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Microaggressions on the University Campus and the Undergraduate Experiences of Muslim South Asian Women

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Abstract

After the events of 9/11, increased Islamophobia led to a significant increase in both overt and covert discrimination toward the Muslim American population. Since Islamophobia adversely affected the Muslim American population's well-being in a variety of settings, it is important to understand its impact on Muslim American college students. The major objective of this study was to examine a number of experiences and perceptions of religious-based discrimination on campus. Individual face-to-face interviews were conducted with 12 Muslim South Asian female undergraduate students who were recruited from five local universities in urban settings of the northeast region of the U.S. This study used Moustakas's (1994) transcendental phenomenological approach to identify seven major themes: (a) Pathology of different religious groups, (b) assumption of religious homogeneity, (c) endorsing religious stereotypes, (d) a belief that Islamophobia is common and will continue, (e) confusion, (f) a desire to educate others about Islam, and (g) positive coping and support. All participants reported experiencing microaggressions, even those who may not be easily identified as Muslim.

The study results may help students, professors, and university counselors gain awareness of the impact of discrimination experienced by a religious minority group on campus and determine preventive measures to promote their safety and wellbeing.

Keywords: Islamophobia, Muslim, South Asian, discrimination, microaggression, university

Overview

It is commonly believed that most universities and colleges enjoy an open and safe environment. However, several studies (Feagin, 1992; Feagin & Sikes, 1994; Feagin, Vera, & Imani, 1996; Franklin & Boyd-Franklin, 2000) have shown that students of color studying at predominantly White universities are more likely than White students to experience feelings of discrimination and microaggressions on campus (Harwood, Huntt, Mendenhall, and Lewis, 2012). Protests and student resistance over racial issues at the University of Missouri and other campuses in 2015 sparked a debate over racism and discrimination at colleges across the United States (Eligon & Pérez-Peña, 2015; Solorzano & Bernal, 2001). Islamophobia (irrational fear of Islam or Muslims) has increased in the U.S. in response to political and economic tensions and the media's skewed lens of Islam and Muslims. Given the current anti-Muslim political climate in the U.S. and significant increase of overt and subtle religious discrimination toward the Muslim American population, especially post 9/11 (Rippy & Newman, 2006) and the 2016 U.S. presidential campaign (Abu-Ras, Suárez, & Abu-Bader, 2018; Clay, 2017), it is particularly important to understand the impact of Islamophobia on Muslim college students. Muslim college students may experience discrimination and microaggressions in distinct ways as compared to other minority groups on campus because many outside of Islam believe that the culture and lifestyle of Muslims are incompatible with the Western way of life (Pew Research Center, 2006). Microaggressions toward Muslim college students can be viewed as the "new" prejudice that has evolved as a product of contemporary American sentiments (Edwards, 2010).

Approximately 3.3 million Muslims live in the U.S and the population is estimated to double by 2050 (Mohamed, 2016). As the American Muslim population continues to grow, the number of Muslim college students will see a parallel increase; this study aims to identify trends that could affect the wellbeing of this growing population. Racial slights that occur in educational or work settings may negatively impact an individual's psychological health (Nadal, Wong, Griffin, Davidoff, & Sriken, 2014) and perception of their life on campus (Harper, Davis, Jones, McGowan, Ingram, & Platt, 2011; Nadal et al., 2014). Studies have focused on a range of religious discrimination in a variety of set-

tings and the impact on the general Muslim American population (Abu-Ras et al., 2018; Aroian, 2012; Livengood & Stodolska, 2004; Park, Malachi, Sternin, & Tevet, 2009; Tummala-Narra & Claudius, 2013).

