British Muslims and Islamophobia in response to the growth of Muslim racism in the United Kingdom, produced a report in 1997 that established the features and dimensions of islamophobic prejudice (Bukar, 2020):

1. Islam is seen as a monolithic bloc, static and unresponsive to change.
2. Islam is seen as separate and ‘other’. It does not have values in common with other cultures, is not affected by them and does not influence them.
3. Islam is seen as inferior to the West. It is seen as barbaric, irrational, primitive and sexist.
4. Islam is seen as violent, aggressive, threatening, supportive of terrorism and engaged in a ‘clash of civilizations’.
5. Islam is seen as a political ideology and it is used for political and military advantage.
6. Criticisms made of the West by Islam are rejected out of hand.
7. Hostility towards Islam is used to justify discriminatory practices towards Muslims and exclusion of Muslims from mainstream society.

8. Anti-Muslim hostility is seen as natural and normal. (p. 157)

Bukar (2020) suggested that islamophobia did not only engender more violence and discrimination but also was used to protect national identity – English, White, Christian. To this end, islamophobia victimizes all Muslims for the actions of the few (Eldik & Bell, 2012).

Ahmadi et al. (2019) and Sayyid (2014) described four manifestations of islamophobia that are apparent in the cognition and behavior of non-Muslim individuals. The first one is having an innate feeling of hostility toward Muslims. The way that the media and Western political ideology depict Muslims and Islam has made non-Muslims feel insecure and suspicious. The second is that innate feelings of hate are justified when non-Muslims are convinced that the Muslim culture and Islamic practices are oppressive to women and dangerous to the free world. The third manifestation is when structures and institutions ignore and marginalize the needs of Muslims, as well as encourage them to renounce their beliefs because of the threat that their culture and religion imposes on American values and democracy. The last manifestation is through policies that directly and indirectly affect the well-being of Muslims. The consequences of these policies lend to discriminate and racially profile Muslims altogether.

Because of the consistent fear of Islam and the misrepresentation of Muslims, the U.S. has homogenized and racially assaulted Muslims. A factor that often gives rise to islamophobia is the notion that an individual appears to look Muslim (Hossain, 2017; Kunst, Sam, & Ulleberg, 2012). Even though race is a social construct, islamophobia has not only targeted Islam but also has been linked to someone’s ethnicity, cultural differences, immigration status, and gender
(Sadek, 2017). In other words, islamophobia has become a set of ideas that combine all Muslims into one group and are being associated with violence, misogyny, and incompatibility with Western values (Garner & Selod, 2014). This has consequently led to racial profiling and persistent racism against Muslims.

Islamophobia has impacted both national security and higher education altogether. For one, the U.S. instituted the travel ban targeting Muslims to stop any possible threat that might inflict harm on Americans (Ahmadi et al., 2019). Former President Trump closed the U.S. borders from certain Muslim countries as a national security measure (Burkett & Hayes, 2018). In effect, the border closing reduced refugee numbers from Muslim and Arab communities, separated families, confused the immigration process, and altered perceptions of Muslims, which heightened racial and religious antipathy against them (Waheed, 2018).

The first of three Muslim bans issued by Donald Trump, Executive Order 13769 on January 27, 2017 that banned individuals from seven Muslim majority countries, had implications for higher education and the campus environment. Muslim students already in the U.S. endured increased incidents of discrimination and believed that they were inferior to others (Aziz, 2020). While Muslim college students and faculty make immeasurable contributions to their campuses, college administration have often failed to address structural islamophobia and ensure safety and protection of their Muslim students and colleagues (Rifahie, 2020). This included physical attacks, institutional silence and suspicion, and anti-Muslim political rhetoric. Additionally, the Muslim travel ban created a campus climate that made Muslim students feel stigmatized, disrespected and excluded from campus life and connection (Campana et al., 2017), as well as harboring feelings of hostility and apprehension (Whitehead et al., 2019).
With institutional and cultural continuity of islamophobia, Muslims on college campuses face unique challenges in combating Muslim racism and finding safe spaces to build a community with shared values. Next I will expand the discussion on Muslims in higher education – particularly in a community college context – and how their college experiences are shaped. Both Muslim Americans and Muslim international students stress that higher education is a priority for them as is attaining a college degree (Cole & Ahmadi, 2010).

**Muslims in Higher Education**

Most research on Muslim college students is combined with the research on international students, thus the statistical data and research findings specific to Muslim students are difficult to separate (Ahmadi et al., 2019; Cole & Ahmadi, 2003). Furthermore, there is a difference in experience between American-born Muslim students and the experiences of Muslim international students. While the research often conflates these groups, there is no clear indication on how Muslim domestic students and Muslim international students differ in regards to graduation rates, college access and experiences, and cultural integration. As there is an abundance of literature examining community college experiences of other minority and racialized minority groups, there is still little information on the college experiences of Muslim students in four-year and two-year postsecondary institutions.

**Community Colleges**

There is significant attention directed toward community colleges by national, state, and local initiatives to expand the labor force (Rose et al., 2019). Community college is commonly
known for its rich cultural and racial environment which enrolls students from various socioeconomic, immigrant, and ethnic backgrounds (Rose et al., 2019). Additionally, these types of institutions are accessible and affordable for many students especially those who come from low-income communities (Carales & Hooker, 2019). For underserved students who leave high school without developing strong literacy and math skills, many of them make a decision between choosing a community college or not attending college at all (Goldrick-Rab, 2010).

Despite providing high-quality education and experience, the community college landscape has particular challenges. One of those challenges is fighting against the stereotype that community college students, particularly students of color, lack academic potential and intellectual superiority (Casanova, McGuire, & Martin, 2018). Another challenge is the limited resources to adequately achieve their mission to provide academic, vocational, noncredit, and enrichment courses (Zeidenburg, 2008). And most pressingly, a number of students who enroll in community colleges are not academically prepared to undertake college-level work (Zeidenburg, 2008). The lack of academic preparedness has expanded remedial education, which has ultimately reduced the success rate of students (Clotfelter et al., 2015). As the central mission of community colleges is student success and efforts to retain students remain a high priority, community colleges continue to struggle with improving student retention and achieving degree completion (Franke & Bricknell, 2019).

It is unclear of the educational preference that Muslim students make between community college and a four-year university. As previously mentioned, the literature on Muslim students in community college is limited, and little is known about their educational
behaviors and decisions. Thus, I presume that reasons based on accessibility, affordability, and convenience might possibly influence their decisions to attend a community college.

**Muslim College Student Experience**

Attitudes toward Muslims negatively shifted after the event of 9/11, causing many Arab Muslim international students to either return to or remain in their home countries in fear of becoming victimized (Lee & Rice, 2007). With the increased spread of religious bias, islamophobia, and xenophobia, Arab Muslim college students are facing stigma and discrimination within higher education (Ahmadi & Cole, 2020). Also, Donald Trump’s presidency and his travel ban policy underscored the importance of religious and interfaith diversity and identity in higher education in which his leadership and rhetoric have detrimentally impacted religious minorities (Beirich, 2018).

After 9/11, Arab Muslim students reported the college experiences being more stressful and anxious. One of the major concerns they had on college campuses was how their identity affected other college students (Nasir & Al-Amin, 2006). Being judged and stereotyped created fear especially when Muslim students engaged in daily prayers (Nasir & Al-Amin, 2006). Muslim students who experienced forms of oppression or discrimination hid away their experiences instead of speaking out against them to avoid any confrontation that could endanger them in some way (Ahmadi et al., 2019).

In spite of the challenges they face on campus, Muslim students have also reported positive experiences amid hostility. Whitehead and colleagues (2019) observed that there was an outpouring of support from peers and the broader campus community for Muslim students after
the first Muslim ban. While the institution did not denounce the travel ban order, nor explicitly state support for Muslim students, the institution ensured the safety and well-being of the campus community and continued to assess the impact of the order. Despite the silence coming from campus leaders, Whitehead et al. (2019) reported that Muslim student organizations took an active role in supporting Muslims as well as advocating for their rights. Finally, they emphasized that some Muslim students utilized counterstories, forms of self-expression, and other forms of resistance to speak out against injustice and racism toward them.

Racial Microaggressions. Acts of racism are commonly practiced through racial microaggressions. Racial microaggressions are subtle acts of racism that have harmful impacts, but because they have become normalized, they are difficult to detect (Harris, 2019). For example, implicit bias research shows that most people support equality, but still exhibit behaviors and emotions that are perceived as biased even though it may be unintentional (Boysen, 2012). Because racial microaggressions are everyday occurrences, Ballinas (2012) argues that these acts of racism have resulted in fostering subordination and systemic racism.

Cueva (2014) explains that racism exists through institutional systems where white privilege, economic injustice, and power justify the inferiority of racialized groups. Racial diversity has increased within the past decade on college campuses, and the culture within these academic institutions have minimized issues of racial inequality, assimilation to White culture, and the maintenance of racial hierarchies (Smith, Bowman, & Hsu, 2007). Racial microaggressions are often committed by White peers, faculty, and staff (Nadal et al., 2014). As postsecondary institutions continue to face intense racial climates, more racialized minority students are seeking out counterspaces to combat racism (Johnston-Guerrero, 2016).
Racial microaggressions are systemically mediated by institutionalized racism (Huber & Solorzano, 2015). There are three subcategories of microaggressions outlined by Pittman (2012). The first one is microassaults, which are overt racist interactions such as a racial slur. The second one is microinsults, which are subtle interactions that demean someone’s racial identity. The third is microinvalidations, which deny or invalidate minority experiences. Racial microaggressions are also layered assaults on an individual’s race, gender, class, sexuality, language, immigration status, phenotype, accent, and surname (Huber & Solorzano, 2015).

Regardless of the categories of microaggressions, victims of these attacks undergo self-doubt, frustration, and isolation, and tend to internalize emotion that could be mentally damaging (Locke & Trolian, 2018). When acts of racial microaggressions remain undetected in society and within institutions, the white assumption on racism remains systemic and deeply entrenched, complicating the discussion on race and racism in society, in schools, and among friends and family (Minikel-Lacocque, 2013; Sue et al., 2009).

An important note to point out is that racial microaggressions that target Muslims commonly center their attacks on Islam (Nadal et al., 2012). And given to the racialization of Islam, Muslims in general feel the pressure of defending their faith. For example, a common microaggression based on religion that undermines and frustrates Arabs and Muslims is the misinformation about Islam perpetuated by non-Muslims (Haque et al., 2019). Also, Muslims feel forced to become a spokesperson for their religion while defending Islam’s right to co-exist with Christianity (Haque et al., 2019). However, research findings related to religious microaggressions are inconclusive and need more studies (Kaplin, 2017; Nadal et al., 2012).
While there should be more studies that focus on the experiences of Muslim students in higher education, the little information that is available suggests that Muslim college students continue to face islamophobia and other forms of racism due to their cultural and religious backgrounds. These negative experiences could have severe impact on education for Muslim students. To make campus more inviting for Muslim students, Hailu et al. (2018) recommend that campus should be more culturally responsive to collectively focus more efforts on ensuring mutual success for all students with different racial and religious backgrounds, and to build safe and inclusive spaces where students can build a supportive community. With these efforts, the campus would be more welcoming and inclusive for Muslim students as well as reduce various forms of hostility affecting them. 

Having space for spiritual expression has also been suggested (Rochenbach et al., 2017). Religious tolerance toward Islam helps Muslim students feel more valued and accepted as part of the campus community (Cole & Ahmadi, 2010). As Muslim students rely on Islam to direct their lives, they find encouragement and motivation through Islamic teachings and practices as a way for them to persist in college (Cole & Ahmadi, 2010; Whitehead et al., 2019). One might presume that religious diversification on campus can direct Muslim students to college persistence and a sense of belonging. However, Cole and Ahmadi (2010) also warn that religious identity and religious-related campus activities positively affecting students’ academic success remain undetermined as findings from other studies focusing on religiosity are inconclusive.
Summary

The role of colleges and universities is to educate the citizenry and to democratize society regardless of the demography of the students. It is a place where students can share their ideas, culture, and personal beliefs without being censored or feeling inferior. Most importantly, the university is an institution that embraces and maintains all forms of diversity. Despite the fact that there may be cultural, social, and political dissonance between Americans and Muslims, the Muslim community is part of the American identity and the members of this community strive to better themselves through education and social participation.

In the next section, I will discuss the theoretical framework that guides this study. College in general can bring a number of challenges and uncertainties for first-year students. From changing study habits to navigating the college campus, students could feel overwhelmed and convince themselves that college is not for them. Thus, ensuring that students feel they are part of the college campus is essential to student participation and success.

Theoretical Framework

I will be framing my study through the notion of belongingness. College campuses are becoming more racially and culturally diverse, and the need for higher education institutions to create a more inclusive learning environment for all students is critical. The community college, in particular, not only enrolls a high percentage of minority, non-traditional, and immigrant students but also faces numerous factors that undermine retention among these populations (Fong et al., 2017). Thus, understanding how minority students perceive the campus environment and campus culture will provide insight on their overall sense of belonging.
Baumeister and Leary (1995) hypothesized that the need to belong is innate, and that humans are naturally driven to have interpersonal relationships to sustain a sense of belonging. With extensive review of empirical evidence, they concluded that a) people have the desire to form social attachments, b) anyone with shared/common experiences or frequent meet-ups often form friendships, c) the need to belong shapes emotions and cognition, and d) the need to belong seems to lead to motivational patterns of satiation and substitution, which means that having the right amount of friends satisfies belongingness and those members who do not contribute to the overall health of the social group can be replaced with new members. Other studies support these findings in which belongingness plays an integral part of engaging students’ learning and contributes to the students’ motivation to persist in school (Hausmann et al., 2007; Hu, 2011; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Maestas et al., 2007; Newman et al., 2015).

**Campus Climate**

Students’ perception of their sense of belonging is further dependent on the organizational culture and learning environment of their campus. Campus climate is described as patterns of attitudes, behaviors, and feelings that characterize organizational life (Victorino et al., 2013). The study of campus climate also accounts for patterns of behavior such as student-faculty interaction; their perception of the institution such as their image of what campus diversity entails; and their feelings about the institution and the level of morale students have (Peterson & Spencer, 1990; Victorino et al., 2013). Exposure to a climate that maintains hostility most likely influences students’ enrollment decisions (Cabrera et al., 1999).
Campus Racial Climate

Studies demonstrate that students of color perceive campus climate more negatively than White students (Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Johnson et al., 2014; Solorzano et al., 2000). Campus racial climate research examines racial discrimination/prejudice, stereotypes, institutional responses to racial conflict, and interaction among racial/ethnic groups (Johnson et al., 2014). Hurtado et al. (1998, p. 282) defined four dimensions of campus racial climate: a) institution’s historical legacy of inclusion or exclusion of various racial/ethnic groups, b) its structural diversity in terms of numerical representation of various racial/ethnic groups, c) the psychological climate of perceptions and attitudes between and among groups, and d) the behavioral climate dimension characterized by intergroup relations on campus. When hostility arises on campus, historically and marginalized students often experience greater threats to their well-being and educational attainment (Abrica & Hatch-Tocaimaza, 2019) compared to their non-minority peers (Victorino et al., 2013).

Sense of Belonging

While white students reported a stronger sense of belonging, minority students had challenging experiences (Johnson et al., 2007). For example, Black students were less confident and had a low sense of belonging when they struggled transitioning into college (Strayhorn et al., 2015). Also, Newman et al. (2015) reported that Black students who prioritized their education
and learning had good faculty interaction, which helped them stay committed. However, non-traditional Black students perceived their sense of belonging with their faculty as negative, which disengaged them. Newman et al. also documented that Black students endured racial and gender stereotypes from faculty. Furthermore, minority students entering college tend to populate remedial classes because they often lack the literacy skills to do college-level work, which lowers their self-confidence and develops a sense of exclusion (Carter, 2006).

Ethnic minority students such as Latinos and Asians tend to have low levels of belongingness. Due to family and cultural obligations, ethnic minority students often experience a lack of socialization, alienation, and homesickness (Meeuwisse et al., 2010). They also undergo minority stress. Wei et al. (2011) define minority stress as “unique stresses experienced by minority students that interfere with their college adjustment and integration into the university community” (p. 195). LeBlanc et al. (2015) view minority stress as dominant social systems that sustain “structural, systematic, and interpersonal disadvantage” (p. 43) of members from a minority group including sexual minorities and race/ethnic minorities. Their experiences are different from white experiences in a way that minorities are exposed to unique stressors such as internalization of negative social beliefs of one’s social identity, the association of a stigmatized identity, and experiences of discrimination and rejection (LeBlanc et al., 2015). As a result, minority stress contributes to a decrease in persistence for minority students. It can negatively influence students’ social and academic integration on campus as well.
Cultural Shock

Culture shock is a phenomenon that is associated with a struggle in changing culture in which the mother culture still plays a dominant role in one’s decision to either accept the new culture or to repatriate (Anderson, 1971). There are 14 factors that contribute to culture shock, which are communication, dress, ethics, individualism/collectivism, food, language, structure, perception, power, distance, religion, rules, time orientation, traditions, and weather (Rabia, 2017, p. 132). The inability to adapt to the new linguistic and cultural environment of the campus may increase the stress and anxiety level (Lee & Rice, 2007).

