Single Muslim Young Adults: Negotiating Identities, Religion And Desire

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SINGLE MUSLIM YOUNG ADULTS: NEGOTIATING IDENTITIES, RELIGION AND DESIRE

by

Zarinah El-Amin Naeem

A Thesis
Submitted to the
Faculty of The Graduate College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the
Degree of Master of Arts
Department of Anthropology
Advisor: Ann Miles, Ph.D.

Western Michigan University
Kalamazoo, Michigan
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This ethnographic thesis is an empirically rich, critical analysis of the singlehood of Muslim young adults. Based on interviews with 21 single Muslims aged 18-36, and participant observation of Muslim spaces, I demonstrate that while Islam and Muslim communities present “ideal” behaviors, Islam is not alone. Instead, like identity, the singlehood of American Muslims is created and recreated through dialectical relationships with several cultural “wombs” including religion, popular culture, family, and ethnicity. As Muslim young adults encounter these often contradictory ideologies, they accept and reject parts, and negotiate their identities, religion and desires - all while struggling to maintain a socially acceptable status both within, and outside the Muslim community. For many, that process is difficult. In view of that, I focus on eight reasons singlehood is complex. The inspiration for this research comes from my own experiences as a single American Muslim woman, as well as the experiences of male and female Muslim friends.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First, I acknowledge God for giving me the fortitude to complete this life stage. Secondly, I am indebted to my husband, Halim, for his inspiration and support; and Sufyan, our son, who provided the smiles, hugs and laughter I needed to keep going.

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Zarinah El-Amin Naeem
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CHAPTER I
BETWEEN DESIRE AND FAITH

Introduction

This research on Muslim singlehood grew out of my own experiences as a young single Muslim struggling to balance religion, identities and desire. Though I am now married with children, there were times when my singlehood felt unbearable. I remember one flight home from Sierra Leone where I worked in international development. While looking over the clouds I slowly began to feel my spirit floating around me. I thought about the trip I had just made - my first tour as the Africa program coordinator for Life for Relief and Development, a Muslim non-profit organization. I thought about new friends, the resilient war survivors, the beautiful children and the gorgeous landscape. I thanked God for providing such an incredible experience. While I truly felt blessed, there was something missing. Where was my man? More specifically, where was my soul mate, my lover, the one to help fill the blanks 20 years later when during dinner conversation with friends I relive the experience? So while I loved the trip, I hated that I did it single and there looking out at the clouds, I prayed to marry soon so that the next time I was at 30,000 feet, my soul would have a companion.

Two years and three long trips passed before that man arrived. Finding a spouse, a Muslim spouse who loved me and whom I loved, proved more difficult than finding a boyfriend. I complained, “If I wasn’t Muslim, I wouldn’t be so lonely! I didn’t have a problem keeping a man until I decided to become a stronger Muslim.” From ninth grade to two years post college, I had a steady man in my life. Those were times
when I dated (usually without guilt.) The times when neither religion, nor getting married were the first things on my mind.

But times had changed. In college, I experienced a religious awakening and that old lifestyle no longer jived with my new “Muslim” soul, the “Muslima” (Muslim woman) Zarinah. This Zarinah was trying to live as a “good” Muslim – no more relationships without intentions of commitment. So I waited. I waited to meet a Muslim husband like I met non-Muslim boyfriends before. I waited and I waited and I waited, until it became apparent perhaps no one would approach me! “What’s the problem? Did my Islam suddenly bring on a case of the uglies? Is this a test from God? Am I being punished?” Perhaps this wait was my scarlet letter, my living punishment for past sins. It seems far-fetched, but for someone who believes in the afterlife, it is not.

Therefore, from age 20 or so, I wondered if I would ever marry. I joked with my friends, “Please pray for God to give me strength... I’m going crazy!” Yes, I was active in the community, had a great job but was still so lonely. Then one day while overseas (alone again), my mother emailed about Halim, a single Muslim brother. Our beloved Sheik AN (a local religious leader) was playing matchmaker and thought Halim and I may be compatible. I thought “Why now while I’m overseas!” So unbeknownst to me, my curious father met Halim and his father for lunch while I was away. When I returned home in April, Dad gave me the details, Halim was 23 years old (2 years younger than I was), but Dad really liked him. Finally getting over the age difference, we set up a family dinner for May. We discussed everything from my strong personality to polygamy and the ways Halim planned to support his wife. I determined that “Hey, he’s Muslim, cute, intelligent, looks strong... why not give it a try?”

Halim and I talked and became friends. By August, three short months later, we had set a marriage date for following July – a fast process by any standards! However, when my grandmother’s health deteriorated, we moved the wedding up so she could see
her only granddaughter walk down the aisle. In November, just 7 months after our family
dinner, we married and for the first time my soul had a legal mate. I could now enjoy
comforting male companionship without accompanying unmarried religious guilt.

Later, I suspect that because I openly discussed my struggles, Muslims of all
ages also shared their singleness experiences. They too were lonely and unable to find
a spouse. Some struggled to “stay on the straight path” and maintain their Islamic
identity, while others deemed “the Good Muslim path” too hard or simply unnecessary
and chose to live a different lifestyle. Unlike me, others remarked that external, not
internal pressure was the source of their discomfort. Overall, it was apparent that
singleness was a stressful period for many Muslims. In response, a friend and I
organized a singles event where Muslims could ask relationship questions and meet
eligible singles. It was a success and even resulted in one marriage. Given these
experiences, I later designed my research thesis around the topic that confronted my
daily life: the singleness of Muslim young adults.