Impact of Religious Discrimination on Muslim Mental Health

Discrimination is defined as the beliefs, attitudes, institutional arrangements, and acts that tend to denigrate or deny equal treatment to individuals or groups based on racial characteristics or group affiliation (Clark, Anderson, Clark, & Williams, 1999). The impact of discrimination and victimization of minority groups is well documented in the psychology literature. Racial and religious discrimination have similar effects and outcomes on an individual's wellbeing and may lead to physical and mental health problems (Kessler, Mickelson, & Williams, 1999; Sellers & Shelton, 2003). Rippy and Newman's (2008) study of 190 Muslim Americans found that perceived religious discrimination and/or hate crimes were associated with a high level of stress. In a sample of 102 Muslim participants, Abu-Ras and Suárez (2009) revealed that over 70 percent reported posttraumatic symptoms post 9/11, such as increased arousal, fatigue, problems with concentration, and anxiety. In their most recent study of 1,130 Muslim Americans, Abu-Ras and colleagues (2018) found that participants with longer tenures in the United States who rated themselves as religious reported feeling less safe in the U.S. and had higher levels of stress that were correlated with higher levels of perceived religious discrimination. Although many Muslim Americans have experienced psychological symptoms as a result of discrimination, a study of 83 participants found that almost all avoided seeking therapy due to a lack of culturally competent services at mental health agencies (Abu-Ras & Abu-Bader, 2008).

Despite the negative impact many Muslims experienced due to post-9/11 discrimination, some individuals took a proactive stance and practiced positive coping strategies. Livengood and Stodolska (2004) found that participants attempted to change broader societal attitudes with "random acts of kindness" (p. 201) and efforts toward interfaith communication and outreach activities. Additionally, many members of the American Muslim community provided the public with educational materials about Islam (Abu-Ras & Abu-Bader, 2008). Abu-Ras, Senzai, and Laird's 2013 study of 62 American Muslim physicians reported participants' increased involvement and visibility in community events about Islam. Regarding more personal strategies, several studies indicated that many Muslims used religious coping by first turning to God when seeking help and comfort in times of stress (Abu-Ras & Abu-Bader, 2008; Abu-Ras & Suárez, 2009; Carter, 2010; Hallak & Quina, 2004; Livengood & Stodolska, 2004; Nadal, Issa, Griffin, Hamit, & Lyons, 2010).

Despite the many studies on overt discrimination against Muslim Americans and its impact (Abu El-Haj, 2007; Abu-Ras & Suárez, 2009; Abu-Ras et al., 2018; Khanlou et al., 2008; Livengood & Stodolska, 2004; Rippy & Newman, 2008), few studies focus specifically on subtle discrimination toward Muslim Americans (Aroian, 2012; Park et al., 2009; Tummala-Narra & Claudius, 2013). Since the college years are a period when many students learn to develop their self-concepts and identities (Nadal et al., 2014), it is important to understand if discrimination has a unique or similar effect upon Muslim college students compared to the Muslim population outside of college. To the authors' knowledge, this study is the first to address this phenomenon with this particular segment of the Muslim American population.

Microaggressions

The concept of *microaggression* is defined as "brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults that potentially have harmful or unpleasant psychological impact on the target person or group" (Sue et al., 2007, p. 273). The major classifications of microaggressions are based on the intentions of the perpetrators, the severity of the act, and the underlying messages that are expressed. Microassaults are conscious comments or behaviors that are made to intentionally hurt or humiliate an individual, microinsults are often unconscious, subtle behaviors that are rude and insensitive, and microinvalidations are statements that discredit the psychological experiences of individuals (Nadal et al., 2010). Since microaggressions can be very subtle, targets may find it difficult to identify which demographic aspect was the major cause of the discrimination (Abu-Ras & Suárez, 2009). Additionally, victims may feel confused and perplexed as to whether they actually experienced a microaggression since the aggressive act can be ambiguous and transpires outside the level of conscious awareness (Nadal et al., 2010). It has been argued that individual differences may contribute to one's perception of a situation or act as discriminatory. For instance, individuals with strong group, nationalist, or ethnic identification are more likely to report personal experiences of ethnic discrimination and perceive themselves as targets of discrimination (Major, Quinton, & McCoy, 2002; Sellers & Shelton, 2003; Operario & Fiske, 2001). Johnston and Nadal (2010) noted how "passing" relates to microaggressions; in this case, Muslims who do not wear religious attire may "pass" as non-Muslim and thus may not experience the same types or number of microaggressions as people more easily identifiable as Muslim.