Persistence

College persistence has been linked with academic achievement and social engagement (Hu, 2011). There is also a link between campus marginalization and lower levels of college persistence (Hailu et al., 2018). Even though colleges and universities have shifted their resources to the minority/ethnic student population to increase persistence and completion, minority students continue to graduate at lower rates than white students (Carter, 2006; Museus & Quaye, 2009). Both Carter (2006) and Museus and Quaye (2009) did not specifically mention statistical data on Muslim students as their primary focus was mainly the Black and Latinx student population. However, similar patterns might be evident for Arab Muslim students as well when they endure marginalization and hostility on campus. Rabia (2017) added that, for Muslim
international students specifically, having a wide array of support from peers, faculty, student success centers, and campus administration contributes to positive college experiences.

In sum, ensuring that minority students feel welcomed, accepted, and appreciated can contribute to their college success and make the college experience more valuable. In the following section, I will discuss my research design and my approach to understanding the essence of what it is like to be a Muslim on campus.

Research Design

In the following section, I will explain my research design. First, I will rationalize why I chose constructivist epistemology as a meaning-making approach. Second, I will give insights on my methodology and its pertinence to this dissertation. Next, I will explain my methods of data collection and analysis. Finally, I will share my personal narrative on researcher reflexivity.

Constructivism

Constructivism is the belief that there are multiple realities, and knowledge is co-constructed through individual experience (Abes, 2016). That is, reality is created when meaning and knowledge are constructed through the interactions of individuals with an understanding that truth in one context may not be the same in another (Burkholder & Burbank, 2020). The chief assumption that constructivism holds is that the knowledge that the subjects possess has vital implications for how behavior or actions are interpreted (Magoon, 1977). Finally, a core belief of
constructivism is that knowledge is not found but rather constructed, whereby knowledge develops when learners actively engage in meaning-making (Ultanir, 2012).

Crotty (2003) and Muñoz (2015) posit that (a) much of constructivist scholarship is focused on the construction of meaning; (b) constructivism is based on historical and social worldviews; and (c) meaning is essentially created through constant interaction and socialization with a human community. For educational researchers, the most basic skill of applying a constructivist lens in education is to approach a certain phenomenon held by the participants with unfeigned interest in learning more about its origins, story, and implications (Confrey, 1990). Therefore, centering the voices of the participants in all parts of my research will be critical.

I believe that using a constructivist paradigm will uncover the ways in which Islamophobia has infiltrated the learning environment and how it has camouflaged itself as part of the campus culture. Through the meaning-making process, participants will have the opportunity to share their lived experiences as a Muslim student on campus.

Phenomenology

As for my methodology, I will use phenomenology. Phenomenology focuses on the essence of a particular phenomenon (Creswell, 2007; Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2014). It explores the meaning of people’s lived experiences and assumes that the central meaning of that particular phenomenon is important to investigate (Hancock & Algozzine, 2017). Likewise, Kafle (2011) pointed out that phenomenology aims to focus on people’s perceptions of the world and what the world means to them. This methodological approach recognizes that the human
experience is complex and is grounded in intersubjective experiences (Bevan, 2014). The goal of phenomenology is to describe the meaning of experiences by explicating the \textit{what} and \textit{how} of meaning (Neubauer, Witkop, & Varpio, 2019). Phenomenology is both a popular and reliable method of understanding how a particular phenomenon shapes experiences (Hesse-Biber, 2017).

To capture the essence of the college experiences of Muslim students, phenomenology will allow them to reflect on their life experiences and describe their worldview to construct specific knowledge based on their lived experiences. While the participants may have similar definitions and notions about Islamophobia, their experiences will most likely differ.

**Research Site**

The research will take place at a large community college in the Midwest. The college enrolls more than 26,400 credit and noncredit students annually, where 34\% of students are full time and 66\% are part time. According to the institution’s website, 41\% of its students are minorities. The college is located near “Little Palestine”, which is a growing Middle Eastern community with bakeries, Arab grocery stores and restaurants, and small fashion shops.

The college runs a large Intensive English Language program for both international and residential students whose first language is not English. Based on their placement test, these students are placed in the program to improve their academic English. As a faculty member in the language program, many Arab and Muslim students enroll in the language classes.
Participants and Recruitment

I will use purposeful sampling (Jones et al., 2014) to recruit 8-10 participants. I will select Arab Muslim students who have attended the college pre-COVID for at least two semesters. Criteria for inclusion will be: (a) participants need to self-identify as Arab Muslim, (b) participants are willing to share the benefits and challenges attending community college, and (c) participants have taken a couple courses outside the language program. Countries that are predominantly Muslim are Algeria, Bahrain, Comoros, Djibouti, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates, and Yemen (Modir & Kia, 2018). Having taught many Arab Muslims at the college for several years, I have learned that the majority of Muslim students attending the college come from these countries.

Recruitment materials inviting Arab Muslim students will be sent to the directors of Multicultural Student Affairs (MSA) and International Student Affairs (ISA) to be distributed and shared with student organizations. MSA provides a support system for minority students, including Muslims. Muslim students who are not categorized as an international student seek support from MSA. The office promotes integration into the college environment and academic success. ISA assists with immigration compliance, visa, passports, and housing needs for international students. The office helps students who are new to the U.S. and to the campus. Also, I will ask the Dean and Assistant Dean of Adult Education, faculty colleagues, and former students for their assistance in inviting participants.
Included in the recruitment materials will be an interest form and demographic information. They will briefly explain the study and ask for basic demographic background of the participants. In addition to sending this form to my colleagues, I will also give it to my current students in which the study is being conducted. Depending on whether or not students have satisfied certain requirements, the college permits students in second language preparatory courses to take college credit courses at the same time. In the interest form, I will include language that addresses this criteria as well as my contact information.

Methods of Data Collection

I will conduct two semi-structured interviews. The first interview will focus on the participant’s decision-making process to attend college and how Islamophobia played a role in their decisions. The second interview will examine more of their college experiences and how their Muslim identity shaped their sense of belonging. The structure of the interview is designed to ascertain subjective responses from participants who have sufficient experience in the phenomenon that is being studied (Jones et al., 2014; McIntosh & Morse, 2015). The interview protocol is less strict with several open-ended questions that allow participants to respond openly and freely, while I probe those responses for clarification and additional information (McIntosh & Morse, 2015). Typically in a semi-structured interview, the ordering and wording of questions are undetermined as participants involve themselves in the structure and process of the interview (Jones et al., 2014).
I anticipate each interview will last between 60 to 90 minutes. The interviews will be conducted in person on campus following social distancing protocols. However, if the participant wishes to conduct the interview virtually due to COVID and safety concerns, I will not object. As the researcher, though, I would prefer to conduct the interviews in person rather than online. I feel that the interview and conversation would be more meaningful, interactive, and less disruptive when the researcher and participant are in the same environment.

All interviews will be audio recorded. Based on the consent form that participants will have received, participants will have the right to end the recording and the interview altogether if they feel they can no longer answer the questions due to traumatic past experiences or personal concerns. After the interviews, I will hire a professional transcribing company to provide the transcription of all the interviews. In the end, each participant will receive a copy of their own transcript from their individual interviews if they wish. I will also give participants a $25 gift card as a thank you for volunteering their time to participate in this study.

Methods of Data Analysis

I will use Moustakas’ (1994) framework of phenomenological analysis to analyze my data. The analysis includes \textit{epoche}, reduction, imaginative variation, and synthesis. My rationale for this analytical approach is that scientific investigation is valid when knowledge is derived and understood through the essence and meaning of experience, which is an essential component to phenomenology (Moustakas, 1994). As for my coding system, I will use open coding because codes are drawn from the data and not created beforehand to apply to the data (Blair, 2015).
Specifically, I will use first cycle coding methods—simultaneous coding and descriptive coding—described by Saldaña (2016). According to Saldaña (2016), simultaneous coding refers to assigning two or more different codes to the data and descriptive coding summarizes a code in more descriptive wording or phrasing for topic clarity.

**Epoche**

Moustakas (1994) defines epoche as freedom from suppositions where the researcher sets aside “prejudgments, biases, and preconceived ideas about things” (p. 85). He viewed the epoche process not only as a preparation for gaining new knowledge but also a process of setting aside predisposition and allowing people or events to enter in a new consciousness as if they had discovered the information for the first time.

However, no matter how unique and careful the research project is designed, the transmission of assumptions, values, and preconceptions is inevitable and may affect the way participants behave and respond during the interviewing process (Tufford & Newman, 2012). To modify the process of epoche, Ahren (1999) and McNarry, Allison-Collinson, and Evans (2018) suggest that the researcher engages in reflexive bracketing. Reflexive bracketing requires researchers to identify their personal and internal suppositions before investigating the phenomenon in an effort to minimize impact and reduce any influence (Gearing, 2004).

Reflexivity, or critical reflection, is the continuing process of having an internal dialogue of the researcher’s positionality and active acknowledgement that may affect the research outcome (Berger, 2015). Probst (2015) defined reflexivity as the action in which the researcher
directs attention back to themselves, while Gilgun (2008) view reflexivity as an opportunity to be more connected to knowledge between the researcher and subjects. Reflexivity is the responsibility of the researcher to reflect upon their situatedness within the research and how their personal experience may affect the people being studied, the questions being asked, and the data being interpreted (Berger, 2015). Thus, an important goal of reflexivity is to account for the researcher’s values, beliefs, knowledge, and biases as a way to monitor the researcher’s involvement and detachment with the participants’ lived experiences (Berger, 2015).

Reduction

The second step in the analysis is phenomenological reduction. Moustakas (1994) describes this step in which the researcher dedicates a large amount of time looking over the data and describing any relevance or essential information that relates to the phenomenon. He emphasizes that the researcher should view the phenomenon from different angles and pursue the phenomenon to the point of exhausting what the data offers. This step requires that the researcher engages in prereflection, reflection, and reduction concentrating on explicating the essential nature of the phenomenon. Moustakas (1994) concludes with the three-step process of phenomenological reduction:

1. Bracketing – the researcher sets aside predispositions and solely focuses on the topic and question related to the phenomenon.

2. Horizontalizing – the researcher initially values every statement, but statements that are irrelevant, overlapping, and repetitive are deleted.
3. Horizons – the researcher reduces the data and highlights the information that is essential to the phenomenon. Then the researcher clusters the horizons into themes that coherently and texturally provide descriptions of the phenomenon.

**Imaginative Variation**

The next step in the research process is imaginative variation. Moustakas (1994) explains that imaginative variation is tasked with seeking possible meanings through imagination, frames of reference, polarities and reversals, divergent perspectives, and different positions, roles, and functions. It intends to answer the question of how the experience of the phenomenon come to be what it is. Moustakas stresses that the major task of imaginative variation is to describe the essential structures of a phenomenon. That is, it distances itself from measurable entities and focuses on the meaning and essences instead.

The end goal of imaginative variation is reaching the point of essence (Moustakas, 1994). To reach that goal, Moustakas points out that the imaginative process includes a reflective phase where the researcher reflectively examines and explicates the many possibilities derived from the data. He further adds that the imaginative variation enables the researcher to develop structural themes that were collected from the previous step. What this entails is that the researcher imagines possible structures of time, space, materiality, causality, and relationship to self and others. Finally, the researcher understands that within this step that there is no singular truth, but rather exists the endless possibilities of meaning and essence of an experience. The steps of imaginative variation include (Moustakas, 1994, p. 99):
1. Systemic varying of the possible structural meanings that underlie the textural meaning;

2. Recognizing the underlying themes or contexts that account for the emergence of the phenomenon;

3. Considering the universal structures that precipitate feelings and thoughts with reference to the phenomenon, such as the structure of time, space, bodily concerns, materiality, causality, relation to self, or relation to others;

4. Searching for exemplifications that vividly illustrate the invariant structural themes and facilitate the development of a structural description of the phenomenon.

Applying the process of imaginative variation is necessary to understand the essence of meaning and truth deriving from people’s experiences. Intuition is imaginative and allows the researcher to examine the various experiences surrounding the phenomenon.

**Synthesis**

The final step is synthesizing the meaning and essence. Moustakas (1994) summarizes the last step as the researcher’s role in intuitively integrating textural and structural descriptions into unified statements describing the essence, thus establishing the knowledge of essence. He says that the textural-structural synthesis occurs when the researcher has finally exhausted the data and has sincerely reflected upon the phenomenon. In other words, the researcher reaches the point in the research analysis to engage in introspection and discuss what the experiences of the people reveal about the particular phenomenon.
Trustworthiness

I will use three strategies to increase trustworthiness and quality. I will be using purposeful sampling to recruit my participants (Coyne, 1997). Considering the vast ethnic and religious composition of Arab Americans, I am specifically selecting participants who have direct experience with the phenomenon that is being studied. The research cite is also carefully selected. MVCC enrolls Muslim community college students with varying immigration status from international to domestic through its Intensive English Program. In most cases, students who complete the English program enroll in college-credit courses where they will be learning alongside non-Muslim classmates. While some Muslim students are already familiar with the American campus, there are many who are unfamiliar with how they should navigate campus resources and interact with campus staff and administrators to obtain information. Finally, participants will have already been exposed to the hostile messages asserted by President Trump to some extent, and they may have already internalized their struggle to cope with the negativity.

I will also use member checking (Harper & Cole, 2012). This method allows the participants to look over their transcript and check for accuracy. The goal here is to ensure that the participants match their words to their intended meaning. I want to give participants the opportunity to think about what they said and why they said it to make sure that their statements are emotionally authentic.

My last technique to maintain credibility is reflexivity (Watt, 2007). During the reflexive process, I will first outline the steps of the reflexive process so that I can precisely document
various things –behaviors, thoughts, and inferences – that happen at a certain time within the interviews. Then I will keep a personal journal to reflect what I have learned from each participant and how their experiences relate to mine in some way.

The journaling will happen after each interview as I will be applying epoche during the interviews to avoid imposing my suppositions. My journaling may benefit my overall research experience by enhancing my follow up questions and conversation with the next participant and creating a deeper understanding of the systemic issues that my participants and I encounter in our lives. I will not share my personal notes with the participants though I will comment on some aspects of my experience if the conversation requires my input. Ultimately, my goal is to make my conversations more meaningful and rich.

Research Reflexivity

As a minority and immigrant, I have been a victim of systemic racism and discrimination. I have also endured racial bigotry more than once growing up. Even though I was not born in the United States, I spent most of my life living and practicing the American culture. In fact, I am confident to say that I am more American than Asian with a stronger command of the English language than my native language. I grew up in a predominantly white community and attended an all-white high school with the exceptions of very few Blacks and Asians. Yet, my willingness to acculturate into American society did not protect me from oppressive systems.

Being culturally and racially different from my white peers in public school was not always comfortable for me. For one, I did not have anyone with whom I could relate or connect
my experiences, so making friends was challenging. For another, a number of my classmates and teachers unintentionally committed racial microaggressions against me on several occasions throughout my schooling. One example that comes to mind was my constant discomfort when teachers would always pair me up with another minority student or foreign exchange student. Perhaps they thought my partner and I had shared values because of our status.

I know firsthand how challenging it is to work hard in school while overcoming racism, bias, and discrimination. One would think that the academic institution would be the one place to feel accepted and treated equally as a racially minoritized student, but American schools are structured in a way that seems to support white students more than minority students. Sometimes it feels like the school culture and environment were intentionally designed to make it much harder for minority students to successfully pursue and achieve their education. The stress and emotions that one goes through to face dehumanization can be overwhelming at times.

My personal experience in attending American schools as a minority has led me to a deeper curiosity in the college success of Muslim college students. While I neither have connection with Muslim culture nor familiarity with Islamic practices and beliefs, the majority of students I teach in the Intensive English program are Muslims. Admittedly, the news and social media are the main avenues of information that I receive regarding the politics and welfare of Muslims in the United States. I have not ventured out and read scholarly books that provide a balanced overview of Muslims in the U.S. prior to this dissertation. In fact, the word islamophobia had no impact on me until I started teaching Muslim students in college.

What I have in common with Muslim students is my non-dominant racial status and the challenges and expectations we endure to survive an educational system created by white
architects. I believe that colorblind racism and the white mantra “judge character and not color” are underwhelming efforts to dismantle dominance and racism in society and in schools. For Muslim students, however, they not only have to endure the challenges I face but also work hard to overcome an islamophobic environment that disrupts their learning. When the country is entrenched in Islamic bigotry because of political ideology and it pervades throughout different institutions, the college experience of Muslim students could have deleterious effects.

