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An Examination of the Experiences of Muslim American Students in Higher Education:

The Arena of Greek Life

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ENG212-W: Melodrama in American Culture and Politics

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Greek Life is a predominant social arena on American college campuses.  Although Greek Organizations can be controversial, many American students across the country choose to join them. Additionally, in a country with growing diversity, a need to reflect that diversity in higher education has been a growing trend. However, then comes the question, how should multiculturalism be reflected within Greek organizations and should it at all? Especially, when it seems only natural to join a group of students that you have something in common with, which most certainly includes culture. The question then becomes, how does one remedy this seemingly innate in-group [mentality](http://virginiaspinksproject.weebly.com/in-group-mentalities.html) of Greek Organizations with the idea of multiculturalism? Is this even possible?

  More specifically, I have tried to collect and recount the stories Muslim American students and their experiences with Greek Life. This particular interest in Muslim American students (and more broadly the Arab-Israeli conflict, and Middle Eastern culture in general) I think stems from wanting to defy a legacy of miseducation, misinformation, and misunderstanding.  In my academic career, I have been attracted to these issues because of:   
  1) how underrepresented these topics seemed to be in such a Western-centric

education system  
 2) My interest in religion (as a reaction to questions of my own Southern Baptist upbringing)   
3) and certain informative media/cultural artifacts that have caught my attention (such as the [Lemon Tree](http://sandytolan.com/the-lemon-tree/" \t "_blank), [Khaled Hosseini](http://khaledhosseini.com/" \t "_blank)'s works, media exposure about issues such as TSA profiling, and the Arab Spring, and a documentary entitled [Promises](http://www.promisesproject.org/nyt.html" \t "_blank)).

 I was brought up in an age where the media constantly disseminated and propagated misleading and just plain wrongful views of Muslims and Arabs post-9/11. The fearfulness and misunderstanding of Islamic and Middle Eastern culture became evident even among people I considered myself closest to, but it all seemed unfounded to me. There was no reason to have such hate and fear toward an entire, rather large, segment of the world's population, because of a few extremists. In a way, I think that all violence is unfounded, because it comes from a place of ignorance and refusal to understand, if not at least respect one another, because in the end, we are all human beings, and this planet belongs to all of us. Human rights are about everyone, regardless of ethnicity, race, religion, class, or culture. Although I, personally, have not been faced with much adversity, I strongly empathize with those who have. This project stems from a love of people, and a yearning for a more tolerant global society.

Before entering into a discussion of my findings, it is necessary to review the literature to examine what has and has not been said on this topic. Insofar as the issue of multiculturalism in higher education is concerned, there is a vast amount of discourse, for as the United States becomes more and more ethnically and culturally diverse, and in the legacy of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960’s and the more recent Human Rights Movement on a more global scale, there has been a large push for a culturally pluralistic society. These ideals of course, are sourced from our broad, venerable, and generally liberal system of higher education.

However, some have argued that we do not currently see multiculturalism as it should be seen. Hu De-Hart makes the argument that too many “politically correct” academics spout a “triumphalist” point of view into the conversation of “American culture.” This view largely ignores the points of views of minorities in the United States that were not ethnically European (here, she focuses on Native Americans, African Americans, and Asian Americans, etc.) and the fact that these minorities were largely ignored and overlooked for large periods of this nation’s history. She also acknowledges that there is now this demographic reality in the United States that we are a culturally and ethnically diversifying population and this can be especially reflected in higher education, and the push for “multiculturalists.” Hu De-Hart then argues that the triumphalists cannot combat multiculturalism in this area (higher education), because the ideals are too entrenched. Instead, they are “masterful at manipulating a media already too willing to sensationalize” and they “[aim] their propaganda at the larger American public.”

What Hu De-Hart describes as the triumphalist agenda (in terms of media manipulation) actually seems to hold up in other pieces of the discourse. Take for example, the media’s treatment and coverage of Muslims and Middle Eastern-centered issues post-9/11. Elisabeth Anker does a good job dismantling and explaining the melodramatic tendencies that the media has in this specific aspect.