Since many Muslim women wear hijab, (i.e., cover their hair or wear dis-

tinct outer clothing), they are often easily identified as Muslim. Therefore, the idea of "passing" can be examined by interviewing a range of Muslim women, those who wear hijab and those who don't. Additionally, due to social gender norms, female participants may be more likely than male participants to be more open with a female researcher. These factors coalesced into the researcher's decision to interview female participants exclusively.

Few studies on racial microaggressions have examined the experiences of South Asian Americans (Alvarez, Juang, & Liang, 2006; Sue, Bucceri, Lin, Nadal, & Torino, 2009). South Asians (individuals with family origins in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, or Sri Lanka) constitute one of the fastest growing groups of Asian immigrants in the U.S. (Inman & Tummala-Narra, 2010). In fact, the most common ethnicity that Muslim Americans reported was South Asian (Varieties of Worship, 2001). Hate crimes targeting not only Arab Americans and Muslim Americans, but also South Asian Americans have increased post-9/11 (Finn, 2011; Wang, Siy, & Cheryan, 2011). The current study will focus particularly on Muslims of South Asian descent.

Currently, there are only a few studies about the impact of microaggressions on religious minority groups, which may lead to overlooking their needs and ways to address them (Nadal, Griffin, Hamit, Leon, Tobio, & Rivera, 2012). A theoretical taxonomy on religious microaggressions was proposed by Nadal and colleagues (2010) based on categories and themes of racial microaggressions described by Sue and colleagues (2007). Nadal and colleagues (2010) proposed six categories of microaggressions based primarily on religion and are likely independent of other identities (e.g., race, ethnicity, gender, and immigration status). The six categories are as follows: (a) *Endorsing religious stereotypes*: statements or behaviors that communicate false, presumptuous, or incorrect perceptions of certain religious groups; (b) *exoticization*: instances where other religions are viewed as trendy or foreign, and sends the message that such religions are trivial and not sacred; (c) *pathology of different religious groups*: statements and behaviors in which individuals categorize some religious practices or traditions as being deviant; (d) *assumption of one's own religious identity as the norm*: comments or behaviors that convey one's presumption that their religion is the standard and behaves accordingly; (e) *assumption of religious homogeneity*: statements in which individuals assume that everyone in a given religious group looks, behaves, and thinks the same; and (f) *denial of religious prejudice*: incidents in which individuals claim that they are not religiously biased, even if their words or behaviors may indicate otherwise.

Nadal and colleagues (2012) validated their proposed taxonomy of religious microaggressions toward Muslims or members of any other religious minority group. Specifically, their pilot study with 10 Muslim participants used focus group interviews to explore experiences with religious microaggressions.

Their findings supported four of the six themes from the theoretical taxonomy proposed by Nadal and colleagues (2010), including endorsing religious stereotypes, pathology of the Muslim religion, assumption of religious homogeneity, and exoticization. Nadal and colleagues (2012) suggested that further research is needed to examine the coping processes and reactions to microaggressions among Muslim Americans.

Purpose and Significance of the Current Study

In a number of previous studies, Islamophobia has been demonstrated to have a negative impact on the lives of Muslim Americans in a variety of settings. To the author's knowledge, this information has never been gathered about effects on the university campus. The overarching research question and purpose of this study was to explore, describe, and understand the incidence of perceived religious discrimination among Muslim American students on five university campuses in urban settings of the northeast region of the U.S. In particular, the current study focused on the experiences and perceptions of microaggressions in university settings among Muslim South Asian female undergraduate students.