Significance

Despite the spread of Islamophobia affecting higher education enrollment, pedagogy, campus climate, and social identity of Arab Muslim college students (Mir & Sarroub, 2019), there is little research information about Muslim students overall (Ahmadi et al., 2019). The information that is available estimates that Muslim college students comprise 1 percent of the overall student population in higher education (Rockenbach et al., 2017). I believe that my study will contribute to the body of knowledge on student development and expand the research on Muslim students and their college-going experiences specifically.

Given to the racialized experiences of Arab Muslim students on campus, I believe it is time to break down the aggregation of racial and ethnic categories into specific categories. Aggregating racial and ethnic data tends to misrepresent and obscure statistical information on specific racial groups (Espinosa et al., 2019). The aggregated data often reported in educational research focuses on the larger racial categories, such as Blacks and Whites with minimal attention to Alaskan Natives or Pacific Islanders (de Brey et al., 2019). According to the Office
of Management and Budget and other researchers I have cited throughout my dissertation, Arabs are legally categorized as white (de Brey et al., 2019). Arguably, my study will support current research demonstrating that the Arab Muslim college student experience is not the same as whites nor do they benefit from whiteness. Therefore, reclassifying them is imperative because college leaders and activists may finally accept islamophobia as a social justice issue.

In addition to advocating for disaggregation of racial and ethnic data, my research will also contribute to the reframing of college leadership as campuses promote racial diversity. There has been an increase in diversity on college campuses over the past decade, and colleges and universities have engaged in systemic efforts to emphasize inclusion, fairness, and equality by implementing diversity programs and other cultural initiatives (Worthington et al., 2008). However, the college campus has witnessed a resurgence of race-related incidents as the attitude toward race changed. Since the presidential election of Donald Trump, disenfranchisement, delegitimization, and bigotry toward minorities burgeoned nationwide (Luttig et al., 2017) and fueled white nationalism in the process (Clark, 2020). Consequently, the college campus became a battleground for racial and political conflict where students morphed into activists and protestors in response to the destabilization of race relations in the U.S. (Broadhurst & Velez, 2019). Particularly, immigrants and Muslims had been the primary targets of former President Trump’s divisive rhetoric (Major et al., 2018).

The college campus is a place where students can build awareness and have appreciation for racial diversity, and it is responsible for cultivating a hospitable racial climate that recognizes the contributions of racialized minorities (Cole & Harper, 2017; Hurtado & Ruiz, 2012). To build such awareness, college leaders should understand the political and cultural nature of
different racial and ethnic groups to better serve them and implement policies that specifically reflect the cultural and racial needs of the institution. For my research, I hope my findings will help college leaders consider reframing their practices that can sensibly align with the needs of Arab Muslim students and to make the campus environment more welcoming.

Higher education researchers need to build scholarship dedicated to Arab Muslim students in order to understand their experiences and identity. It is important that researchers extend their research to focus on the Arab Muslim college student experience as campus racial diversity continues to expand. I believe that my research will assist in building an important body of knowledge that can improve not only effective responses to racial diversity on campus but also the college experiences of Muslim students in community college.
CHAPTER 2
PARTICIPANT PROFILES

This chapter provides an overview of each participant. Knowing the background of each participant aided in understanding their lived experiences as community college students and their perception of islamophobia in their lives. Their life story were unique and diverse in terms of their decisions to pursue higher education at a large U.S. community college in the Midwest. Their response to islamophobia and its impact on their college experience was also distinctive as they discovered their own ways to cope with anti-Muslim sentiments pervading across the country and within their social and educational settings. Their motivation to share their campus experience underscores the critical importance of recognizing and acknowledging their racial and religious identity, as well as addressing the social and cultural challenges they face on campus as Arab Muslim students.

Ten individuals agreed to participate in this study. Participants included five women and five men with ages ranging from 20 to 41. Concerning with community college completion, the majority of the participants had already completed at least two years or more by the time they were interviewed. Table 1 is a summary of the demographic information of the participants with their pseudonyms that they chose (see Table 1).
Table 1

Participant Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Nationality</th>
<th>Religion</th>
<th>Years/Semesters in Community College</th>
<th>Enrollment Status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abu Amer</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>Jordanian</td>
<td>Islam</td>
<td>2 years</td>
<td>Enrolled</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AJ</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>Iraqi</td>
<td>Islam</td>
<td>3 semesters</td>
<td>Enrolled</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ali</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>Jordanian</td>
<td>Christianity</td>
<td>2 years</td>
<td>Enrolled</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avvan</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>American</td>
<td>Islam</td>
<td>2 years</td>
<td>Not Enrolled</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Judy</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Syrian</td>
<td>Islam</td>
<td>3 years</td>
<td>Not Enrolled</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Memo</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Jordanian</td>
<td>Islam</td>
<td>2 years</td>
<td>Not Enrolled</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moe</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>American</td>
<td>Islam</td>
<td>2 semesters</td>
<td>Enrolled</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nada</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Egyptian</td>
<td>Islam</td>
<td>2 years</td>
<td>Not Enrolled</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Noor</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Yemeni</td>
<td>Islam</td>
<td>3 semesters</td>
<td>Enrolled</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yeb</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>Jordanian</td>
<td>Islam</td>
<td>2 years</td>
<td>Enrolled</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The following profiles of each participant shares information about their backgrounds and reasons for attending community college. Then I will discuss their perspective of campus environment and the Muslim community on campus.

Abu Amer

Abu Amer was charismatic, hardworking, and focused. He was born in Jordan and graduated from nursing school in his home country. Like many others, his credentials needed to be recertified, so he was taking classes at the community college to fulfill his dream of being a nurse in America. However, his endeavor to become a nurse was also accompanied by his fear of islamophobia and not being accepted by non-Muslims. Abu Amer struggled to connect with his non-Muslim peers because he felt that they do not want to make the effort to know someone who was Muslim. He feared that they might judge him and see him in a negative way.
While he acknowledged the reality of islamophobia, Abu Amer was focused on achieving his academic goal and dream to become a nurse. He understood that there was a significant chance that he would be a target of islamophobia some day because of his name and physical features. He has accepted the notion that Islamophobia could take place on campus as well. Despite his thinking, Abu Amer has pushed himself to persevere through adversity because his family was relying on him to achieve his academic and dream goal. Abu Amer is currently enrolled and is studying nursing.

AJ grew up in Baghdad, Iraq and graduated college one year after September 11. He identified as Arab Muslim and then as an American. However, he hesitated to say Arab Muslim all the time because of his past experiences with Islamophobia and how others treated him. For example, he recalled a time when he was denied gas at the gas station. The gas attendant noticed his name on his credit card and refused him service. AJ left the gas station without confronting the attendant because he feared that he and his family, who were in the car at the time, could get hurt. Even though he was treated this way because of his Muslim background, AJ strongly asserted that he will never forget nor deny his true identity as an Arab Muslim living in America.

AJ was an optimist who strived to live his life to the fullest despite encountering racism toward him. He lived life knowing that he could be victimized because of his religion and the way he looks. He acknowledged that people’s mindset toward Muslims and Islam in America may never change. As a result, this had given him the motivation to live by example so that others may witness that Muslims are good and peaceful people too. Also, his personal experience
of racism passionately and emotionally pushed him to teach the truth about Islam and Muslims to others through conversations. After enrolling in community college, he happily found comfort and safety among his peers, professors, and staff. He considered college his family. AJ is currently enrolled in college and is studying anesthesiology technician.

Ali

Ali completed his high school education in Jordan, but never completed his college education in his country. Instead, he worked and got married and then moved to the U.S. Though he did not meet the criteria for this study due to his Christian background, Ali strongly felt that his experience as an Arab Christian was quite similar to that of Arab Muslims, which he thought was extremely important to share. Therefore, I agreed to have him participate in the study because his worldview as an Arab Christian would provide invaluable information.

Ali described the relationship between Christians and Muslims in Jordan and how it was different from the U.S. In Jordan, Arabs respect the traditions between Christians and Muslims and that they see each other as Arabs and brothers. In fact, Ali proudly claimed that he was Arab first and then Christian. In the U.S., Ali was frustrated that social media and American politics have distorted the Christian-Muslim relationship. When it comes to discussions on terrorism and violence, Americans do not see the difference between Arab Christians and Arab Muslims. He felt that Americans perceive all Arabs as terrorists. It was Ali’s experience that Americans only see Muslims as terrorists and never Arab Christians. Because of Ali’s name and physical feature, non-Muslims have always identified him as a Muslim and never as a Christian.
He desired so much to share his experience as an Arab Christian and to tell others that Christians and Muslims were not enemies of each other. He wants people to understand that the word Arab does not mean Muslim; it can mean Christian as well. Ali is currently enrolled and is studying HVAC.

Avvan

Avvan was born in the U.S., but spent most of her life growing up in Jerusalem starting at the age of six. In 2017, she moved back to the U.S. When asked about her identity, she was not sure how she identified herself. Her family was originally Kurdish, but she has no familiarity or connection with the Kurdish culture, traditions, and language. Even though she spent most of her life in Palestine, she identified more as an American because America was her country of birth. She also mentioned that people she knows identify her as Palestinian, which does not offend her because she was also proud to be Palestinian.

Different from the other women participants, Avvan did not wear the head scarf. She described herself as progressive because she believed that the head scarf was more traditional than religious. She posited that many Muslims, especially the younger generation, are not as strict in their practice because of social media influence and progressive thinking. Thus, a number of her cousins do not wear the head scarf as a result. The reason why Avvan does not wear the head scarf was that it was her personal choice and fervently believed in having this choice available for all Muslim women. Because she had personally chosen not to wear the head scarf, she emphasized the importance of maintaining her Muslim identity regardless. She asserted that her head scarf does not make her a Muslim. Avvan graduated from community
college with an associate degree in Applied Science. Her next chapter in life was to work toward her nursing degree.

Judy

Judy was born and raised in a small town in Syria. She and her family moved to the U.S. when she was 14 years old, but returned to their home country shortly after. In 2013, they moved back to the U.S. to permanently stay. While she did not struggle with communicating in English since English is considered a second language in Syria, she had some difficulty adjusting culturally to her new environment. For example, she noted that she had to be extra careful as a newcomer to the country because of the preconceived notions that Americans had about Muslims. Judy felt like she had to behave differently in order to avoid any prejudice against her as a Muslim woman.

No matter how often she would hear negative stereotypes about Muslims from social media or the news, Judy proudly identifies herself as Syrian American and a Muslim woman. She also believed that personal responsibility shapes one’s life experiences and destiny, and always carefully assessed situations related to Muslim racism before drawing conclusions. In all, she felt comfortable wearing the head scarf around people because she believes that people are naturally good and positively curious about different cultures and religious practices. While she was saddened that islamophobia is prevalent, she does her best to yield positive outcomes. As a graduate from the community college, Judy has applied to law school.
Memo

Originally from Palestine, Memo grew up in Jordan and has dual citizenship. She also completed her Bachelor’s degree in Jordan, but her husband encouraged her to pursue another degree in the U.S. Memo thought that pursuing education in the U.S. was going to be challenging because she would have to adapt to a new culture and learn a new language. However, what was particularly challenging for her was integrating into the American educational system with students who were not Muslim. While she has heard of many stereotypes characterizing Muslims, one of her fears was not being accepted by her non-Muslim peers. Despite some concerns, she was determined to learn new skills for a different profession and make her husband and children proud. Memo was currently pursuing her nursing degree at the community college at the time of interviews.

Moe

Moe was born in Jacksonville, Florida, but mostly grew up in Jordan. He was a young community college student with strong passion for his Arab culture and Islamic faith, so much so that he identified as Muslim first and human second. He enjoyed having meaningful conversations with people from different racial and cultural backgrounds and did not hesitate to share the truth about Islam and Muslims with anyone who was willing to listen. He strongly and emotionally deplores the ongoing false information that was being pervaded by various news outlets and social media platforms about Islam and Muslims. Because of this, he was
passionately motivated to spread the truth about his culture and religion in college as a way to stop ignorance.

Moe’s passion to spread the truth in college was attributed to the stereotypes that he has heard, which describe and portray Muslims in the most erroneous fashion. For example, he has been told before that he was not human and that all Muslims were killers. While being a victim of bigotry and feeling dehumanized, this act of hatred encouraged Moe to fight even harder for the truth by attending college and helping non-Muslims find the truth instead of relying on what they hear on the news. He believed that the college itself should make the effort as well to help spread the truth so that it could take away ignorance and make Muslims safe on campus. Moe was a charismatic student who desires to use his skills to educate the misinformed. He is a current student at the community college and studies graphic design.

Nada

Nada was born and raised in Egypt. She completed high school in her country and came to the U.S. at the age of 18 with no English. Nada’s parents expected her to be a good role model for her siblings since she was the first born child. Thus, she was expected to go to college and get a good-paying job after graduation. Not only did she have to learn English at a fast pace, but also adapt to the new social and educational environment as quickly as she could. Nada felt it was inherently and culturally obligatory to make her parents proud by achieving success.

Adjusting to her new surroundings, Nada struggled fitting in college because she felt she was completely different from non-Arabs, even among other Arab students. On one hand, her Muslim identity made her standout in her classes with non-Muslim classmates and professors.
because of her clothing and her English language accent. On the other hand, she did not fully connect with Arab students on campus as well because her dialect of Arabic became a target of criticism from her Arab peers and her skin complex automatically made her an outsider. Despite facing these challenges, Nada persevered and worked hard to achieve higher than her peers. She was in the process of returning to Egypt to pursue another degree for herself.

Nada bore the responsibility of helping her family get acquainted with American society and culture. Because her parents did not speak English, Nada had to interpret for her parents whenever they needed to sign papers, visit the doctor, or submit various applications. With school and family obligations, Nada experienced a lot of stress and anxiety because she felt like she had to assume all roles in the family in order to make America their home. By the time of the interviews, Nada had one more semester left to complete her engineering degree and plans on applying to another university in Egypt to pursue mathematics after graduation.

Noor

Noor grew up in a small remote village in Yemen where the educational system was poor and educational opportunities were scarce. She said that if anyone from her village wanted to go to college after high school, one would have to travel long distance to pursue higher education or certification. Because of the scarcity in educational opportunity after high school, Noor’s father left the family and moved to the U.S. in order to pave a pathway for her to continue her education. She was the oldest child and would be the first family member to earn a college degree.
Noor strongly felt that she had an obligation to succeed in college because her parents have worked hard to prepare for her future. She had been given the responsibility to learn and navigate the American college system, acquire English fluency, and graduate college. She had little time to socialize with her friends and classmates outside school responsibilities because her parents were counting on her to achieve a college degree. She also mentioned that succeeding in college and learning English fluently were far more important than socializing with friends and taking part in on-campus activities because she does not want to fail her family. At the time of data collection, Noor was a current community college student with a goal of becoming a medical doctor.

Yeb

Yeb, who comes from a long line of educated family members, was a 21-year-old man from Jordan. He completed high school in his country even though he was supposed to complete his last year in the U.S. He left the Arabic school and focused his attention on passing the SAT’s, so that he could pursue his college degree in the U.S. He asked his parent’s permission to study in the U.S. because he truly fell in love with the American culture the first time he visited.

Moving his life to the U.S. to pursue his Bachelor’s degree, Yeb understood the challenges and stereotypes that Muslims faced in the U.S. While he could not recall if he had encountered Islamophobia personally, he had heard that Americans get scared when they see a Muslim woman wearing the hijab and a Muslim man wearing the taqiyah, which is a head covering that comes in different colors. More specifically, Yeb explained that Americans viewed Muslim men wearing a taqiyah as a threat and as terrorists. However, the atmosphere was not the
same when he enrolled in community college. He felt more accepted and welcomed as a Muslim student because the college was more open to Muslim culture. Yeb completed his English language courses the semester before this study and is enrolled in college courses.

**Perspective of Campus Environment**

As the participants’ perception of how Muslims were mischaracterized in America and the spread of Islamophobia worry them, they were concerned about the campus environment and how they would be treated because of their Muslim background. Many of them assumed that the campus environment would be hostile toward their culture and second-language ability. Despite feelings of hostility and uncertainty about their on-campus college experience as Muslim students, all the participants found the campus environment to be unexpectedly welcoming and friendly toward them. They felt like they were part of the campus. For instance, Yeb expressed thankfulness that the campus was designed for him:

> The college was friendly, and I felt welcomed as a Muslim student. I was surprised that the college had lots of clubs for Muslims and Arabs. The college even celebrates the holiday *Eid*, which is an important holiday for us.

He was also grateful that he found a job on campus and felt accepted by his peers and professors. Yeb believed that the campus had a good support system that he could lean on whenever problems would manifest, for example islamophobia.

> Within this support system there was a Muslim community on campus that Yeb could depend on. The community also helped spread Muslim trust among the members of the campus community. He shared,
If there was islamophobia on campus, I think the campus would help stop it because they care about diversity and the students. I trust that the campus helps anyone with problems and that they can defend you no matter what…The campus also created Muslim clubs, which is good because non-Muslims can join the club. This is a good idea because it help spread the word on campus that Muslims are good people.