Other scholars, such as Neider, have examined how these misperceptions, created and propagated in part by American media (and society as a whole), are played out for students of Middle Eastern heritage on college campuses. She says that “For students of Middle Eastern heritages the current sociohistorical moment is riddled with misconceptions, misrepresentations, misunderstandings, and perhaps more egregiously, miseducation, both formally and informally” (56). Here, Neider acknowledges that the American public is being miseducated both informally, such as by the media as Anker suggests, and the remedy for this is to “begin to question the seductions of this national self-understanding” (Anker 36). Neider also acknowledges the failure to educate people about people of Middle Eastern heritages in a formal setting. Neider’s research is an attempt to correct this problem for, “scholars have also explored how elements of campus environments that are hostile toward some aspect of identity can be detrimental to individual students and thus compromise the value of education for all students” (Neider 56). Hu De-Hart would advance that more Ethnic Studies programs in higher education would be a way to counteract this trend. This correction must be seen as imperative because currently “The mythical American is permitted to survive as a multicultural and global citizen with only a limited purview of the world” (Friedman as cited by Neider 168).

Other scholars, as an attempt to remedy this miseducation, have conducted research that aims to dispel such stereotyped by introducing studies of identity of Muslim ad Arab Americans into the discourse and academic conversation. Derose spends a long time in his dissertation just giving background to Arab American Culture and explaining just exactly what Islam is. In Bavifard’s interviews of “Iranian college students in the post 9/11 context,” “Media bias and misinformation were mentioned repeatedly and consistently by informants. Students used the term ‘ignorance’ repeatedly,” and they acknowledge that they were fearful of saying certain things that might confirm the stereotypes and prejudices that these people had of them (Bavifard 109).

But the reality is that Muslim American students do not conform to stereotypes and they have very complex and diverse identities. Neider gives an anecdote about Muslims’ diverse ethnic identities (159). Many believe that all Muslims are Arab and vice versa, but that is not the case. Many would be surprised to know that there are “50 million Muslims in China” (Neider 159). Bavifard and Neider both share the stories of students and their experiences with prejudice and stereotyping as well as their struggles to form their own identities in “resisting how their identities were being defined by others” (Neider 176). A study done by Abu-Ras, et al hints at this sort of identity complexity inherent in being Muslim and an American. He studied the alcohol use of Muslims on college campuses (as that is a large part of social life) and found that Muslim American students were less likely to consume alcohol than other students. This can influence the social lives’ of Muslim American students, because they embrace their American culture and want to go out, but also embrace their Muslim culture and don’t want to explain why they abstain from alcohol use (Bavifard).

So, the discourse shows not just a complex sense of identity, but also that stereotyping and prejudice is often more multi-dimensional than we may think. For example, much discrimination is “’below the radar’ of societal awareness” (Derose 97). And “stereotypic beliefs can shape the behavior of even low-prejudice people.” (Derose 99). In addition, another nuance to this complex question of stereotyping and the experiences of Muslim Americans is that people define Multiculturalism differently. Hunter aimed to study views on multiculturalism in Greek Organizations on college campuses and found that not all organizations even claimed to aspire toward multiculturalism, and many others who did, defined multiculturalism differently.

This is where my research comes in. It is apparent that people are talking about issues of stereotyping of Muslim Americans, and a push for multiculturalism in higher education and there’s even a discussion of multiculturalism in Greek Organizations. However, this discussions, as in Hunter’s and Hu De-Hart’s, often focus on the legacy of race barriers in this country, i.e. African Americans, Asian Americans, and Natives Americans—those whose oppressions have become apparent and highly discussed. I’d like to posit however, that although there is conversation of stereotyping and prejudice of Muslim Americans (as can be seen in Bavifard, Neider, and Derose), Muslim Americans are still being overlooked in the broader conversation of multiculturalism on college campuses, and in Greek Organizations in particular. Therefore, I am interviewing Muslim American students about their experiences with Greek Organizations to examine the dynamics of stereotyping among a social institution that seems particularly prone to the type of in-group, out-group dynamic that Derose discusses (94). Derose mentions that “evaluations of out-group members also tend to be polarized and extreme compared to evaluations of in-group members” (Linville and Jones as cited by Derose 94), and he even goes on to cite the viewing of all Muslims as violent extremists as an example.

So, the foundation has been laid, and here I aim to enter the conversation of redefining multiculturalism, but in the nuance of the experiences of Muslim Americans and their interactions with Greek Organizations, given the current sociohistorical context (9/11).

In my interviews, I have come across a whole host of diverse experiences. Some students did end up expressing a type of [ignorance](http://virginiaspinksproject.weebly.com/ignorance.html)among their peers when it came to the realities of Muslim Americans, but this could also be because among the students I interviewed, identities, [values,](http://virginiaspinksproject.weebly.com/values.html) and backgrounds proved to be incredibly different and complex.