Method

Research Design

The current study used a qualitative method to collect and analyze data to understand the phenomenon of perceived religious discrimination toward Muslim South Asian female undergraduate students on five university campuses. Qualitative research is the best method to use when a topic has received little empirical attention (Morrow & Smith, 2000). Moustakas's transcendental phenomenological approach (1994) allowed for an in-depth exploration of the participants' subjective experiences. A semi-structured questionnaire was used to collect data from 12 participants regarding their experiences and perceptions of religious microaggressions in academic, employment, and social settings on campus.

Recruitment Process

The participants were recruited in three ways from September 2014 to February 2016 from five local medium-to-large American universities in urban settings of the northeast. First, the first author contacted leaders of student orga-

nizations from each of the universities and explained the purpose of the study. Upon their agreement, they disseminated the study announcement during club meetings and prayer gatherings and through e-mail using their listserve. Second, the first author posted flyers advertising the study at these universities. Third, the first author attended on-campus events with Muslim students, distributed flyers, and met with potential participants. Additionally, some participants referred the researcher to other classmates, generating a snowball sample.

Inclusion criteria.

Participants were eligible to take part in this study if they: (a) self-identified as Muslim; (b) self-identified as South Asian (family originally from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, or, Sri Lanka); (c) were 18 years of age or older; (d) were enrolled at an undergraduate institution; (e) self- identified as female; (f) experienced at least one incident of perceived religious-based discrimination in the university setting; and (g) spoke English. Since most acts of religious-based discrimination are often incepted by physical appearance, careful attention was given to participants who wore traditional Muslim attire (e.g., hijab or headscarf).

Study Procedure

A total of twelve students participated in this study. The first author contacted each participant twice, the first contact being a phone screen aimed to determine if the volunteer met each inclusion criteria of the study. Eligible volunteers met with the researcher to review the informed consent document and participate in the individual face-to-face interview in a private setting on campus.

The semi-structured interview protocol designed for this study sought the participants' description of the role Islam plays in their lives, definition of discrimination, and experience of being treated equally and feeling included on campus. The protocol also asked participants about their experiences and perceptions of religious microaggressions in different sectors including the classroom, work place, and social settings on campus. All individual interviews were audio-recorded and each lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes in duration. Upon completion of the interview, each participant completed a brief paper-and-pencil demographic questionnaire. The form asked participants to identify their date of birth, marital status, country of family origin, language(s) spoken, number of years living in the U.S., citizenship status as a U.S. student or international student, and level in college. Each participant was compensated with a $10 gift card to the bookstore Barnes & Noble.

Data Analysis

All interviews were transcribed by the first author. First, horizontalization involved creating a list of significant statements from each transcript that provided an understanding of how the participants experienced the phenomenon. Second, these significant statements were clustered into themes. From the thematic analysis, two kinds of descriptions were developed using the method developed by Moustakas (1994): (a) a textural description (what participants experienced), and (b) a structural description (how the participants experienced it in terms of the conditions, situations, or context). For quality assurance, the second author reviewed all codes and themes followed by comments and revisions. Lastly, both types of descriptions were combined to convey an overall essence of the participants' common experiences. The essence captures the meaning ascribed to the experience (Moerer-Urdahl & Creswell, 2004).

For a robust analysis, the first author consulted with peers, a process known as peer debriefing. Peer debriefing supports the credibility, or "believability," of the data in qualitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Peer debriefers challenge the analysis and explore alternative approaches in order to maintain objectivity and determine if the conclusions are valid. Three graduate students volunteered as peer debriefers and were trained in analyzing the data using Moustakas's (1994) transcendental phenomenological method. In addition, to avoid any possible research bias, the first author: (a) bracketed her own views beforehand in order to establish a clear boundary between the researcher's views and experiences and those of the participants (Moustakas, 1994), and (b) used a reflexivity journal to describe her observations of the participants' attitudes and actions and reflect on how data collection and analysis was impacting her personally and professionally (Maxwell, 2005).