Avvan had a similar experience, stating

I think most teachers and classmates are welcoming to us and that they like Arab Muslim students. I like the college because it accepts all people and all cultures…Anywhere on campus I went to ask for help, the people were so nice to me and I think that the college does a good in not making Muslim students feel uncomfortable. For me, they never tried to make me feel unwelcome because I am a Muslim.

Avvan further explained,

The college all the time trying to make student feel accepted and accept others by talking about diversity and doing some activities together. The college is so good to us that even during our holiday when we fast they respect that. No one tried to make fun of our holiday. For me, I feel at home.

For AJ, he did not expect the warm welcome from the campus. He was surprised how great the people treated him and the positive atmosphere he felt when he enrolled.

Some people are going to accept you from the beginning and others not so much. They will judge you by the way you look and the clothes you wear. But the campus environment was so different that I didn’t expect the feeling of excitement and being greeted by awesome people.

Like the other participants, AJ was new to U.S. higher education and so he did not really know how to navigate the campus nor understood the enrollment process. To his surprise, his first-day experience was extremely encouraging. He happily said,

Everybody was helping me out since day one. Everybody was teaching me because it’s different system. Everybody was teaching me how to take the placement tests, how to do this, how to do that, how to set up the account. And I was, at the time, I said to myself, I was overwhelmed for nothing. Everybody’s helping, so community college is awesome.

AJ’s demeanor was uplifting as he shared his positive experience, and he continued saying:

To be honest with you, the faculty, the students, the office, everywhere, people accept you socially and understand where you from. They’re going to accept you right away.
Even though I was scared and terrified that I was going to be on my own attending an American college, the people accepted me. They had no problem with my background, with my name.

Another factor that participants were concerned about and it appeared to be interrelated with their Muslim identity was English fluency. English competency was one of the things that worried Judy and Abu Amer. They were afraid that their English language skills would somehow disadvantage them, but they discovered that the campus treated them professionally. Judy shared, When I learned about the diversity on campus, I felt good and it made me feel more comfortable. At first I was worried that they were going to make fun of my English accent. But I think Muslims were treated just the same as other students. My teachers were just respectful, we were treated just like any other student.

Abu Amer had some reserves about attending community college because of his accent and religion, but he was surprised that the college helped everyone get adjusted to college life.

I was scared at first to go to the college the first time because I don’t know English very well and I heard about racists, which makes me not want to attend college. But I think the college is doing a good job trying to prevent Islamophobia from happening on campus. Actually, there are some students and teachers at the college that don’t care if you’re Muslim or what your religion is. They don’t care about that stuff. They just want to help you with academics. I think this is a good feeling and a good thing too.

After feeling a little uncertain about the college environment, Noor had a different perspective of the campus climate and was surprised that nobody criticized her English. She felt comfortable on campus because there were other Muslims, which took away the fear Islamophobia. She felt safe and accepted. As for Nada, she praised the diversity that she noticed throughout the campus.

I thought the American campus would be like what I see on TV about people being racists, but to my surprise, there was so much diversity on campus…Cultural diversity on campus is such an important aspect of the college experience; it made it 110% better.

Ali noticed that campus did not see him and other Arab students as Arabs or Muslims. He believed that the campus made it welcoming by seeing all students as students.
Everyone was helping, not because you are Arabic I want to help you, it’s not like that. The staff and teachers want to help all people on campus. I believe this…They are helpful people and kind people and they want to learn and they want to help me for everything.

Ali pointed out:

Because I see everybody is kind and they talk to you, it’s not like because you are Arab and didn’t speak to you or something like that…Even the college has staff and professors who are Arab. This made me feel safe and that people didn’t hate me…I think the people speak to you because you are human, not because you are Arab, you are Muslim, or you are Christian.

However, not all participants were convinced that the campus was completely welcoming and supportive of Muslims. For Moe, he believed that Muslims and non-Muslims got along because the campus expected them to engage in a cordial manner.

I think there’s no problem in the college because everyone knows the rules and the teachers and police are there to help anyone, but outside the campus like the parking lot, friends get together and feel free to say whatever they want about us.

He also noted that the campus relationship with the Arab people was not as strong as other participants had said. There was still a sense of separation and indifference on campus and in the classroom setting.

My non-Muslim classmates and sometimes my teachers don’t understand my culture when working with the opposite gender. This is uncomfortable situations when we have to work in groups or partners. We can’t really say anything because they’re the teachers. I don’t think the teachers consider our feelings.

Moe also mentioned that the college as a whole was not doing enough to make Muslims feel truly welcomed.

In my opinion, I don’t think the college is doing enough to stop Islamophobia because I still feel uncomfortable when people look at me. Also I see that the college supports other groups like the LGBT community more, but they don’t do anything with the Muslim community. They only put a Muslim woman wearing hijab on the front page of the school website. That’s it. There’s no information about Islamophobia that non-Muslims can learn about.
As for Memo, she thought that the campus was doing a sufficient job in making campus fair for Muslims and for all people from different cultural backgrounds. What she appreciated the most was that the campus did not make special treatment for Muslims because the campus was open for everybody and Muslims were not the only people who faced problems.

Overall, the participants expressed gratitude that their perception of the American college campus was not what they had thought. They appreciated the fact that the college valued its students from diverse backgrounds and made effort to include all students in the campus community through clubs, organizations, and other campus-wide activities. As a whole, the participants found the college campus surprisingly friendly.

Muslim Community on Campus

The presence of a large Muslim community on campus played a role in reducing fear of islamophobia. The participants felt the community helped them adjust to the school setting and provided a sense of security. The Muslim community lessened the participants’ anxiety and fear because they were able to easily connect with other students with the same culture, religion, and language. The community also provided not only a safe place for the participants but also promotion of the Muslim culture and religion throughout the campus.

For Nada, Ali, and AJ, the Muslim community helped them feel at home. Nada was thankful that she was able to communicate with other Arabs, and that having other Muslims on campus made her feel comfortable. For Ali, he was surprised that there were a lot of Muslims on campus. So this made communication easier for Ali and he was able to make close connections with other Arabs and Muslims. He said,
I didn’t know there was a lot of Arabs at the college. I was surprised that there were so many. I didn’t really choose to go here because of the Arabs, but I felt comfortable with the community because I could talk with them…We speak together sometimes, we helped each other in the classes, it’s a good community.

The sight of other Muslims on campus reminded AJ that he was not alone. The more Muslims he saw, the more confidence he had displaying his Muslim identity. He commented,

When I saw Muslim women wearing the hijab, I was so excited because I wasn’t the only Muslim on campus. It really helped me feel good and safe because the college accept us no matter our religion. They don’t mind us speaking the language even though I speak English as much as I can for fluency.

Avvan and Memo shared the same enthusiasm about the Muslim community as well. They felt like the campus was safe and friendly because other Muslims were attending. Avvan shared,

Knowing that there’s a Muslim community helps me feel safer and more comfortable, which helped me to choose this college actually. The environment makes you feel comfortable because you can hear people speaking Arabic and we share the same culture. So this didn’t make me feel alone and makes me not worry about being a Muslim on campus.

Memo further added,

I was glad to see big Muslim community because they could know our names, religion, our fasting traditions, and how we pray. I also feel welcomed because of the common religion, language, and country. There are many people from Jordan and Palestine. But I think what is important is other cultures can know our culture and know more about us, so that they can know how to treat us.

In the beginning, Abu Amer was unsure whether it was good for him to go to the college because he did not want to deal with people who were racist toward Muslims. However, his wife used to be a student at the college and she encouraged him to attend because of the Muslim community. Abu Amer further explained,

My wife pushed me to get an education. She said that there are a lot of Arabs at the college and they can help me. Some of the employees are also Arabs. So I went and noticed that teachers interact with their Muslim students and treat them kindly, which
gives us a good image. When I go to different parts of the campus, I see other Muslims and I feel comfortable. Sometimes I feel like I’m back in my country.

As for Moe, Judy, and Yeb, they had a different perspective about the Muslim community. They agreed that the Muslim community was a great part of the campus because it made Muslim students feel comfortable and sociable, but they also thought the community served another purpose. Moe explained that the reason why Muslims did not feel threatened on campus was that the presence of a large Muslim community gave them strength in numbers. Similarly, Judy said that the Muslim community provided a safe place for all Muslims, but it also discouraged non-Muslims from bothering them in any way.

Yeb also shared his views saying,

If there’s no big Muslim community, then they will see one or two Arabs or Muslims. Then they’ll get worried like “What are they doing here? They might blow up something.” I also think that the community gives non-Muslims opportunity to know our culture, practices, and traditions. But again, people might think that we’re going to blow up something, doing bad things, or being labeled as terrorists because they don’t understand who we are and what we do.

Yeb further mentioned,

But I was comforting when I saw other Muslims on campus and I got to develop some friends in the process. Also, I wasn’t worried about my safety because everyone knows us since we have Muslims everywhere on campus.

The participants shared how important it was for them to have a Muslim community on campus because the community brought a sense of connection and safety. They also believed that this community would teach non-Muslims about the Muslim culture and the truth about who they were as Muslims. In many ways, the Muslim community created a sense of belonging on campus as well as a safe place for Muslims to embrace who they are. Shared cultures and values made them feel they were part of the campus community. Though some indicated that their
enrollment in college was not based on the presence of a Muslim community, but they expressed how reassuring it was knowing that other Muslims were present on campus.

Summary

All the participants were eager to participate in this study because they believed that it was important for them to share their experiences with others. Due to the stereotypes and mischaracterizations of their religion and culture, some participants were compelled to join in the study to combat misinformation and hatred directed toward them. They expressed their passionate necessity to voice the truth to a society that has been misguided by social media and biased reporting. They were even motivated to vocalize their experience in such a way that it would paint a fairer perception of who they were as Muslim students on campus.

In the next chapter, I write one publishable article for the Journal of Applied Research in the Community College. I believe this scholarly journal is relevant and supportive of my findings as my study reflects on the community college experiences of Muslim students and their overall sense of belonging on campus.
CHAPTER 3
ARAB MUSLIM COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENTS’ PERCEPTIONS OF BELONGING ON CAMPUS

Abstract

Islamophobia continues to persist in higher education and challenges institutional efforts to provide a welcoming and inclusive campus environment for Arab Muslim students. For community colleges to address this ongoing concern, they first need to understand the experiences of their Arab Muslim student population. Thus, this phenomenological study explores Arab Muslim community college students’ perceptions of islamophobia and sense of belonging on campus. Findings from this study indicated that Arab Muslim students felt belongingness when the college invested in their cultural and religious needs. Recommendations for college leaders to better meet the needs of Arab Muslims on campus are provided.

Introduction

Arab Muslims in the U.S. have experienced an increase in hate crime, workplace discrimination, and bias incidents since the terrorist attack on 9/11 (Alsultany, 2013). Anti-Muslim sentiments and messages increased during the Trump presidency which complicated and threatened the lives of Muslims living in the U.S. (Nacos et al., 2020). Since the Trump Administration, prejudice and hostility toward Muslims had proliferated (Khan et al., 2019; Sunar, 2017; Waikar, 2018) while deepening social, political, and educational challenges for many immigrants in general (Pierce & Bolter, 2020). This includes Arab Muslims studying at community colleges.
The research surrounding Arab and Muslim communities in the U.S. has focused on the racialization of Islam pre- and post-9/11 (Cainkar, 2018; Considine, 2017; Elver, 2012; Ibrahim, 2008), American attitudes toward Arabs and Muslims (Brown et al., 2017; Rosenthal et al., 2015; Sekerka et al., 2017; Schmuck, Heiss, & Matthes, 2020), and islamophobia (Acim, 2019; Bukar, 2020; Malek, 2009; Tariq, 2020). Yet, scholarship on Arabs and Muslims in higher education is limited despite the prevalence of islamophobia across campus (Ahmadi et al., 2019). Arab Muslim college students have reported harassment, discrimination, and institutional islamophobia on campus (Council on American-Islamic Relations [CAIR], 2019-2020). While there has been a rise in islamophobia on college campuses, little is known about the experience of Arab Muslim community college students.

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to understand how Arab Muslim community college students’ perceive islamophobia shaping their experience and sense of belonging on campus. The study is guided by the following questions:

1. What were Arab Muslim community college students’ perceptions of islamophobia prior to enrollment?
2. How do Arab Muslim community college students perceive islamophobia mediating their relationships with peers and faculty?
3. How do Arab Muslim community college students perceive being accepted on campus?

This study is critical as community college campuses become more racially and religiously diverse. To address the needs of the Arab Muslim student population, it is necessary for college
administration to cultivate a welcoming and inclusive environment where Arab Muslim students can feel safe pursuing their post-secondary education.

Community Colleges

The composition of community college students is widely diverse from non-traditional students to students with veteran status, coupled with intersecting and multidimensional identities, race/ethnicity, and immigration status (Rose et al., 2019). Community colleges are the most accessible institutions in higher education, and nearly half of the students attending these institutions come from diverse racial and socioeconomic backgrounds (Carales & Hooker, 2019). In order to prepare for a diverse workforce, the U.S. needs to increase educational attainment, economic productivity, and civic engagement (Teranishi et al., 2011). Community colleges are seen as having the capacity to meet these workforce needs as they are conveniently located and accommodating for students who work and have family obligations (Teranishi et al.). They are also attractive because of lower cost of attendance (Kane & Rouse, 1999).

In addition to providing associates degrees, certificates, and college level course, community colleges often provide developmental education, high school equivalency programs, and English language programs. According to the Center for the Analysis of Postsecondary Readiness (CAPR), 60% of students who began in 2013-14 took one or more remedial courses by 2016, and 25% took remedial courses in their first year in 2015-16. These students are often placed into remedial/developmental courses to improve their reading, writing, and math skills. (Calhoon-Dillahunt et al., 2017). Nonnative speakers of English, including immigrants, are more
likely to be enrolled in these courses (Bettinger, Boatman, & Long, 2013). In turn, community colleges have developed English language programs that address the linguistic needs of their English language learners. The primary goal of these language programs is to enhance the English language proficiency of these students in order to help them be successful in their academic work when they transition into college-level classes (Fox & Zumbo, 2014).

While there are ongoing efforts to improve racial diversity and an inclusive campus environment for racialized minority students, students from different racial and religious backgrounds as well as immigrant students often experience discrimination on campus. This includes Arabs and Middle Eastern college students who may encounter various forms of islamophobia throughout their college experience because of their perceived racial identity. Modir and Kia-Keating (2018) reported that Arab students may undergo mental and emotional distress when non-Muslims associate them with violence and stereotypes depicted by the media. However, research on the perceived discrimination and racism toward Arabs on community college campuses is understudied.

**Arab Muslims in the U.S. and Islamophobia**

The terms Arab and Muslim are often confused in public discourse and in social media discussions. U.S. Arabs were once an invisible group until the 9/11 terrorist attacks increased their visibility, creating a racialized Arab/Middle Eastern/Muslim social category that blended the concept of Arab and Muslim (Kumar et al., 2014). As Telhami (2002) reported the often-confused terms for Middle Eastern individuals, Muslim Americans are not a homogenous group,
but rather a mosaic of many racial, ethnic, and national backgrounds. This study uses the term Arab Muslim, however, in reviewing the literature the term the author uses (e.g., Arab, Middle Eastern, Muslim) will be used.

Arabs are legally classified as white, but they neither share the feelings of being white nor enjoy the benefits of whiteness as they are often treated like other racialized minority groups (Malek, 2009). Arabs do not identify themselves as white because they feel less welcomed by the dominant culture, and exhibit a stronger connection with minority group status instead (Ajrouch & Jamal, 2007). Historically, the restrictive naturalization era between 1790 and 1952 made whiteness as a prerequisite for citizenship. Because naturalization judges viewed religion as a proxy for race, Arab Christians invoked their Christian right to claim whiteness while rendering Arab Muslims as non-white (Beydoun, 2013). However, the constant conflation of Arab and Muslim identity constructed all Arabs as Muslims (Beydoun, 2013) even though not all Arabs are Muslims. Beydoun (2018) sharply points out that the U.S. government’s response to 9/11 systematically framed Muslim Americans as foreigners, subversives, and terrorists.

The negative views and rhetoric toward Muslims can also be found on U.S. colleges and university campuses. During Donald Trump’s presidency, islamophobia amplified on college campuses (Hailu et al., 2018) with increasing incidents of Muslim racism and assaults (Taylor, 2017). For example, Muslim women reported that they were judged by their non-Muslim peers for wearing a headscarf, and Muslim men were stereotyped as terrorists and controlling (Bhattacharya et al., 2014). Muslim college students often feared that they might become victims of random, unprovoked acts of violence because of their identity, and feel that they are powerless to confront their attackers in fear of their safety (Al-Sharif & Pasque, 2016).
Muslim College Student Experience

The precise number of Arab Muslims attending U.S. colleges is difficult to ascertain as Arab or Middle Eastern are often not included as options regarding racial/ethnic categories. Also, Arabs are not culturally and religiously homogenous either specifically noting that not all Arabs identify as Muslim and vice versa. Therefore, the percent of Muslim college students attending community college is uncertain. Additionally, Arab Muslims that are international are often identified as an international student rather than from a particular region of the world. As a result, much of the scholarship regarding Arab Muslim students is embedded within the international student scholarship (Ahmadi et al, 2019; Cole & Ahmadi, 2003).