**Values and Perspectives**

If you were to look at my Annotated Bibliography or my Review of the Literature, you would find my discussion of a study done by Abu-Ras et al that followed the drinking habits of Muslim American students in higher education. It was concluded in the study that Muslim American students were less likely to drink than their non-Muslim peers. This was thought to be so, because [abstaining from alcohol](http://virginiaspinksproject.weebly.com/islam-and-alcohol.html) is an important religious moral value of Islam.  However, in my [interviews](http://virginiaspinksproject.weebly.com/research-questions--interviews-subject-1.html) I found that students' personal values far outstretched just those dictated by their religion. While a few students did express that they did not drink alcohol, others did not list that as a reason for not participating in Greek Life. A few of the students expressed that they saw Greek Institutions as a sort of conformist culture that they did not wish to be a part of. Other students expressed that they were not very strict about alcohol abstinence, or that they were particularly "liberal" Muslims. And yet others expressed that they did not agree with how fraternities objectify women and make it such a normal expectation for immodest ways of [dressing](http://virginiaspinksproject.weebly.com/clothing-and-modesty.html) that it's almost a requirement to be let in to frat parties. Some students had qualms with the "fakeness" of Greek institutions, while others who identified as Muslim did not really see a problem with Greek Institutions at all. In general, there was a very mixed feeling toward and about Greek Institutions, and varying degrees of religiosity in those value differences per se. Many people even spoke very differently about [multiculturalism](http://virginiaspinksproject.weebly.com/multiculturalism.html): what they defined it as and the varying degrees with which they saw this ideal realized in Greek Institutions on campus.

In my mind, multiculturalism was much like the definition my first [subject](http://virginiaspinksproject.weebly.com/research-questions--interviews-subject-1.html) gave--it was about having a mixture of different people with different backgrounds and exposure to different things and the place where all of those differences came into contact with one another. However, some subjects' definitions were narrower than that, and many definitions were dealing with individual perspectives and perceptions. For example, a couple of the international students ended up giving me a definition of a "multicultural person." In fact, I found that the international students were more likely to give that sort of individualist type of definition than those who identified as "American," who described more of a "multicultural environment."

This speaks to the overwhelming complexity of [identity](http://virginiaspinksproject.weebly.com/identity.html), which is one of the primary themes I came across in my research. It can sometimes be hard to realize that not only are our identifications of people not always analogous to what they identify themselves as, and that people can identify themselves as a whole host of different things. Identity is multifaceted and complex, not planar and unitary.

In my research, I was careful to ask students if they personally "identified" as something--not whether they "were" something or not, and not whether other people saw them as something ( e.g. "Muslim" or "American"). I was also careful not to make assumptions about where a person identified with culturally and geographically, and tried to accomplish this by asking students what "ethnicity" they identified with. One student, when asked this question did not know whether to identify as Arab or Egyptian. Another said that she identified as "Bengali/Bangladeshi" but said that she wanted to make sure that her children knew how to speak Bengali. Another student identified himself ethnically as Indian, but ended up saying later, when asked about whether or not he identified as American, that Dubai, UAE was where home was for him--that was the place he most strongly identified with. Still other students who one-hundred percent identified as American, and who had lived here their entire lives also identified with other cultures as well.When I started to conduct [interviews](http://virginiaspinksproject.weebly.com/research-questions--interviews-subject-1.html), I did not realize the imperative to ask students to what extent they identified as American as well, even though that was the claim in my research title of whom I was studying.

Originally, I was only interested in studying students who identified both as Muslim and American, but this proved to be a quite slippery task. Some students said they did identify as Muslim, but that they were not particularly religious, others said that their parents identified as Muslim, but they did not, because they were not religious. In addition, I became interested in what international Muslims had to say, because their experiences of Greek institutions ended up deviating from any sort of noticeable pattern as much as those who identified as "American." I ended up interviewing both "American" and international students, because I wanted to listen to what everyone's experiences and feelings were, not to mention that I wanted to follow this growing mystery in the unfolding narrative of identity. In fact, the more complex I realized that identity was, the more I realized that the answers I received to my interview questions were probably not going to establish any sort of navigable trends, which actually ended up helping my research more than if I had been able to establish trends. My research led me to a vaster and, I believe, more important realization--that in studying people, social scientists can be quick to separate the humanity from the person. However, if this mistake is made, we prevent ourselves from ever making any applicable solutions to problems that we see in the world and we may end up misinterpreting their sources, or even the problem themselves, also making any solutions to them futile and ineffectual.