Results

Participants' Background

The 12 participants ranged from first year to senior levels in college with a mean age of 19.75 years. All participants were born in the United States and had lived in the country their entire lives. Half of them identified their country of family origin as Pakistan and the other half as Bangladesh. Most of the participants (58%) did not wear hijab or any attire that easily identified them as Muslim, but all described Islam as central to their identity and regularly engaged in religious practices. In general, the participants defined discrimination as "treating an individual differently based on their appearance and/or background" and "not giving people equal opportunities because they're a certain

sex, race, religion, sexual orientation, etc."

Themes

Seven themes emerged from the data analysis: (a) pathology of different religious groups, (b) assumption of religious homogeneity, (c) endorsing religious stereotypes, (d) a belief that Islamophobia is common and will continue, (e) confusion, (f) a desire to educate others about Islam, and (g) positive coping and support. The following section will introduce these themes and provide supporting examples for each to describe the experiences and perceptions of religious discrimination among the participants.

Theme 1: Pathology of different religious groups.

This type of religious microaggression involves actions which send the message that Muslims are somehow abnormal. The vast majority of participants described receiving stares that made them feel "uncomfortable," "tearful," "self-conscious," "guilty," "scrutinized," "judged," "alone," and "unaccepted by society." A participant described receiving a stare while walking on campus: "You think of yourself as a normal person, and then you're reminded that you're not." Another participant, not wearing religious attire, described feeling unsafe on the university shuttle bus after being stared at by another student:

> My hijabi friend and I were taking the [university shuttle] bus back to her apartment right off-campus and we got this look and it made my skin crawl. This look was that bad. I knew it wasn't because he was sexualizing me, even though I've had that, too. This was specifically, like, [in a judgmental tone], "You're a Muslim."

Other participants discussed friends and classmates no longer interacting with them after disclosing their Muslim identity. One participant shared an incident that occurred in which a friend volunteered to massage her hand for her after completing an in-class group activity and stated, "After I told my friend in class that I'm Muslim, he let go of my hand [and stopped massaging it]. After I told him I'm Muslim, he never talked to me." Almost every participant described experiencing this type of microaggression and their examples conveyed the message they were treated as inferior to the majority group.

Theme 2: Assumption of religious homogeneity.

This theme discounts the individuality and variety of ethnic and cultural groups of Muslims around the world. Most participants (75%) shared incidents

that endorsed this assumption. For example, a participant interpreted an incident when a woman at a campus bus stop told her she was not expecting her to speak perfect English and shared: "She obviously did not expect to hear perfect English from me because to her, I guess, I didn't look like I would be able to speak proper English." This type of microaggression sends the message that Muslims are foreign and do not speak English. Even though many Muslims, such as all the participants in this study, are born and raised in the U.S., they can be treated as though they are not from the U.S. due to perceptions of their religious identity. Another participant described a random off-topic remark made by her professor in class: "Yoga pants are not allowed to be worn in Muslim countries." She expressed her feelings about her professor's use of the term "Muslim countries" and the assumptions of homogeneity in such places:

> I think, sometimes, people assume that when they say 'Muslim countries,' they also mean everyone who comes from these Muslim countries. It feels kind of strange. It feels kind of targeting. At times, it can feel like they're talking about you or your family.

In this instance, the professor assumed that everyone living in predominantly Muslim countries does not wear a certain type of clothing that is form-fitting and there is no individuality in one's attire.

Theme 3: Endorsing religious stereotypes.