Non-Muslim college students tend to have little knowledge about the Islamic faith and practice. Rochenbach et al. (2017) found that non-Muslim college students based their preexisting knowledge of Muslims on what they had been taught by their own religion and family upbringing. Because of this, they often held biased and judgmental views toward Islam and subsequently, people that practiced Islam. Additionally, Rochenbach et al. found that non-Muslims were more prejudiced toward Muslims of color than White Muslims. For Muslim students, Rochenbach et al. reported that they were less comfortable on campus when the campus climate was hostile toward religious diversity, especially toward the stigma of Islam. Lastly, the researchers’ study indicated that maintaining a diverse environment drastically reduced Muslim hostility.
Other studies found that Muslim college students faced personal, social, and structural challenges. Islam et al. (2019) found that the overall Muslim college students’ sense of belonging was largely positive because students were able to embrace their Muslim identity through academic exchange in the classroom. However, they indicated that the social experiences and integration of Muslim students did not produce the same positive outcome. Muslim students believed that the institution did not meet their cultural needs, nor helped with integration with peers. In another study, Muslim students struggled finding belongingness and building a sense of community due to the political climate during the Trump Administration and the hostility toward Islam (Center for Education, Identity and Social Justice, n.d.). The political enmity toward Muslims in general made peer acceptance and campus participation challenging.

Cultural practice and appearance of being Muslim created a sense of disconnect for Muslim students with their non-Muslim peers. Moreover, Muslim students were more involved in campus activities that promoted diversity. For instance, Nasir and Al-Amin (2006) found that Muslim practices, such as fasting, daily prayers, and attire caused a sense of discomfort for non-Muslim students because they perceived their practices as a potential threat. Regarding campus activities, Cole and Ahmadi’s (2010) reported that Muslim students participated more in diversity-related activities on campus. This included attending racial/cultural workshops and joining a racial/ethnic student organization in comparison to Jewish and Christian students. The findings in this study suggested that Muslim students were more willing to interact with peers from different religious backgrounds than other religious groups.

While the majority of the studies mentioned previously had been conducted at different four-year universities, there are fewer empirical studies investigating the experiences of Arab
Muslim community college students. Thus, it is uncertain whether Arab Muslim students attending community college undergo similar experiences as those who attend the university.

Theoretical Framework

This study is framed by sense of belonging. Belonging is a psychological sense of affiliation and connection with the campus community as well as feeling of being valued and included (Garvey et al., 2018). Social and identity acceptance, college staff interaction, and respect for diversity contribute to belongingness for college students (Van Gijn-Grosvenor & Huisman, 2020). Existing research indicates that when students feel they are part of a campus community, they are more motivated to focus on their studies and more willing to utilize campus resources and facilities to make their college experience successful and meaningful (Gopalan & Brady, 2020). Furthermore, friendships (Freeman et al., 2007) and faculty connections (Cole & Ahmadi, 2010) were strong indicators that contribute to the students’ overall success in college.

However, other research has examined that not all students feel they belong, and that there are other factors such as background traits, social class, and student engagement that contribute to the students’ sense of belonging (Strayhorn et al., 2016). Strayhorn et al. further added that race, age, gender, and college grades shaped the students’ perception of how they stayed connected to the campus. For students who speak a second language, they may have concerns with language and cultural barriers, interpersonal communication, alienation, loss of social support, and cross-cultural communication (Sherry et al., 2010). However, building a
community with shared values and language could improve college connection and provide a sense of belonging on campus as these students create relationships.

A positive campus racial climate also strongly contributes to a sense of belonging for ethnic minority students (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Johnson et al., 2007; Vaccaro & Newman, 2016). Diversity on college campuses helps prepare students for their future participation in democracy and globalization, and discussing racial issues increases the level of satisfaction as well as advances racial understanding (Strayhorn et al., 2016). Additionally, cross-cultural interactions have yielded positive outcomes as students from different ethnic backgrounds meaningfully engage with each other to discuss and learn about sociopolitical issues and racism; such engagement improved retention and college satisfaction (Strayhorn & Johnson, 2014).

Amit and Bar-Lev (2015) found that religious participation and aspects of religiousness (e.g., motivation, religious involvement in public) positively improved one’s well-being and sense of belonging. Bowman and Small (2012) came up with similar results in which students’ religiosity and emotional health with participation in religious activities were also linked to students’ motivation to complete school. These studies suggest that meeting students’ religious needs can help students stay more connected to campus life, feel more accepted, and enhance their sense of belonging.

Sense of belonging provided a theoretical framework to understanding how Arab Muslim students connect with non-Muslim peers, faculty, and staff. This framework was appropriate because sense of belonging has been connected with particular educational outcomes such as persistence and retention.
Methodology

Constructivism and phenomenology guided this study. Constructivism, as an epistemology, is a belief that there are multiple realities, and knowledge emerges from personal experience (Abes, 2016). It claims that meaning and knowledge are constructed through individual interactions, recognizing that the context of truth is nonlinear (Burkholder & Burbank, 2020). Phenomenology focuses on the essence of a phenomenon (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2014; Moustakas, 1994), and explores the essential meaning of people’s lived experiences, which assumes that the phenomenon is important to investigate (Hancock & Algozzine, 2017).

The goal of phenomenology is to describe the meaning of experiences by explicating the what and how of meaning (Neubauer, Witkop, & Varpio, 2019). Phenomenology is both a popular and reliable method of understanding how a particular phenomenon shapes experiences (Hesse-Biber, 2017). Moustakas (1994) describes the phenomenological approach in human science research in which researchers investigating a phenomenon focus on listening to their participants tell their story. Within this approach, researchers try to set aside preconceived notions of a phenomenon in order to center the experiences of participants. Therefore, using phenomenology in this study focused on the wholeness, meanings, and essence of experiences that were described through first-person accounts of Arab Muslim community college students.
Research Site

I conducted the study at a large community college in the Midwest, which enrolled more than 26,000 students annually, and 41% of its students identified as students of color. The institution had a large Intensive English Language program where many Arab Muslim students took courses before taking college-level classes.

The college was also located near a growing Arab, Muslim, and Middle Eastern community where many of the participants moved to when they arrived to the U.S. The location of the college provided convenience, affordability, and accessibility for many Arab Muslims. Additionally, one of the things that attracted Arab Muslims to the college was the large Muslim community on campus. Thus, this research site was chosen to access the population.

Participants and Recruitment

I used purposeful sampling (Jones et al., 2014) to recruit 10 participants for this study. Arab Muslim students who attended the community college pre-COVID were selected. To participate, the following criteria applied: (a) participants needed to self-identify as Arab Muslim, and (b) participants attended community college for at least two semesters.

The Dean and Assistant Dean from the Department of College of Readiness and Enrichment helped with the recruitment process by emailing former students, faculty, and staff. I also spoke with faculty colleagues I knew from different departments to help. I provided them a
brief description of the study and gave them a letter of interest to distribute to their students who met the study criteria.

Enrollment declined at the community college and access to students was difficult due to COVID 19. Recruiting the necessary number of participants for the study was slow. Therefore, I contacted my former students who already met the criteria on social media, such as Facebook. I recruited 8 of the 10 participants through Facebook and the other two were through school email. Table 1 includes demographic information about each participant.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Nationality</th>
<th>Religion</th>
<th>Years/Semesters in Community College</th>
<th>Enrollment Status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abu Amer</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>Jordanian</td>
<td>Islam</td>
<td>2 years</td>
<td>Enrolled</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AJ</td>
<td></td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>Iraqi</td>
<td>Islam</td>
<td>3 semesters</td>
<td>Enrolled</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ali</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>Jordanian</td>
<td>Christianity</td>
<td>2 years</td>
<td>Enrolled</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avvan</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>American</td>
<td>Islam</td>
<td>2 years</td>
<td>Not Enrolled</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Judy</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Syrian</td>
<td>Islam</td>
<td>3 years</td>
<td>Not Enrolled</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Memo</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Jordanian</td>
<td>Islam</td>
<td>2 years</td>
<td>Not Enrolled</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moe</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>American</td>
<td>Islam</td>
<td>2 semesters</td>
<td>Enrolled</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nada</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Egyptian</td>
<td>Islam</td>
<td>2 years</td>
<td>Not Enrolled</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Noor</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Yemeni</td>
<td>Islam</td>
<td>3 semesters</td>
<td>Enrolled</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yeb</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>Jordanian</td>
<td>Islam</td>
<td>2 years</td>
<td>Enrolled</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Ali was the only participant who identified as Christian among the participants. Though the study criteria was restricted to only participants who practiced Islam, I permitted Ali to join the study because Arab Christians are often grouped with Arab Muslims and tend to share similar experiences with islamophobia and discrimination. Ali’s voice in the study would be able to provide important insight on how non-Muslims perceive Arabs regardless of religion.
Furthermore, the participants either had already graduated from the Intensive English program offered at the research site or were currently enrolled in the program during the time of the study. The Intensive English program provided language learning for students whose first language was not English. It served as a gateway to college-level courses for many language learners. The program was particularly beneficial for participants who were new to the U.S. because it equipped them with academic English and taught various forms of communication.

**Data Collection**

I conducted two semi-structured interviews with each participant that lasted 20 to 40 minutes each. Most of the interviews were conducted on Zoom because it was more convenient for participants and safer for the participants due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Each interview was audio recorded and transcribed by a professional transcription service. There were some factors that shortened the length of the interviews, however. First, the participants were nervous using English. They were not sure how to articulate their answers due to limited vocabulary. Second, timing was challenging. Even though interviews were scheduled, participants got busy with family and work obligations. It was difficult completing the full interview. Finally, I believe there was an issue of trust. There was a sense of hesitancy of telling the whole story from some of the participants. I believe they did not want to be put in a position that would push them to talk negatively about someone or the college.

I wrote a reflective journal after each interview as well. Because of language barriers and poor internet connection, I used the journal to clarify information the participants said. The
journal was also used to cogitate on their experiences relative to my own experiences with racism, other forms of oppression, and new cultural adaptation.

**Method of Data Analysis**

I applied the four steps from Moustakas’ (1994) phenomenological framework to analyze my data. The first step of his framework was epoche, which sets aside the researcher’s personal understanding of the phenomenon during the interviews. Additionally, I used reflexive bracketing to identify what knowledge I understood about the phenomenon prior to the interviews.

The second step was reduction, which reduces the data into manageable units. I applied the three-step process of phenomenological reduction to code data (Moustakas, 1994). First I bracketed information that was most related to the phenomenon and excluded narrations that were not in the purview of the questions. The second step was horizontalizing. A significant amount of time was spent on examining the two-part interview transcriptions from each participant. I read the transcriptions exhaustively without making any changes in order to understand the information thoroughly. Then I revised the descriptive codes to better align with the participants’ descriptions of their experience. Finally, I deleted the participants’ statements that were irrelevant or had no impact on the research questions. The third and final step in the framework was horizons, which I highlighted information specific to the phenomenon. That is, I identified participants’ statements, assertions, and declarations about how islamophobia impacted their community college experience altogether. In the end, I gathered 49 codes.
The third step in Moustakas’ (1994) framework was imaginative variation, which is the primary goal of reaching the essence of the phenomenon. I formulated four themes to explain the structural meanings of the phenomenon and how the phenomenon materialized. They were: (1) Invisibility on Campus, (2) Feeling Ignored and Misunderstood from other Peers, (3) Encountering Islamophobic Microaggressions, and (4) Engagement and Student Support. The final step in the framework was synthesis where I grouped my various codes into themes that best described the essence of the participants’ experiences and knowledge of the phenomenon.

Trustworthiness

I used three methods for trustworthiness. First, I applied purposeful sampling (Coyne, 1997) to recruit participants and to specifically pick the research site. Second, I used member checking (Harper & Cole, 2012). Each participant reviewed their own transcripts and were instructed to provide feedback within two weeks. This method ensured that my data was accurate. Third, I used reflexive journaling during the interviews (Watt, 2007). By writing down notes that captured the participant’s behavior, facial expression, and body language, I was able to get a sense of their feelings and reactions.

Positionality

As a racialized minority and immigrant, I know the impact of racism and discrimination on my identity. I also understand the difficulty of learning how to cope and deal with negative
experiences. Additionally, I am no stranger to the challenges of learning a new language and adapting to the cultural practices and beliefs of the new country. It also takes a lot of mental strength and emotional maturity to understand my purpose and place in a different society.

While I cannot fully relate with the experiences of Arab Muslim students facing deep-rooted racial and religious intolerance from the public sphere, I am able to understand how difficult it may be to accept and be accepted in a new environment. Prior to this study, I had little knowledge about Muslim culture and Islam. This study has allowed me to open my eyes to other forms of racism and xenophobia that others face.

Findings

Participants discussed having experienced islamophobia as part of their community college experience. The following themes will be discussed: 1) Fear of Islamophobia, 2) Invisibility on Campus, 3) Feeling Ignored and Misunderstood from other Peers, 4) Encountering Islamophobic Microaggressions, and 5) Engagement and Student Support.

Fear of Islamophobia

Eight of the 10 participants were immigrants to the U.S. Each participant had different reasons leaving their country and starting their life in the U.S. While some had already graduated from the university in their home country, others started their first year of post-secondary education in the U.S. Most participants expressed uncertainties and fear about enrolling at U.S. colleges because of the possibility of being treated differently. Moe shared: “Because of other
stories I’ve heard about Muslims being attacked, I fear that it might happen to me especially when I pray because somebody could attack me from behind.” He was convinced that, “bad things happen to Muslims outside campus and so those bad things can happen on campus because the college is its own community and people can do whatever they feel they want to do.” He was worried that colleges would not hold anyone accountable for their actions especially if those actions were against Muslims. He felt that U.S. colleges favored certain groups of people and detached Muslims from the campus community. Moe found it frustrating that, even though he was born in the U.S., he did not feel like he was accepted as an American as anti-Muslim rhetoric continued to affect him.

Similarly, Memo, AJ, Avvan, and Abu Amer expressed concerns about enrolling in college because of their Muslim identity. Memo stated: “I mostly felt safe going to American college, but I was concerned about how they would treat me because I am Muslim…I also thought that they would not accept me because I am a Muslim.” Adding more details, AJ commented:

Because of the attitude toward Muslims off campus, I didn’t really expect for Muslims to be accepted that much, to be honest…I said to myself, why would it be different now. Maybe something is going to happen to me someday from the people on campus, from my classmates, maybe from faculty, who knows.

Avvan worried that her experience would mirror what she experienced in Palestine. She shared:

I thought that this college would treat me differently in the same way as I experienced back in Palestine where there is discrimination against Muslims…If I go to a place that I hear is racist, I would never consider going.

In Palestine, she faced discriminatory attacks where Muslims were treated unfairly by the Jews. These experiences shaped her concerns about attending college in the U.S. For instance, Avvan shared, “I would be afraid to take night classes knowing that islamophobia can happen on
campus and anywhere. My fear of being attacked would affect my college experience.” Despite these concerns, she remained positive that going to college in America would be a welcoming experience because she was focused on achieving her educational and career goals.

As for Abu Amer, he worried about his son’s future growing up Muslim in America but also worried about how he would achieve his educational goals in an environment that disfavored Muslims. Growing up in Jordan, Abu Amer had some hesitancy. He shared, “I was scared about choosing and going to college in America because it’s a different culture and I fear of what will happen if I act in a certain way that non-Muslims don’t approve of.” He also added:

Someone told me that attending college with very few Muslims makes college even more challenging because it’s hard to communicate with teachers and classmates and also there is no community for me…and this could lead to more problems with racism.

Abu Amer’s perception of how non-Muslims treated Muslims worried him because he did not want to put himself in a situation that he would experience problems because of his identity.

For Noor, she had personal experience with islamophobia in public, which shaped her perceptions about American culture. She shared a situation in which she was confronted by a man who threatened to rip off her hijab. This incident discouraged Noor from going to college even though her family believed that America was the right place to get a college degree. She shared, “In the beginning [thought of attending college], I felt afraid that somebody would take off my hijab because they didn’t like my clothing or my religion.” She noted as well, “I was a little concerned about attending college because there are a lot of people who mistreat Muslim women in the street or market, and that it could happen on campus.” Despite this fear and hesitancy, getting a college degree was Noor’s priority because she would be the first in her
family. Overall, participants believed they would experience islamophobia on campus and, yet, still decided to attend college because they wanted to get an education.