**Ignorance**

In my research, subjects, when asked about where they think students' [prejudices and stereotyping](http://weebly-link/871662982256822130) toward Muslims stems from (if they had witnessed any), some expressed a sense of ignorance about Muslim culture and Islam in general. Some said that they believed that the stereotypes were a result of the way that Muslims were portrayed in the media post-[9/11](http://weebly-link/859002791783119793). One subject expressed that many of her peers were surprised that she was Muslim, and considered this a sort of ignorance--in that they had some sort of preconceived notion of what a Muslim should look like. Another subject expressed that people assume sort of innocence about her, because she was Muslim, but she did not want anyone to assume anything about her.

However, this ignorance did not seem to be more prevalent in Greek Institutions than outside of them. In general, students were very mixed about whether or not they even saw prejudice in Greek Institutions, and if they did, they did not indicate that these institutions and people within them were more likely to be ignorant of Muslim culture than any other person in American society in general. This means that the ignorance about Muslims seen in Greek institutions is probably more about the broader sociohistoric narrative at work in America. The United States has had a history of Christianity being its' most common religious foundation, and some of the conservative ideology that comes along with that has perhaps helped drive the almost willful ignorance about Muslim culture and one might even go so far to say that this ignorance extends to political issues centered in the Middle East (Arab-Israeli conflict and the Benghazi attacks). If you were to take a poll, most Americans could not say that they really knew the difference between Al Qaeda and the Taliban. People generally consume the [melodrama](http://weebly-link/711699560813580447) that they see in the media and what stigmas exist in popular culture without doing further research and looking at all sides of an issue.

The media takes complex issues and situations and simplifies them down to issues that seem inherently black and white--it creates absolute victims and villains, manipulating it's audiences' point of views. What people forget to realize is that the American media is a commercial venture; they are out to make as much money as possible, by any means necessary. The media is meant to entertain as well as give news, but sometimes the reality is fudged in the name of good ratings. An additional problem is that many people take news anchors and programs as having more authority than they should. As an example, many people in the United States see Muslims as terrorists, or to a lesser extreme, subconsciously as an enemy, because of the way that the media portrayed Muslims in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks.

In Elisabeth [Anker's article](http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/store/10.1111/j.1460-2466.2005.tb02656.x/asset/j.1460-2466.2005.tb02656.x.pdf?v=1&t=htqmzmw6&s=b5d755b0f7749169085eee7e1d45b5a7ef435e85" \t "_blank), she breaks down this phenomenon. She makes the point that the pain and hurt that came from the attack needed an outlet-- or what Anker calls, the "demonization of the other." Several of my subjects noticed this phenomenon in their daily lives, and cited the misinformation that the media disseminates as a source of prejudice that they've experienced.

**In-Group Mentalities/ Stereotyping and Prejudice**

Many of the subjects I interviewed said that they believed that the reason that Greek organizations may seem exclusionary and prejudiced was that they have an inherent in-group mentality. A couple of my [male subjects](http://virginiaspinksproject.weebly.com/subject-6.html) said that they believed that fraternities just chose men that they liked. However, one of my [female subject](http://virginiaspinksproject.weebly.com/research-questions--interviews-subject-1.html)s mentioned that she thought that Greek Institutions are looking to uphold a certain image, meaning that they recruit students who are like them, and Muslim Americans are not generally the norm.  This is not to say that there are not Muslim Americans in Greek Organizations on campus. I discovered a great many who were in organizations, but many of them said that they were liberal Muslims, that they were not religious, or they did not participate in the part of Greek Life that conflicted with their[values](http://virginiaspinksproject.weebly.com/values.html)(i.e. drinking alcohol). My subjects did unknowingly point to some [differences](http://virginiaspinksproject.weebly.com/sororities-v-fraternities.html) between sororities and fraternities in how they selected members, and even in their [tolerance](http://virginiaspinksproject.weebly.com/tolerance.html)levels.

Some of the women that I interviewed were involved in Greek Life and did not see any sort of discrimination or prejudice in how they were recruited, or how the sisters treated them. As far as the sisters were concerned, whether or not a girl was Muslim, whether or not they were American, or anything else they could have identified themselves as, was not an object. The only thing that really seemed to vaguely matter was value alignment.