A common stereotype linked with this minority group is that all Muslims are affiliated with terrorism. One participant relayed that her professor stated in class that "terrorists are towelheads," which is a derogatory term used to refer to Muslims, Arabs, or South Asians who wear turbans or other head covering. Other participants expressed statements made by classmates that endorsed this stereotype. For example, one participant described a social event on campus, Meet-A-Muslim Day, and stated, "A friend told me a student walked by the table of Muslim students and shouted, "It's ISIS! It's ISIS!"" This "joking" incident conveys that a perception that every person who identifies as Muslim is a violent terrorist. Another participant shared an experience working with a group of students in the classroom:

> In the middle of preparing for our presentation, my group member just randomly asks me, 'So I heard about the bombing in . . . or, terrorist attack in some Middle Eastern country. So why are you people always trying to bomb people?'

This incident led the participant to feel "disconnected" with her group members. Such statements endorsing this stereotype can be viewed as overtly Islamophobic.

Theme 4: A belief that Islamophobia is common and will continue.

Many of the participants (75%) expressed a belief that Islamophobia is commonplace and discrimination toward the Muslim population will continue throughout their lives. A few described it in their everyday lives as "a common theme," "natural," and "normalized." The participants described expecting discrimination against Muslims to occur at their on-campus workplace and in the classroom. For example, one participant described expecting to hear Islamophobic comments in each class after her professor once stated: "Africans and Asians can't put a government together." She described bracing for the offense: "I feel on edge, like whenever it becomes a controversial topic in class, it's like, Oh, no! They're about to whip out something wild I'm going to have to live with." This participant demonstrates that Muslim students may feel uncomfortable in the classroom, which is generally believed to be a safe environment for students. This incident is also an example of when it is difficult to attribute whether the microaggression is based on religion, race, ethnicity, or some combination of several factors. A second participant described her feelings about the future after she perceived that a classmate did not speak to her because of her visible Muslim identity: "After this experience, I felt very insulted and I again felt that feeling of, wow, things are going to be very hard for me in the future. This kind of feeling like I'm being held back." This theme portrays that many of the participants believe that they will continue to experience Islamophobia and that it will interfere with achieving their future goals.

Theme 5: Confusion.

Many of the participants' (58%) reactions to microaggressions on the college campus involved feelings of confusion. Participants described not understanding the incident, wondering why they were being treated differently, feeling uncertain of how to respond, and feeling unsure of their responses. A participant expressed confusion after a student on the campus shuttle was staring at her and her Muslim friend: "While he was staring, I thought, Oh my God. Is this really happening? Is what I'm thinking actually happening?" This incident displays that Muslims may not recognize the subtle nature of microaggressions. Another participant pondered about her response to a classmate who she felt was attacking her stance on the Iraq war: "But after my classmate made that comment, I was, like, should I not have said what I said? Should I not have

defended my people?" This theme communicates that the subtlety of microaggressions may often lead to confusion, doubt, and questions about what occurred and if they responded appropriately.

Theme 6: A desire to educate others about Islam.

Most of the participants (75%) expressed the need to educate the American public about Islam and challenge stereotypes and prejudicial attitudes toward Muslims. Since they believed other students had a very limited understanding of Islam and held misconceptions of Muslim people, they felt "pressured and responsible" to educate them about the religion. Most of the participants explained they are welcoming of questions on how they practice their faith, yet feel anxious when teaching others, and thus would like to be more educated and prepared themselves. Additionally, some commented being asked many questions about their religion and feeling that their statements and actions were in a way representing Islam. One participant expressed feeling responsible for representing her entire faith:

> I think it goes both ways. Sometimes when events happen, it's nice to be able to speak out [about Islam] and then have people support you in that, but then at the same time, I just want to live my life and go to my classes, go to a party or something, and not have to worry about, 'Okay, let me make sure I'm representing Islam perfectly every single time I step out of my house.' I'm just a college kid. Most of us are just college kids. That's not a responsibility I should have on my shoulders.