Invisibility on Campus

Participants shared their strategies on how they purposefully covered up their Arab Muslim identity from peers and faculty. They appreciated when they were seen as only students rather than being labeled and identified as an Arab and/or Muslim student. For instance, Noor felt more accepted on campus when nobody acknowledged her Muslim identity:

Nobody sees me as a Muslim but rather as a student and so they treat me the same as other students and see me the same as other students. So I feel they appreciate me more as a student more than as a Muslim.

As for AJ, he was thankful that the college cared more about his academic performance rather than his Arab Muslim identity.

Every single human being I met on campus don’t care about your religion. They don’t care about your name, your background. They care about what your performance in school, they care about your participation in your classes, how you do your assignments and how you keep on top of homework…Some people don’t even care if you’re like “What is your background? What is our religion?”

AJ was referring to the campus environment being friendly because the college staff was only concerned about his academic background.

When conversations then shifted to the classroom, AJ maintained that his Arab Muslim identity was not important to his professors. He indicated that they only cared about his academic performance in class. However, AJ also believed that “if I keep accepting them, even go out for a drink or something, or get together in a party…I still have my hopes that islamophobia in their
minds going to go away because of my actions toward them.” He believed that islamophobia in the minds of non-Muslims would disappear through his various acts of kindness.

AJ made the effort to establish a cordial relationship with those who intended to disparage his identity as a strategy to reduce conflict.

Similarly, Yeb believed that his actions could change people’s minds about Muslims as well. He said that people were more inclined to recognize him as a student and not as a Muslim student. However, Yeb discussed strategies he used be perceived favorably by others:

Muslims try to be good as they can so that people don’t think we’re terrorists. Sometimes I feel like I need to limit the things I say because non-Muslim classmates might interpret what I say wrong…If we show others [faculty and classmates] we are hard workers and studious, they will know that we’re not here to do bad things.

By trying to be “good” and limiting what he says, Yeb believed he could show non-Muslims that not all Muslims were bad or terrorists. He added:

Muslims should act in a way that will help non-Muslims see them as good, nice people and that our religion is nice too. But sometimes I have to be careful when I stand up for my religion because I’m afraid that what I say will be taken the wrong way. This is why I think that if Muslims speak in a quiet way and not be rude to anyone, they won’t get treated with racism.

Yeb believed that if he adjusted his behavior to accommodate the needs of non-Muslims, he would avoid any confrontation with them about his identity and religion. He also believed that remaining invisible on campus and in the classroom was the right thing to do.

Participants discussed other strategies to blend in including not being absent during major holidays. For instance, Avvan shared that she would not ask permission to be absent from class due to a major holiday. She did not want to inconvenience her teachers during major Muslim holidays, such as Ramadan. She “wasn’t sure what they were going to say to me” if she did ask to be excused from class. She had no resentment for not asking because “it’s good that my
teachers and classmates don’t look at me as a Muslim, but they just look at you as just a student. We probably shouldn’t get extra treatment.” While Avvan’s decision to remain unnoticed in the classroom averted any potential conflict with her professor and peers, it seemed to come at the cost of not being able to participate in important religious traditions.

Abu Amer emphasized the necessity to learn English to feel more accepted and blend in. He believed that learning English would help him integrate into U.S. society easier and that Americans would welcome him more if he could communicate easily. He also believed that he could avoid cultural and religious conflicts with people if he knew the language fluently, sharing:

    If you know how to communicate in English well, maybe they accept you more. Also, if you learn English fluently, you might become more accepted as an American and not be a stereotype that they think you are, like terrorists…To be honest, if you go anywhere and tell them “I’m American” they give you more respect. This is what I think.

Abu Amer believed that the more fluent he was in speaking English the more accepted and less threatening he would be.

On campus, Abu Amer limited his participation in class and campus activities to avoid any unforeseen situations that could jeopardize his safety:

    Sometimes I don’t like to take the conversation deeper because I’m afraid that they might misunderstand me and take things the wrong way. I’m always watching my behavior and how I interact with other people on campus because I don’t want them to think bad about me or misunderstand me. That’s why I recommend other Arab Muslim students who are new to the campus to not act in a way that you are noticeable because you don’t want others to look at you weird or make them think you are doing something bad.

Not only did Abu Amer try to make himself less visible on campus, but he also encouraged other Arab Muslim students to do the same. Watching his behavior and not acting in ways that are noticeable were strategies Abu Amer used to keep himself safe on campus and free from suspicion.
Moe and Judy had similar comments about being recognized as just students. Judy said that she felt “normal” and did not notice that she was treated differently because of her Arab identity. Moe believed that by not openly practicing Islam, he would create relationships with non-Muslims more easily. Nada said she chose to adapt to the campus environment and made “peace with it and it doesn’t bother me anymore” regarding the looks on campus and feeling different because of her accent and clothing. Nada indicated that her education was more important than worrying about judgment and suspicion toward.

Overall, participants shared how they tried to minimize their identity as Arab Muslims on campus in order to not draw suspicion or comments. Most participants expressed a desire to blend in and be treated like any other student on campus.

**Feeling Ignored and Misunderstood from Other Peers**

In the previous theme, participants intentionally engaged in strategies that made their Muslim identity less visible. This theme focuses on how they perceived they were treated by others on campus. Participants indicated that they felt disconnected from their peers and professors because of differences in culture, religion, and language. As some of the participants were able to make peer connections, many of them felt ignored and misunderstood from their non-Muslim peers. Their experiences suggested that social interaction and cross-cultural friendships were limited. Nada shared:

I feel like my challenges was just being accepted in the class, especially when it was just me. Sometimes I felt they looked down on me or didn’t think I was smart enough so they wouldn’t choose me for group work or lab work…I would see them interact with other
students. They’re loud as they can be, they’re laughing and doing stuff, and then when it comes to me it’s just nothing.

Nada believed that her Muslim background may have been part of the reason why she felt like an outsider among her classmates.

So then it’s sort of just me and some friends, two or three in one class sometimes. But in other classes when I was the only Muslim my classmates did not even want to be with me, did not want to sit with me or anything. I mean they were nice to me, but they would sit with me because no other seat open.

Nada saw classmates interacted with each other, but they seemed to ignore her which she believed was due to her Muslim appearance.

For Moe, he thought the campus was nice and comfortable because of the Muslim community on campus and in the local community. However, he described his relationship with non-Muslims as frail. As a first-year student, Moe did not feel he was part of the campus and said that “…I don’t feel like a student because I get ignored and get stared at. It feels like I’m a visitor at the campus.” In regard to his classroom experience, Moe indicated there was not a lot of interaction between non-Muslims and Muslims either. He stated:

Based on my experience, there’s not a lot of interaction going on between non-Muslims and Muslims because I don’t feel they want to interact with me…I haven’t really tried to make friends with non-Muslims. I think our cultures are just too different and they sometimes feel uncomfortable or strange around me. Also, when my classmates or teachers don’t feel comfortable around me I think it will be challenging to achieve success in college because it will be hard to get help or make comfort with them. When my culture clashes with theirs, they don’t say anything, they only give you a weird look.

In all, Moe struggled making connections with his classmates and with other non-Muslims on campus because he believed that there was little cultural awareness among his non-Muslim peers about Muslims and Islam.

Even though Yeb felt comfortable on campus and was able to get on-campus employment, his interaction with non-Muslims was similar to other participants. He shared:
Sometimes I think my classmates are afraid of us even though we are all students. We pay for tuition and we want to learn like them. In a way, I think there are some negative attitude toward me because I’m a Muslim. Maybe they blame me for 9/11 or the shootings that happened in the past.

Yeb believed that his classmates had negative perceptions of him because he was Muslim.

Moreover, he shared that he would ask his classmates for help, but they would ignore him. He assumed that his classmates had a “bad experience” with other Arabs in the past. He thought that their past experiences with Arabs most likely taught them to “not trust us” anymore.

When Abu Amer was asked to discuss his overall experience with non-Muslims on campus, he shared his past experiences with islamophobia and the overall anti-Muslim climate surrounding his identity made him more reticent and cautious when interacting with non-Muslims on campus. He said:

My relationship with non-Muslims isn’t the strongest because I know that islamophobia will happen to me. That’s why I don’t want to have deep conversations or hang out with them [non-Muslims] because there could be tension and racism.

He further shared:

I feel like people here stick to themselves and not communicate like the people in Jordan. Everyone wants to be alone and do their own things. I’m not sure if it’s because we’re Muslims but it’s not easy to connect with non-Muslims at the campus.

Abu Amer’s prior experience with islamophobia shared his interactions with peers but also cultural differences. He indicated that he was not always sure if it was islamophobia that it was difficult to connect with non-Muslims or other cultural differences.

While most participants indicated that it was difficult to connect with non-Muslims on campus, there were few who felt connected to campus and to peers. Prior to enrollment, Judy thought that she was not going to be accepted on campus because she was Muslim, but this was not the case. She became friends with non-Muslim classmates and felt comfortable talking about
her religion and culture with others without feeling obligated. Similarly, AJ was surprised that the campus welcomed him and mentioned that “everybody was encouraging me to get involved because they can hear what I have to say and what my opinion is. I didn’t feel like they were restricting my ideas.” Even though he suspected that he would experience islamophobia in college, his on-campus experience turned out positive. While a couple of participants connected with non-Muslim peers, most discussed feeling ignored by their non-Muslim peers.

Encountering Islamophobic Microaggressions

The participants discussed encountering Islamophobic microaggressions periodically on campus. Microaggressions are comments or actions that are directed toward marginalized groups and may appear subtle. For instance, Moe shared two experiences of microaggressions:

One time I was in the cafeteria eating my food and my classmate sat at the same table as me. She asked me where I was from and I told her I was from Jordan and I was Muslim. I think she felt uncomfortable when I said Muslim because she said “that’s nice” and she got up from the table and left. She didn’t finish her meal either. Another time I saw my non-Muslim classmates hanging out after the class. They were talking loud, making jokes and laughing. But when I walk by or other Muslims walk by they stop the conversation and sometimes give a little smile. They don’t say anything to me. They don’t include me in their conversations.

In both examples, Moe believed that his classmates disengaged from him because he was Muslim.

Avvan and Abu Amer both shared examples of microaggressions committed by their professors. Avvan shared,

I had a teacher who didn’t like Muslims at all. She would treat all the other students better than the Muslims. She would give time for those students but not for me or my Muslim friends in class. She always say she didn’t have time to see us if we had
questions about the homeworks. When I try to talk to her, she was always rude for no reason. I don’t really know what we did wrong to make her treat us differently. Other Muslims had the same experience too. She doesn’t care about us in the class.

Through her words and actions, Avvan felt her professor treated her differently than her non-Muslim peers. This had consequences for her learning as her teacher would not answer questions about homework or other questions about the course. Similarly, Abu Amer shared:

I was the only Muslim in class and the teacher treated me different than other students. I study a lot for tests and quizzes. I even go to the library and tutoring center for help with study. Sometimes I ask my teacher for help but she look like she always bothered by me. The teacher always give me bad grade and she doesn’t encourage me. I have this feeling of negativity that she only like students who are Christian and can speak good English.

Abu Amer believed his lower grades in the course were due to him being Muslim and his professor did not like Muslims.

The participants acknowledged that peers would be curious about their religion and culture. While the participants perceived some interactions as friendly and respectful, they also felt a little troubled with their verbal and non-verbal communication. For Nada, her encounter with her co-worker on campus was unpleasant. She shared:

My co-worker asked me what I thought about 9/11 even though I was only very young when it happened. I mean, my co-worker is very nice and old but she thinks that I know lots of details about 9/11 because I’m Muslim. I try not to get mad at her because she’s nice, but she just assumes that 9/11 is a big memory for me and for other Muslims.

Nada experienced this as a microaggression because she felt like she was being blamed for a tragedy that she had no control over just because she was Muslim.

Yeb had similar uncomfortable experiences with campus co-workers. He acknowledged that he appreciated his co-workers for asking him before making assumptions. However, his co-workers often presumed he had first-hand knowledge of what was happening on the news related to Muslims, but he would respond to himself saying that “I didn’t even know what was going on
to Muslims in the news.” Additionally, whenever he would ask for help in class, his classmates would give him a “weird look”. He was not sure if his accent was hard to understand, or his Muslim identity was a problem to them. Similarly, Noor said that people would stare at her because of her outfit and wondered how her hair looked. She said that sometimes people would “look at my hijab and ask about my hair.” She believed that they did not mean to make her feel uncomfortable, but sometimes it was uncomfortable for her to explain. In all, the participants’ Muslim identity subjected them to various forms of microaggressions in class and on campus.

**Engagement and Support on Campus**

Several participants mentioned that the college provided clubs for Arabs and that there were organizations specifically for Arabs and Muslims. These clubs and organizations served a bigger purpose for Muslim students because they wanted a place that they could embrace their identity and be part of the overall college experience as students at the same time. Nada commented:

Even though I was nervous, I wanted to get involved somehow. I wanted something that I could be part of, so I joined clubs that had lots of Muslim students. I know it was my goal to learn English and American culture, but I really felt accepted in these clubs because there were people like me who speak Arabic and know my religion.

Abu Amer agreed with Nada about joining various clubs, saying that being a member of a club with other Muslims made him feel at home. He was able to communicate in his native language and ask for any help he needed about school or cultural adjustment.

In addition to the clubs, Yeb, Judy, and Avvan said that the college offered a place for anyone to pray. They called it the prayer room and the participants were excitedly grateful for it.
Avvan said that she was “shocked that the college had a place for us to pray. I think this is so nice and wonderful because it’s important for us to have this.” This space had given her a feeling of “safety and calm”. Though Judy did not use the prayer room often because of her studies, she was grateful that the prayer room was available at any time.

Participants shared they felt accepted on campus when teachers or classmates recognized their efforts and contributions. They truly appreciated when others valued their work, their cultural traditions, and holidays. AJ happily explained his experience:

When I did math, a lot of stuff and algebra came from our culture, came from Muslim culture. That’s when I felt so valuable especially when I discussed this with my teacher who also gave me confirmation about the history of algebra. The teacher acknowledge the history of algebra and I really felt good that we could share this in common.

For Abu Amer, balancing Ramadan and schoolwork was hard, but he was thankful for his teacher’s understanding. He shared:

Last semester before the summer term we had Ramadan. This is a time when we fast. My teacher understood how exhausting and tiring this holiday can be because we don’t eat or drink at certain times. My teacher worked with me and with other Muslims with assignments, and this helped out a lot. I really appreciate his understanding.

The teacher’s understanding of his cultural traditions made Abu Amer feel he mattered not just as a student but also his identity.

As mentioned before, the English language was one aspect of the college experience that challenged many of the participants. In the Intensive English Language program, participants discussed having instructors that understood the students’ hesitancy and insecurity using English, and were able to accommodate their linguistic needs. However, the environment for these learners changed as soon as they began their college classes where most of their instructors
disregarded their second language development. Because of this, the participants presumed that their English was not good enough for their teachers or classmates. Yeb shared:

Sometimes my teachers don’t understand me in writing class. I try my best but they still don’t understand that English isn’t my first language. They always give me bad marks. One time I told my teacher that I was going to drop the class because I didn’t understand. She told me it was a good idea.

Yeb later on described a professor who encouraged him to study and improve his English. He said that the professor was proud of his language accomplishments, and being recognized for one’s effort to improve encouraged Yeb to work harder.

With Nada, she was worried that her English was not perfect, but her professor took into consideration her second language abilities. This special attention she received from her professor reduced her anxiety and worry because she finally had someone who took the time to care about her needs. For Judy, she appreciated it when people recognized Muslim holidays. To her, she believed that the college made the effort to value and appreciate the Muslim students. She did not feel marginalized or neglected by the college because they were open to celebrating and learning about the traditions and cultural practices of Muslims. Overall, the support system the participants received helped them feel more part of the campus community.

Discussion

Even with the change of Presidential administrations, anti-Muslim sentiments still lingers throughout the U.S. (Mohamed, 2021) and on college campuses (Ahmadi & Cole, 2020). Community colleges are known for the diversity of their student population, open access, as well as providing Intensive English language courses (Bettinger et al., 2013). The majority of the
Arab Muslim students in study chose to attend this community college for those reasons. However, the threat of islamophobia as well as macro and micro examples of islamophobia shaped their experience and belongingness at their community college.

Research has shown that Muslim students on campus were targets of bigotry, ignorance, and discrimination (Cole & Ahmadi, 2003; Modir & Kia-Keating, 2018). They also experience stigmatization against Islam because of the way the West perceived the religion as violent, oppressive, and fanatic (Mir & Sarroub, 2019). Through their experiences, participants believed that islamophobia and cultural differences largely shaped their relationships with peers, classmates, and professors as well. However, the majority of them indicated that their community college experience was mostly positive and welcoming despite concerns of islamophobia and microaggressions on campus and in the classroom.