However, with the fraternities, some of the women expressed that they had had negative experiences. One subject expressed that she had a harder time getting in to frat parties because she was Muslim. Another expressed that she felt that she felt like the fraternity men had a standard for what women should look like/be that did not include her identity. While the men interviewed did not really see the same stigma as from the women, they did admit that fraternities were more apt to choose men that were very similar to them--in all aspects. However, these findings could be isolated to this campus by the nature of the Greek System here. In general, there are much more women involved in Greek Life than men, and therefore capture a larger, more diverse portion of the campus' population. In addition, the fraternities hold many more events that can be taken as exclusionary--i.e. their parties often have capacity maximums that they must adhere to, and refusal to admit anyone of any minority could be taken as coming from a discriminatory place even when it is not. Also, some of the negative comments that women reported males saying to them, were said when the fraternity members were intoxicated.

Here, stereotyping should be distinguished from prejudice. Stereotyping, as described by Whitley and Kite (2006--as cited by Derose) can be seen as either descriptive or prescriptive, where descriptive stereotyping just acknowledges the characteristics of a group--i.e. a generalization such as, "all Muslims are Arab." However, prescriptive stereotyping is meant to put limits on the stereotyped group--i.e. discriminate based on an individual's prejudice. The difference, then, between stereotyping and prejudice is that prejudice is a sort of faulty attitude that an individual holds about a group and the stereotype placed upon that group is how the prejudice manifests itself.  However, having prejudice and stereotypic beliefs do not mean that a person, or even a group of individuals (such as a Greek Organization) is discriminatory. In fact, in my research, subjects did not indicated any sort of discriminatory acts toward Muslim Americans or even any outward stereotyping toward Muslim Americans, however they did hint toward the sort of subconscious stereotyping that [Derose](http://media.proquest.com/media/pq/classic/doc/1949111201/fmt/ai/rep/NPDF?hl=&cit%3Aauth=El-Khadiri+Derose%2C+Mouna&cit%3Atitle=Factors+affecting+Arab+Americans%27+psychological+health%3A+Culture%2C+...&cit%3Apub=ProQuest+Dissertations+and+Theses&cit%3Avol=&cit%3Aiss=&cit%3Apg=n%2Fa&cit%3Adate=2009&ic=true&cit%3Aprod=ProQuest&_a=%3D&_s=T0SO4iyWlegqa8Rkwz20GFsVAAk%3D" \l "statusbar=1&zoom=110" \t "_blank) mentions in his dissertation.

As an additional factor, Derose cites Bushman and Bonacci in saying that people naturally place themselves into "in-groups" and "out-groups" and this natural process of typology and classification into these groups can be a cognitive slippery slope to [stereotyping and prejudice](http://virginiaspinksproject.weebly.com/prejudice.html).  In addition, a need to feel accepted in the "in-group" can create negative outlooks on the out-group. Some would say that this natural grouping of people into subcultures is not a negative thing, because people need to reaffirm identity through their chosen outlets. In the case of this research study, this would hold up, however a problem does arise, when people are not okay with not being able to identify, because they are told from the outside that they cannot. It is a far different thing for a Muslim American to be told by a Greek Organization that they do not belong, than to not be interested in Greek Life because a Muslim American does not choose to identify with it for religious reasons or otherwise.

In reflection of this research I realize that I entered into this project with some preconceived notions about what the experiences of Muslim Americans would be in Greek Institutions. I think that I had an idea that all Muslim American students would have similar experiences, because of their common religion and the fact that most non-Muslim Americans hold a common stereotyped view of Muslims, because of the media's handling of 9/11 and the attitudes disseminated and propagated through the channels of American culture in general.   
       However, in the midst of my research I came to realize that I was also a victim of American society's distortion of who a Muslim was, as if that was a person's only identifying factor. The reality of the complexity of identity had not occurred to me. The student I interviewed would not even remotely have the same experiences, because they were vastly different people that held vastly different beliefs, had vastly different values, and were shaped by were influenced by unpredictable and diverse ways of life and experiences.   
         I realized that there might have been an inherent flaw/bias in my research. I was trying to generalize the experiences of Muslim Americans, which takes away the overwhelming human component in trying to understand people. One can see how this might be a problem. So, instead of trying to "redefine multiculturalism," I turned inward and tried to redefine my goals for this project. I now think that multiculturalism is an extremely relative and subjective term that does not do a good job depicting much of anything. I think that in an ideal world, we should adjust our own attitudes and viewpoints to create an unbiased space where the true diversity in people's identities can be expressed and accepted.   
          Of course, just because something is ideal, does not make it realistic, nor does it mean that others would find this idea idyllic either. But, if I could leave that idea, my contribution, with the academic community and with broader society, and it was heard, that would be enough for me. There is never a guarantee of changing the world, or anything for that matter, but that should not stop us from trying.

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