This statement depicts that Muslim students on the university campus may perceive themselves as a spokesperson for the entire Muslim population. Furthermore, participants believed they need to teach Islam by conveying through their actions that they do not align with the stereotypes and misconceptions. Another participant who does not wear religious attire described her change in behavior after she perceived that others were more friendly and approachable to her than to her friend wearing hijab: "When someone asks, 'What are you?' then I become hesitant because I want to know their stance on Muslims first because I want to portray myself better before I have to tell them." This participant expressed that she does not want others to know she is Muslim and feels as though she must work harder than others to prove her positive qualities before she discloses her religious identity. This theme shows that many participants believe their experiences of microaggressions are somewhat the result of others' limited understanding of and misconceptions about Islam and, even though they express an interest to educate others, they may still feel it is overwhelming and unjust to undertake this role.

Theme 7: Positive coping and support.

All but one of the participants engaged in healthy and positive coping methods. They reached out to family, friends, professors, and members of the campus Muslim Students Association (MSA), who they viewed as trustworthy for support. In addition to becoming more engaged in defending their religion, they felt the need to pursue more knowledge about their religion and further strengthen their own Muslim identity. Other participants made more efforts to connect with other non-Muslim students, engage in activism on campus, and become more involved in on-campus organizations. A participant described the national backlash against her university's MSA due to the group's stance against a movie screening on campus and expressed her increased activism:

> After this screening experience, I've gone out to WAY more diversity events, WAY more politically active events, just because it was the first big thing that I felt obligated to go to all these things for. Since then, I've gone to everything.

Another participant described her response to her professor's generalization about Muslims in class:

> In the course evaluation, I said, 'There are just some things that you said throughout this semester that have no . . . I feel like you should consider [what you said] and think about a little bit. It's not that it makes you a bad person or a bad teacher, because I think you're a good one.' I was polite. I wasn't off-putting.

This participant used her experience as an opportunity to provide positive and constructive feedback to her professor when she was asked to complete a course evaluation at the end of the semester. Altogether, where possible, the participants used their experiences to improve their understanding of themselves and help Muslims and other vulnerable groups who also face discrimination.

Descriptions and Essence of the Experience

When the participants described their experiences with religious discrimination on their university campus, they used words such as "stared," "ignorant," "lonely," "unfair," "judged," "confused," "pressured," and "targeting." Participants encountered ignorance of others about Islam and felt a responsibility to educate them about their religion. They expressed "Islamophobia is real" and "discrimination is going to exist." Moreover, they described feeling excluded by non-Muslim students. Many participants expressed feeling confused about

what they experienced and doubtful about their responses. The participants experienced these incidents in a variety of settings on the university campus, including classrooms, university shuttle buses, on-campus jobs, libraries, social events, club meetings, and the university's MSA social media webpage. The perpetrators of the discrimination were both students and professors. A majority of participants reached out to family, friends, and professors for emotional support. Many of them turned these painful experiences to learning moments about themselves and to educating others. These experiences also increased their motivation to stand against discrimination by getting more involved in their own Muslim community and showing more support of other minority groups. The essence of the experience is being generalized and feeling judged by those who have a limited understanding of Islam, and that family, friends, and professors can be sources of support.

Discussion

Although there has been much research on the experiences and impact of Islamophobia on the Muslim American population post-9/11 (Abu-Ras, Suárez, & Abu-Bader, 2018; Abu-Ras & Abu-Bader, 2008; Abu-Ras & Suárez, 2009; Aroian, 2012; Livengood & Stodolska, 2004; Park et al., 2009; Tummala-Narra & Claudius, 2013), little research has been conducted on Islamophobia on the university campus. While most of the participants did not wear hijab or any religious attire, all the participants perceived to have experienced microaggressions. This finding did not support the idea of "passing" (Johnston & Nadal, 2010); participants who could pass as non-Muslim still perceived to have experienced the same types and amounts of microaggressions as those more easily identifiable as Muslim. Additionally, study participants described Islam as an essential aspect of their identity. Since individuals who demonstrate strong group identification are more likely to perceive themselves as targets of discrimination (Operario & Fiske, 2001), the participants are likely to have interpreted the ambiguous nature of most microaggressions as indeed discriminatory.