Participants shared their reason why their interaction with non-Muslims was limited and how this limitation impacted their overall college experience. Participants expressed that both they and their non-Muslims peers lacked cross-cultural communication skills to make interaction and socializing meaningful. Most of them in the study did not feel comfortable interacting with non-Muslims because they worried that they would be misunderstood and that this misunderstanding would lead to racial or religious conflict. They avoided situations that would likely engender racism or discrimination because of their Muslim identity. As cross-cultural interactions can produce satisfying dialogue (Strayhorn & Johnson, 2014), the participants minimized their Muslim identity to better blend in among their non-Muslim peers on campus and in the classroom. By doing so, they felt better connected and accepted.
While blending in did help with peer connection with non-Muslims, participants found more comfort and belongingness among their Muslim peers on campus. Interacting within the same cultural group helped participants feel more wanted and safe attending college; it gave them a support system where they could freely practice their culture and religion without feelings of discomfort or suspicion. In all, the presence of other Muslims on campus did not only give participants a sense of community but also the community itself counteracted the microaggressions and islamophobia that participants faced in the classroom. With the strong support they received from their Arab and Muslim peers, participants were able to overcome racial challenges and persist through their courses and program.

The Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR, 2019-2020) reported targeted harassment, such as physical attacks and verbal abuse against Muslim college students due to anti-Muslim policies, national media, and cultural and political structures. While participants in this study experienced microaggressions on campus, none of them indicated they felt physically threatened or felt imminent violence toward them due to their appearance or speaking Arabic. The minimal threat of physical harm may be attributed to the presence of other Muslims throughout the campus and the institutional commitment to diversity and inclusion.

A strong point of connection to campus for the participants was the prayer room. Participants indicated that having a designated spiritual space on campus gave them the opportunity to practice their faith. By giving them the resources to meet their spiritual needs, participants felt that the community college did not only value their spiritual practice but was also committed to the religious diversity of all students. In addition to religious inclusivity, participants shared their appreciation for clubs and organizations that were specific to Arab and
Muslim students because they were able to build a community as a source of social connection. The ability to be active and involved in campus activities provided a way for participants to not feel detached and/or invisible from their non-Muslim peers. However, the findings showed that islamophobia still maintained a subtle presence among students and faculty but less at the institutional level.

Furthermore, participants made strong connections with Intensive English instructors who valued their learning abilities and hard work. As Intensive English classes have had a positive impact on the social and cultural integration of international students in higher education (Stegall, 2021), participants had indicated that their Intensive English classes also helped them succeed academically and socially, and created a sense of belonging and confidence as they felt acknowledged and valued by their instructors and other language learners. Specifically, participants believed that these efforts encouraged more participation and engagement in the classroom because they felt like they mattered to their professors and peers.

Even though participants had to confront racial and cultural challenges during their time in community college, their college experience was mostly positive and felt they belonged. The college has made significant efforts to include Muslim students as part of the campus community and to help them adjust to campus life. In spite of experiencing microaggressions on campus and in the classroom, participants combated these negative experiences by participating in clubs, utilizing the prayer room, and taking language classes. They found a strong sense of belongingness when they were able to socialize and form friendships with other Muslims and make meaningful connections with their professors.
Recommendations

An important role for higher education institutions is to advance racial diversity, equity, and inclusion. They strive to cultivate transformative relationships between campus personnel and the student body in order to create a positive learning environment. To do this, I highlight recommendations from participants in conjunction with two essential recommendations from the research literature. By understanding the participants’ perspective, not only can campus leaders tailor their efforts to better meet the needs of Muslim students, but also cultivate an environment where they can have a sense of belonging. They would feel more acknowledged and connected to the campus if the college recognized these necessary changes.

Prioritize Cross-Cultural Interaction

Community college should promote more cross-cultural interactions. It is necessary for colleges and universities to promote cross-cultural interactions because of the steady growth in racial diversity, particularly in community college. Park and Bowman (2015) pointed out that academic institutions have a responsibility to cultivate a learning environment where engagement can be meaningful among groups of people from different racial backgrounds.

There should be more diverse activities that welcome all racial groups. Muslim students struggled interacting with non-Muslims because they lacked knowledge of American culture. In other words, Muslim students were uncertain how to understand or respond to the behavior and thinking of their non-Muslim peers. Thus, campus clubs, activities, and social gatherings are
essential sites to bridge interaction among the racial groups that community college leaders and student affairs can capitalize on to strengthen connections (Odell, Korgen, and Wang, 2005).

According to the participants, there are some ways that colleges can improve cross-cultural interaction, particularly with Arab Muslim students. They suggested that the college should bring more awareness of Muslim culture and Islam to campus. One might suggest inviting guest speakers to discuss current events, or welcome scholars with specific interest in the Middle East to provide intellectual insight. One participant recommended using the Muslim community to educate the public by teaching the basics of Islam and Muslim culture during big campus events, such as International Week. Another participant suggested having more campus activities that are racially and culturally inclusive. That is, campus programs should be designed in a way that makes all students feel welcome, equal, and supported.

**Expand Interfaith Initiatives**

Interfaith cooperation should be part of any campus culture. Patel and Geiss (2016) argue that the field of student affairs should not solely focus its attention around race and ethnicity, gender identity, and sexuality but also on religious diversity as it is part of the overall intersecting identities of students, which deserve equal attention as the other categories. Embracing religious diversity on campus signals to students of all faiths that the campus is faithfully committed to the spiritual needs of their students.

Having access to a prayer room at the college provides a sense of appreciation and comfort. It also signifies acceptance for Muslim students and can lessen acts of islamophobia and
ignorance. Rockenbach, Mayhew, Morin, Crandell, and Selznick (2015) researched that interfaith spaces, or prayer rooms, would allow different faiths to find common ground and these spaces would encourage structured dialogue that would compel different faiths and non-religious individuals to listen and learn from one another despite differences in beliefs and practices.

In addition to prayer rooms, participants further suggested that interfaith initiatives should include the conversation on Christian privilege and how it impacts the campus. For example, they think that semester schedules should be more accommodating for Muslim students, recognizing Muslim holidays as equally important as Christian traditions. Additionally, the need to pray five times a day should not be stigmatized but embraced in the classrooms. Professors would play a critical role in normalizing this religious practice by working with Muslim students in helping them meet their spiritual needs.

Conclusion

This phenomenological study allowed the participants to share their lived experiences as Muslim community college students, and how islamophobia impacted their college experience and sense of belonging. Institutionally, the community college has infrastructure in place to make the college experience for Muslim students more positive. The college has diversity programs, clubs, and spaces that accommodate the cultural needs of its students. However, this study revealed that there was a lack of connection between Muslims and non-Muslims. The college would need to consider taking necessary steps to improve cross-cultural relationships and interactions among its students from different racial backgrounds. Even though some participants
experienced what they perceived as islamophobic during their campus experience, many of them agreed that the overall campus environment and culture was welcoming and non-discriminatory.
CHAPTER 4

SCHOLARLY REFLECTION

In this chapter, I will reflect upon my dissertation experience and provide discussion of the challenges and successes that I encountered throughout this journey. Then I will spend time talking about how my research can apply to different units of the college, particularly with faculty since I am also faculty. I believe that the scholarly reflection of this dissertation is vital in closing this dissertation project as it gives me the opportunity to assess my own thoughts and feelings about this challenging endeavor.

Pre-Dissertation Feelings

A big fear I had in deciding to pursue my doctorate degree was the dissertation requirement. First of all, I could not imagine committing a year or more to one topic and finding the time to write about it on top of working and raising kids. Second, I thought choosing a topic was going to be hard—it was. When I got accepted into the program, my anxiety kicked in knowing eventually I would have to start the dissertation, and choosing the topic would be the first step. I do not know why this part of the process caused so much emotional distress and internal conflict, whether I had the mental capacity to undertake this project or not. Finally, the thought of proposing and defending in front of my professors did not make my decision to enroll in the program much easier. I had this fear of rejection that they would not like my topic,
and that I was not talented enough to do serious scholarly work. Regardless of my concerns, I had a lot of people counting on me to complete my doctoral education.

Writing my first doctoral literature review on in-state tuition access for undocumented students opened up an area of interest for me. In fact, my professor for that class encouraged me to consider this topic for my dissertation work because it was an emerging field of scholarship, and that this was an area of student affairs that needed more investigation in terms of how colleges can make undocumented students feel safer and more involved in the campus community despite their immigration status. Prior to this writing, I already had knowledge about the basic concerns that colleges had, and the challenges undocumented students faced pursuing their college degree. But I did not realize the complex web of bureaucracy and structural marginalization that undocumented students navigated through to achieve success. The more papers I wrote on the social and political nature of undocumented college students, the more I felt certain about my dissertation topic, and this made me feel accomplished.

Since day one of my doctoral studies, I focused all my writing on undocumented college students from federal and state financial accessibility to the role of campus leaders helping and accommodating the needs of their undocumented student population. My passion for writing on the needs of undocumented students increased even more when I had the opportunity to speak with some of my own students who were undocumented. Their stories of studying invisibly on campus and the limitations they had outside of school inspired me even more to advocate for their rights and to learn more about activism. In fact, I published an article with my classmate discussing different strategies to socializing undocumented students on campus. My classmate
and I were so proud of this achievement. For me, in particular, I felt like this was the direction I needed to take to complete my doctoral degree.

Then a series of events suddenly changed my course of action for my dissertation. First, Donald Trump’s nativist agenda undermining immigrants in this country refocused my attention from undocumented students to Muslim students. Ever since he implemented his travel ban policies starting in 2017, I became worried for my Muslim students. Not only did they have to cope with the effects of the travel ban, but they also had to endure islamophobia in the community. Their lives changed when the travel ban was in effect. For example, one student had to return to his country for visa purposes during the implementation, but was never able to return to the U.S. because his parents were worried for his safety. In school, some of my students felt they were being watched. They felt like the campus environment changed because non-Muslims suddenly became suspicious of them. Another student told me that social media affected her mental health because she was in shock of the hateful comments that people were saying about Muslims. Second, the pandemic hit. Schools shut down and enrollment decreased. Though I am not certain, but it seemed like the enrollment for undocumented students declined because I lost communication with them. Third, the majority of my students during the pandemic were Arabs and Muslims. Even though the total enrollment for international students declined, I still had a large number of Arabs and Muslims. Given the spread of islamophobia across the country, I thought studying Muslim college students instead was a great alternative.
Dissertation Process

Although I invested in so much time and many late-night writings on undocumented students, I did not regret pivoting to researching Muslims and their college experiences. With getting to know my Muslim students more in my classes and connecting with their concerns with islamophobia rising, I felt inspired to pursue this topic even more. The truth is that both my Muslim students’ experiences with islamophobia in their social and schooling context and the ignorance filling up social media platforms critically piqued my interest in the most passionate way. When I submitted my topic proposal for my dissertation to the department, I was so happy because I felt like this was an extremely important undertaking that I would enjoy.

Parallel to my interest with Muslim students, I also got passionately and intellectually absorbed with Critical Race Theory. My fascination for CRT increased when the Trump Administration and most Republicans did everything they could to discredit and ban CRT in schools and many parts of government. They even allied with conservative pundits and think tanks and led a large crusade of disinformation on social media to the American public. The more I learned about CRT, the more I wanted to use it as my theoretical framework to explain the Muslim experience. Key words like oppression, structural racism, marginalization, and white supremacy aligned with the experiences of Muslim students on campus as I presumed. I was not going to let the current political climate discourage me from applying CRT in my dissertation.

As I mentioned before about my fear of rejection, it finally happened but in the most positive and constructive way. I came into the dissertation proposal ready to conquer until my committee members were honest with me and said that they had a hard time understanding how CRT fit the research context with my Muslim participants. I was silently shocked and a little
scared, but honestly, it was probably the greatest setback I had throughout the dissertation process. It made me think more about what my goal was in my research and what I really wanted to investigate. After my chair and I spent time discussing my next step to move forward, we both agreed on a new theoretical framework that better aligned with my research context. Rewriting my theoretical framework and seeing how it applied during my data collection, I could not have been more grateful to my chair and committee for steering me in the right direction.

I had two major concerns looming over me when I received the green light to conduct my study. The first concern was recruitment. The pandemic and dangerously low enrollment exhaustedly complicated the recruitment process because everyone was concerned for their safety, and the overall college atmosphere was gloomy and dispiriting. At the time when the research was conducted, the research site was not at full capacity so there were hardly any students on campus for me to recruit. The bulletin boards were bare and various student organizations, particularly ones that were for international and ESL students, were not operating. My second concern was the willingness for any student to participate in the study. After asking the Dean, faculty colleagues, college staff, and my own students to help me recruit, I felt like nobody was really interested because of safety concerns and lack of motivation. I did not really blame them for not participating either because nobody really wanted to be on campus. Thus, recruitment nearly took two months and it worried me. But I was reminded that this stage in the process always takes time no matter what the current circumstance might be. With some patience and lots of prayers, I started getting emails from interested participants.

The interviewing process was ultimately the greatest experience in this project. I listened intently and attentively as the participants welcomed me into their world and shared their story.
Observing their body language, their change in tone, and emotions revealed so much about the type of world they lived in as Muslims, a world that I could never experience or know. In some parts of the interview, I struggled to understand the hate and fear the participants were describing about their past and current encounters with non-Muslims. It bothered me that these participants became victims and were blamed for something they did not do. Even when they described islamophobic incidents that appeared more subtle, it troubled me that these subtle acts of islamophobia were normalized social practice. Understanding the essence of the phenomenon through the lived experiences of the participants widely opened up my eyes to the reality that continues to negatively penetrate our society in every way. Using phenomenology in this study really captured the essence needed to understand Muslim students.

By and large, the biggest and most daunting task of my dissertation experience was the coding and theming process. After reading more about coding from Johnny Saldaña’s book, *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*, I thought this research project would never end. I also did not imagine how complex the coding process was either. After getting over my whining and childish ways for about a week, the book was instrumental in helping me code the 60 pages of transcription. Without this book, I would have been overwhelmed and depressed. Doing phenomenology research means to interpret meaning, and I thought this process was not only meaningful but immensely helpful connecting me to the participants. I did not assign codes just to assign, but rather, I assigned a code because a particular meaning stood out to me. I just felt like the participants were trying to convey something that had an underlying meaning for me to interpret. Though this task was gruesomely time-consuming, every minute I spent reading and re-reading the transcripts and revising and reassigning codes and themes was worth it.
Another challenge I encountered during this time was managing my data. I had 60 pages of data to work with but little room to write it in my publishable article chapter. So, my chair suggested that I write two publishable articles, which got me excited because I did not want to cut out any information as I found all of it very important. After a month of dissecting my data, I was able to piece together two articles. However, after looking over it and the feedback from my chair, we both agreed that one article had to go because it slightly drifted away from my overall purpose in the dissertation project. Honestly, deleting one article was the best decision. This allowed me to direct more brain power and focus on the other article. Because of this decision, my publishable article sounded better, stronger, and more focused.

Post-Dissertation Thoughts

As a college writing instructor, writing the dissertation was a really large undertaking but enjoyed every minute of it. I was in disbelief that I wrote this whole dissertation by myself and that my words represented me as an educator, scholar, and advocate. Leaning back in my office chair and scrolling up and down to see the many pages I had written, I strongly felt a sense of accomplishment and relief that my time as a doctoral student had come to an end. But most importantly, the work I put into this project was not about getting to the end, but rather passionately sharing this information with the academic community with such urgency. I know that my participants are counting on me to share their experience with others.

If I had the opportunity to redo this dissertation, I would improve my interviewing skills. During the interviewing process, I learned that I was a terrible interviewer. Interviewing people for the first time, I was nervous (probably more nervous than the participants) and struggled to
expand our conversations because I did not know how to ask follow-up questions effectively since I was fully reliant on my interview protocols in front of me. I know that in some interviews the conversation did not sound natural because I had many pauses trying to figure out which question I was at in my protocol sheet. Because I could not manage to hold a conversation or ask pertinent questions, I know I missed some opportunities to ask participants to give more details about a particular situation that I thought would be relevant and important. Regardless, this was a learning experience that will prepare me for future research using interviews.

My final thought that I would like to close with is that nobody should be afraid to undertake doctoral work because of the dissertation requirement. You will find that your ability to write academically and the motivation needed to complete a certain task in the dissertation process gradually develops while taking classes, conversing with classmates, and committing to your interest in the field. Granted that dissertation work is a lonely endeavor, there is always strong support from the dissertation chair and classmates. For me, I do not regret pursuing my doctorate degree, and completing my dissertation boosted my confidence in everything. Yes, I had some challenging times throughout this journey, but I pressed forward to achieve my goal.

Application for Professional Practice

As racial diversity grows, college leadership must cultivate a learning environment that is inclusive to all students from different racial, ethnic, and religious backgrounds. The college bears the responsibility of implementing programs and activities that welcome cross-cultural interaction among students, staff, and faculty. It is also imperative that the college fosters a campus culture that understands the social and academic needs of students, as well as the
challenges that they face as racism continues to be structured in everyday life. While every part of the college has an integral role to play in making college more inviting, I would like to primarily focus on my role as faculty in shaping positive college experiences.