The results of the current study support three themes from the proposed taxonomy of religious microaggressions (Nadal et al., 2010). These supported themes include pathology of different religious groups, assumption of religious homogeneity, and endorsing religious stereotypes. Four additional themes emerged based on the experiences of the participants. One of these emerging themes was feelings of confusion about the incidents, which supports the literature that victims can be unaware of the microaggressive act or comment (Nadal, 2008; Sue et al., 2007). Other themes that emerged were the desire to educate others about Islam and to increase their understanding of Islam and Muslims. Participants also became more engaged and active in on-campus

organizations. These results correspond with other studies on the problem-focused coping strategies (proactive stance) many Muslims have used in response to discrimination (Abu-Ras & Abu-Bader, 2008; Abu-Ras et al., 2013; Livengood & Stodolska, 2004). Another emerging theme was the belief among participants that Islamophobia is a common phenomenon of American society and will continue throughout their lives, which supports the notion that microaggressions are a contemporary form of discrimination in American society.

Finally, the ultimate essence, or common experience, of the participants with regard to microaggressions was feeling that non-Muslims who often generalized and judged them held a very limited understanding of Islam. As the American media continues to project narratives of Muslims as violent terrorists, many Americans will likely continue to hold prejudicial attitudes toward this minority group. These attitudes may lead to intentional or unintentional discriminatory acts toward the Muslim American collegiate population. Thus, it is important for the media and other institutions to promote balanced images of this community, which can ultimately contribute to reducing Islamophobia and improving the wellbeing of the Muslim population in general and the college experience for Muslim students in particular.

Limitations and Implications for Research and Clinical Practice

Although this is the first study to address microaggressions toward Muslim students on university campuses, it has its own limitations. First, the current study used a small sample size of 12 participants; it is challenging to obtain a bigger sample of stigmatized minority students who may be afraid to take part in this type of study. Thus, it is important to continue qualitative as well as quantitative research on microaggressions in the university setting to better understand its impact on Muslim American college students. Second, this study only included participants in the northeast urban region of the U.S. who identified as female and South Asian. It is recommended that future studies attempt to sample other campuses in different geographic areas (as the culture and politics of a region can influence the types of microaggressions exhibited) and more diverse ethnic and racial groups. Different gender, ethnic, racial, and age groups present various intersectional identities, and thus may have unique or different experiences of overt and subtle discrimination. Third, including students fluent in English might bias the sample toward more active or involved students while excluding others. Future research can compare the experiences of Muslim international students whose second language may be English to Muslim U.S. students.

Given that universities influence the social and intellectual growth of students (Pushkin & Colon-Gonzalez, 1998), administrators have an obligation

to enhance the racial climate on campus. Further research about religious discrimination toward Muslim college students can inform the design of effective interventions and educational programs in the university setting (e.g., courses on world religions for students, cultural competency training for professors). Educational programs for students, faculty, and administrators to increase awareness about microaggressions and their impact can demonstrate a commitment to combating microaggressions on the university campus (Nadal et al., 2014). Research can also help mental health professionals at university/ college counseling centers understand the kind of discrimination Muslim students may encounter, be aware of their own biases regarding this population, and provide culturally sensitive interventions for the Muslim students who do seek help from professional providers. For instance, university counselors can help students develop effective coping strategies when encountering microaggressions (Nadal et al., 2014). They can also empower students to advocate for the Muslim student population and other minority groups on campus. Additionally, university counselors can take initiatives to create intergroup dialogue among students to foster social justice attitudes, self-reflection, empathy, and understanding (Zúñiga, Lopez, & Ford, 2012). Altogether, educating students, professors, and mental health professionals can ultimately develop a safer environment and improve the wellbeing of Muslim college students and other students of minority groups on campus.

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