The area of the dissertation that impacted me the most was the interviewing process. When participants were describing how their teacher’s implicit bias about Muslim culture mediated between the teacher’s authority and the learning process, I realized that I could have been doing the same thing throughout my teaching career. It also bothered me to think that I could have made my students feel inferior because of the power I hold as a teacher. Though I believe that I strive for racial equality and fairness in the classroom, sometimes students get a different experience, and I think this is an area that needs to improve for all teachers.

Often time students do not report their feeling of being marginalized in the classroom because they feel powerless or lack the resources to engage in meaningful conversations with teachers or classmates who might not be aware of the microaggressions they are committing. A couple of participants in the study mentioned this and said that they did not address the issue because they felt they had no authority or power to confront their aggressors. When they do not report these experiences, then these acts of microaggressions become normalized in everyday practice. Teachers especially have a responsibility to ensure that their students feel safe and included by creating a classroom environment that respects people's beliefs and cultures. But most importantly, I wholeheartedly believe teachers should improve on building relationships with students to establish trust so that students do not feel isolated or misguided.

With over 9 years of teaching freshmen and first-year students, I know that many students only look toward their teacher for guidance and feeling of belonging. When racialized
students endure ongoing hostility off campus and struggle co-existing with systemic racism in their everyday lives, they find an ally and peace of mind when they walk in the classroom because they can rely on their teacher to understand and support them. The classroom is the epicenter for cross-cultural interaction as students from different socioeconomic and racial backgrounds come together to engage in structured dialogue. Therefore, students should feel they belong and accepted in the classroom. I believe that the teacher has a critical and transformative role to play in creating a classroom environment where students can be free from racial prejudice while, at the same time, engage in dialogue about overcoming challenges.

Application to Research

When I pursued my research on Muslim college students, I was extremely surprised that there was not a lot of scholarship on Muslim students in higher education. Given to the widespread anti-Muslim rhetoric on social media, the travel bans, and the impact of Christian privilege, I could not comprehend how wide the gap is in the literature for this topic. Muslim college students are becoming more visible on campus and rapidly shaping campus diversity. Islamophobia is also equally growing and spreading across the country and college campuses, affecting the college experiences and belongingness of Muslim students in many ways. Thus, the unique experiences of Muslim college students warrant further investigation.

One important area of research that I think would be worth the undertaking is the comparison between the educational pipeline for Muslim students who graduate high school in the U.S. and others who graduate high school in their home country then coming to the U.S. to
pursue higher education. The decision-making process to attend college is vastly different and largely based on the parent’s decision and family connection in the U.S. I think understanding the initial stages of precollege behavior with Muslim students and their families is necessary knowledge to unearth in order to get a better understanding of how they acclimate to American society and how they socialize in college with non-Muslim peers. In turn, this may provide an explanation on how Muslim students cope with Islamophobia overall.

While there are many more areas to investigate surrounding Muslim college students, I think another crucial area that would be beneficial is how Muslim students perceive acceptance on campus and in the classroom. Particularly, their necessity to modify their behavior to feel accepted should be examined even more in order to fully understand how covering up one’s Muslimness results in acceptance. In conjunction with this focus, there should be an extensive discussion on the compromising of one’s Muslim identity to feel more valued, appreciated, and accepted by non-Muslims. This intrigued me a lot when participants were positively describing this experience while surrendering their identity in the process.

The findings in my study raised other questions that deserve much attention within the field of student affairs. First, in what capacity is student affairs involving Muslim students on campus? Participants pointed out that they hesitated or struggled connecting with non-Muslim peers because they had little social and cultural competency to interact with them. Even during campus events, some participants felt like they were still outsiders afraid to socialize with others. Second, how is student affairs bringing awareness to the campus about Muslim culture especially political issues concerning Muslims and Islam? Throughout the study, the participants only focused on the events that affected their college experience, rather than identifying ways in
which the college informed and educated the community about the Muslim experience. I believe that these questions and more should encourage higher education scholars to research.

Conclusion

I am tremendously proud of myself for undertaking an area of research that deserves so much attention. I do not regret one bit choosing this research topic because my emotions and passion told me from the very beginning that the information I discover would be enriching and meaningful. Though this dissertation process was extremely daunting and stressful, the vital knowledge I learned from the participant’s stories and lived experiences was absolutely invaluable for higher education scholarship and for my professional life.

The research literature on Muslim students in college is insufficient to fully understand how college leadership, student affairs, and faculty can effectively meet the social and academic needs of the Muslim student population. It is one thing to say that Muslim students are shaping racial diversity on campus, and another to say how they are being involved in campus life. Therefore, it is my hope that the findings in my dissertation will build on to existing literature on minority students in college specifically focusing on the Muslim student experience.
REFERENCES


Berger, R. (2015). Now I see it, now I don’t: Researcher’s position and reflexivity in qualitative research. *Qualitative Research, 15*(2), 219-234.


Approval Notice

Initial Review

25- Jun -2021
TO: Dustin French (01857483)
   Counseling, Adult and Higher Education
RE: Protocol # HS21-0437 “A Phenomenological Study of Exploring Arab Muslim
Students at Community Colleges and Islamophobia”

In a preliminary review, the Initial Submission of the above named research protocol was
determined to meet the definition of human subjects research according to the federal
regulations. The submission was then reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review
Board through the expedited review process under Member Review procedures on

25-Jun-2021. Please note the following information about your approved research protocol:
Protocol Approval period: 25-Jun-2021 - 24-Jun-2022
It is important for you to note that as an investigator conducting research that involves
human participants, you are responsible for ensuring that this project has current IRB
approval at all times. If your project will continue beyond the above date, or if you intend to
make modifications to the study, you will need additional approval and should contact the Office
of Research Compliance, Integrity, and Safety for assistance. In addition, you are required to
promptly report to the IRB any injuries or other unanticipated problems or risks to subjects or
others.

Please note that the IRB has the prerogative and authority to ask further questions, seek
additional information, require further modifications, or monitor the conduct of your research
and the consent process.

Informed Consent:
Unless you have been approved for a waiver of the written signature of informed consent, this
notice includes a date-stamped copy of the approved consent form for your use. NIU policy
requires that informed consent documents given to subjects participating in non-exempt
research bear the approval stamp of the NIU IRB. This stamped document is the only consent
form that may be photocopied for distribution to study participants.
If consent for the study is being given by proxy (guardian, etc.), it is your responsibility to document the authority of that person to consent for the subject. Also, the committee recommends that you include an acknowledgment by the subject, or the subject's representative, that he or she has received a copy of the consent form.

**You are responsible for retaining the signed consent forms obtained from your subjects for a minimum of three years after the study is concluded.**

**Continuing Review:**
Continuing review of the project, conducted at least annually, will be necessary until data collection is complete and you no longer retain any identifiers that could link the subjects to the data collected. Please remember to use your **protocol number** (HS21-0437) on any documents or correspondence with the IRB concerning your research protocol.

**Closing the Study:**
Please note that a **final report submission** should be created in the record in lieu of an annual continuation form if data collection has ended and the data are free of identifiers. The final report is a separate submission form in the list of options in the InfoEd record, and it may be submitted prior to the annual review deadline.
With all of this said, the IRB extends best wishes for success in your research endeavors!

Please see the RIPS website for guidance on the impact of COVID-19 on research (including face-to-face data collection) [https://www.niu.edu/divresearch/covid/index.shtml](https://www.niu.edu/divresearch/covid/index.shtml)
APPENDIX B

LETTER OF INTEREST
Hello Future Participant,

My name is Dustin French. I am a doctoral student at Northern Illinois University. I am also an adjunct faculty in the Intensive English Language program at Moraine Valley Community College. I am conducting a study on the college experiences of Arab Muslim students. The goal of this study is to learn more about how Islamophobia has shaped the college experiences of Arab Muslim students and their sense of belonging. I hope my study will contribute more knowledge about the college experiences of Arab Muslim students in the research literature.

I am looking for participants who are willing to share their college experiences. For those interested, participants will take part in two interviews with me either in person or on Zoom. All interviews will be individual and audio recorded for accuracy. The interviews will strictly be confidential. At the end of the second interview, participants will receive a $25 gift card as an appreciation for participating and contributing to my research.

Therefore, I am looking for participants who meet all the criteria. All the boxes must apply to the interested participant.

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<td>1. You identify as an Arab Muslim.</td>
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<td>2. You have attended community college for at least two semesters.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

If all three boxes apply, then you are the right person for the study. If this study interests you, please send me an email to let me know. I will reply with a confirmation letter to welcome you and a consent form for you to give me permission to document and record your interviews. I will also send you demographic information to fill out to know your background more.

Thank you again for taking the time to read this. Please send me an email to let me know you are interested. You may put “Interested in research study” in the subject line of the email.

Sincerely,

Dustin French  
(workplace) frenchd4@morainevalley.edu  -or-  (personal) krudustin@gmail.com
APPENDIX C

DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION
Demographic Information

Thank you for your willingness to participate in my study. As part of participating in the study, I would like to collect some demographic information from you. Please complete the following:

1. Name

2. Gender

3. Age

2. Nationality

3. Country of birth

4. Religion

5. Years/semesters in community college

6. Program of study
APPENDIX D

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL 1
Interview Protocol 1

Thank you so much for agreeing to participate in this study. This is our first interview. Today, I will ask questions about your decision process to attend community college. I anticipate the interview will last about 60 to 90 minutes. I will also be audio recording this interview to ensure accuracy of information. So you can pretend it is not there and just have a conversation with me, okay? Should you feel the need to stop the interview, please let me know and I will stop the interview and the recording.

If you are ready, I will begin the recording and the questions. Ready? Please answer the following questions in detail and as accurate as possible.

First Interview

A. General background
   1. Tell me about your background and where you grew up.
   2. How would you describe your identity?
   3. What stereotypes have you heard about Arabs and Muslims?

B. Decisions to attend college
   4. How was education and going to college discussed in your family while growing up?
      a. How important is a college education to you and your family?
   5. Can you describe the process in which you made the decision to go to college?
   6. What factors led you to choose community college?
      a. Was choosing community college a difficult or easy decision? Explain.
   7. Why did you choose this college specifically?

C. Personal expectations for the college
   8. What are you studying and why did you choose that particular field?
   9. Before enrolling, what was your general perception of attending a community college?
      a. What were your perceptions of what college students were like?
   10. Before enrolling, what was your perception about how Arab Muslim students were treated on community college campuses?
      a. What do you think shaped this perception?
   11. Before enrolling, what expectations did you have for yourself and for the college?
      a. What were some concerns or uncertainties you had?
         i. Were you ever concerned/worried about your safety attending college as an Arab Muslim student? Explain.
         ii. Do you think your Muslim background would disadvantage you in some way as an Arab Muslim student? Explain.
         iii. Did you ever worry that Islam might not be easily accepted on campus?
   12. What has been the most important factor for you to continue/complete your education at this college?
APPENDIX E

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL 2
Interview Protocol 2

Thank you so much for agreeing to participate in the second interview. Today, we will discuss your sense of belonging on campus. I anticipate that the interview will last about 60 to 90 minutes, and I will also audiotape our conversation. Should you feel the need to stop the interview, please let me know and I will stop.

If you are ready, I will begin the recording and the questions. Ready? Please answer the following questions in detail and as accurate as possible.

Second Interview

D. Campus Environment
1. What is the campus environment like for Arab Muslim students?
2. How do you feel like you’re part of the campus community?
   a. What aspects of the campus you feel that you belong or feel accepted?
3. What do you think are some challenges that you and other Muslim students face on campus?
   a. Can you describe a time when you felt valued as a Muslim student?

E. Interaction with non-Muslims
4. How does your identity as an Arab Muslim impact your relationship with your non-Muslim instructors and classmates in the classroom?
   a. Can you describe your typical interaction/involvement in the classroom?
   b. What are your teachers’/classmates’ attitudes toward you like?
      i. Have you had a negative encounter with your teacher or classmate because of your Muslim background?
5. Can you describe a time when you felt uncomfortable speaking with campus staff (i.e., financial aid, student center, advising, cafeteria, campus police, etc.)?
   a. How often do you utilize campus services? (i.e., tutoring center, writing center, library, counseling, etc.)

F. Islamophobia
6. How do negative stereotypes about Muslims and Islam affect your college experience?
7. Have you experienced Islamophobia on campus? If so, how do you know?
   a. How did you react to this experience?
   b. Do you report it to someone or department?
8. What part of your identity makes you a target of Islamophobia?
9. How do you feel when you know someone who has been a victim of Islamophobia?
10. Assuming that Islamophobia remains a part of American society, how does this reality impact your motivation to complete your college education?
    a. How does it impact your relationship with non-Muslims on campus?
G. College Response

11. How do you perceive the overall campus response to Islamophobia?
12. In what ways can the college make Muslim students feel more welcomed, accepted, and appreciated?
   a. How can the college be more of an ally to support Muslim students?
   b. What are faculty, non-Muslim peers, and staff doing to support Muslim students?
13. Is there anything else about your experience as an Arab Muslim community college student that you think is important to share?
APPENDIX F

LETTER OF CONSENT
Key Information

- This is a voluntary research study on the community college experiences of Arab Muslim students.
- This study involves two (2) interviews that last 60-90 minutes each. Interviews are in person or online.
- The benefits include expanding the research on Arab Muslim college students in the areas of community college experience and their sense of belonging on campus and experiences of Islamophobia.
- There are potential risks for this study.

Description of the Study

The purpose of the study is to explore how Arab and Muslim college students make sense of their belongingness on campus and experiences of Islamophobia. If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to do the following: You will participate in two interviews in person or online. The first interview will take 60-90 minutes and the second one, which will be a week or two after, will take 60-90 minutes. Both interviews will be audio recorded for accuracy and all interviews will be confidential.

Risks and Benefits

Potential risks may include feelings of uncomfortable discussions about one’s racialized experiences, which could trigger a negative memory or trauma. Interview questions could reveal sensitive and private information as well. Also, a breach of confidentiality could be a potential risk. While audio recordings make data identifiable despite using pseudonyms, it is also likely that participants may have close ties with the Arab community and may even have familial connections with other participants in the study. If participants were to read the entire paper upon request, they may possibly be able to identify the other participants.

The benefits of participation are giving Arab Muslim students a space where they can share their college experiences as a minority group and be able to discuss their educational journey, and experiences of Islamophobia and other campus climate challenges they may face. This study will help expand the limited literature on the experiences of Arab and Muslim students and how they make sense of their belongingness on campus. Participants will receive a $25 gift card for participating in the study.

Confidentiality
The records of this study will be kept confidential. Research records will be kept in a locked file, and all electronic information will be coded and secured using a password protected file. The interview transcripts and audio recording files that you provide will be kept in a safe place for at least 1 year. They will be destroyed afterwards if they are no longer necessary. I will not include any information in any report I may publish that would make it possible to identify you. I will only use your pseudonym. The data collected for this study will not be used in future studies and publications.

In written publications and presentations, I will assign a pseudonym to you to enhance confidentiality. With your permission, your racial, religious, cultural, gender, and other pertinent social identity will be made known in written materials resulting from the study. However, you will be given the opportunity to review and approve any material that is published about you.

**Compensation**
You will receive a $25 gift card for participating.

**Your Rights**

The decision to participate in this study is entirely up to you. You may withdraw from the study at any time. Your decision will not result in any loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You have the right to skip any question or research activity, as well as to withdraw completely from participation at any point during the process. Additionally, your withdrawal will have no impact on your grades or academic success as my current student.

You have the right to ask questions about this research study and to have those questions answered before, during, or after the research. If you have any further questions about the study, at any time feel free to contact the researcher, **Dustin French** at **frenchd4@morainevalley.edu** or by telephone at (708) 571-5348. Should you need to speak with my dissertation chair or the director of IRB at Moraine Valley, their contact information is below

**Contact Information**

Dissertation Chair
Carrie A. Kortegast, Ph.D.
Associate Professor, Higher Education and Student Affairs
Department of Counseling and Higher Education
Northern Illinois University
Gabel Hall 201-C
DeKalb, IL 60115-2828
(815) 753-9200
ckortegast@niu.edu

If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant that have not been answered by the investigators or if you have any problems or concerns that occur as a result
of your participation, you may contact the Office of Research Compliance, Integrity, and Safety at (815)753-8588.

Northern Illinois University policy does not provide medical treatment or compensation for treatment of injuries that may occur as a result of participation in research activities. The preceding information shall not be construed as a waiver of any legal rights or redress which the participants may have.

Your signature below indicates that you have decided to volunteer as a research participant for this study, and that you have read and understood the information provided above. You will be given a signed and dated copy of this form to keep, along with any other printed materials deemed necessary by the study investigators.

________________________________________________           _____________________
Participant’s Signature                            Date

I give my consent to be audio recorded during the two interviews

________________________________________________           _____________________
Participant’s Signature                            Date