The Research

I originally conceptualized this thesis around a dichotomous relationship between
ideal “Muslim” values and “American” values. I asked, “How and why do Muslim young
adults perform and maintain their religious identity in a society that does not hold the
same values?” However, I quickly discovered that to conceptualize the meaning of
singleness for Muslim young adults, I would need to explore identity construction and
salience. Several cultural fields (hereafter referred to as cultural wombs, explained
further in Chapter 3) and ideologies including Islam, society (culture norms), life
experiences, spirituality, peers, and parents influence Muslim young adults (Beckworth
and Morrow 2005). Muslim identity versus American identity was too simplistic; I needed
to examine the intersection of religious identities with other identities affecting the singlehood of Muslim young adults.

Therefore, I broadened my questions to address these issues identity salience and pluralism. The new research questions became: How are Muslim identities formed, maintained and hybridized in a society of great religious and spiritual diversity? What are the attitudes of Muslim young adults towards their singlehood and what are the factors that play a role in the formation of those views? What are the challenges Muslim young adults face within their singlehood? Lastly, how can the Muslim community address the issues raised?

To investigate these questions, I employed ethnographic methods over a nine-month period (December 2007 – August 2008). I conducted interviews with 21 Muslim young adults aged 18-36, ranging from 30 minutes to four hours. I was a participant observer within a variety of locales including local Masjids, Muslim conferences and other Muslim events and spoke with several parents, Imams and community members outside of my target age range. I analyzed American Muslim cultural documents such as magazines, websites and newsletters. I discovered that irrespective of ethnic background, economic level, gender or geographic location, many single American Muslims had similar fears, concerns, feelings and needs. Time after time, I was pushed to examine the ways Muslims “practiced” their Islam in a non-Muslim society.

As this thesis is a critical analysis, I narrow my findings to the most challenging aspects of Muslim singlehood. In the end, this study presents eight reasons many Muslim singles find singlehood difficult (also the subtitles of Chapter 4), 1) To be or not to be Muslim; 2) I’ve got needs (physical and emotional); 3) Everyone is pressuring me to get married; 4) I don’t know how to talk to the opposite sex!; 5) I need a B.A., money and a career before I get married; 6) I don’t know what kind of person to marry!; 7) I need help finding a spouse!; and finally 8) My family won’t accept cultural differences.
Background on Singlehood in America vs. Islam

Traditionally, marriage served to legitimize sex, authorize parenting, and provide an economic basis for two individuals (Stein 1975). As such, in 1957, 95% of the U.S. population over the age of 18 was married. By 2006, according to the U.S. Census Bureau fact sheet, the percentage of married Americans 18 and over dropped to 59%. But why the shift? Stein (1975, 1981) a pioneer of singlehood research, argues singlehood is not only a viable choice for many Americans but that the emergence of singlehood as a lifestyle is most likely a response to a growing dissatisfaction with traditional marriage. Exploring shifts in college students' attitudes about marriage, 39% of seniors felt traditional marriage was becoming obsolete and 25% agreed that the traditional family structure of mother, father, and children living under one roof no longer works (Stein 1975). Then, the interest of Stein and others was to predict the probable decline of lifetime marriage.

It is too early to predict with confidence that the increase in singleness among the young will lead to an eventual decline in lifetime marriage . . . just as cohorts of young women who have postponed childbearing for an unusually long time seldom make up for the child deficit as they grow older, so also young people who are delaying marriage may never make up for the marriage deficit later on. They may try alternatives to marriage and they may like them" (Glick 1975: 18 in Stein 1975).

Indeed today, alternatives to marriage such as long-term cohabitation or habitual dating exist. It appears Stein was correct, for many, the ideological and economic bases for traditional marriage have been removed. "Men no longer (have) to marry to get sex and women no longer (have) to marry to get financial support" (Bird 1972 in Stein 1975: 491). The women's liberation movement that stressed achieving fulfillment outside of wife and motherhood meant that it was socially acceptable for a woman to live a long comfortable life without a man. This coupled with a high divorce rate, the advent of the birth control pill and other movements such as open marriages, gay liberation and
communal living broadened the common definition of marriage. Relationships now emphasize companionship rather than children and family and people are free to exert their independence (Stein 1975).

Stein’s research is 20-30 years old but recent studies like DePaulo (2006) concur and also suggest marriage is quickly becoming obsolete. In “Singled Out: How Singles Are Stereotyped, Stigmatized, and Ignored, and Still Live Happily Ever After,” DePaulo, argues “while the institution of marriage is ensconced in the laws, politics, religions and cultural imaginations of Americans, it is presently of little true significance as a meaningful life transition” and is, in effect, inessential (DePaulo 2006:11). Financial stability and children, traditionally achieved through marriage are now socially available outside of marriage, a fact DePaulo argues removes the need or trend for many Americans to marry.

Given the work of Stein and DePaulo, one may assume a majority of Americans have no desire to marry. However, it appears that is not the case. Several popular books and studies like Holland and Eisenhart (1990) suggest that marriage is still an important part of American culture. Nevertheless, whether desired or not, approximately 41% of Americans are single (U.S. Census 2006) and for many, singlehood is stressful and confusing.

In response to this phenomenon, popular books often attempt to show single Americans how to love, rather than lament, their singlehood. However, there are gender differences. Women account for just over half (54%) of the single American population, (there are 86 men for every 100 women) yet single women are largely the targets of the “single and loving it” message. For example, Jerusha Stewart, one of America’s 89 million singles grew tired of feeling like the “last single girl in the world.” After interviewing close to 200 singles, mostly women about their choice to stay single, she discovered she was not alone. For several reasons, many women’s choice was less
when to get married and more if to get married. She writes, “It’s becoming more acceptable to consider education goals, career focus, and individual growth as important—if not more so—than love, marriage, and children” (Stewart 2005:4).

It’s no accident that so many singles are happily avoiding the altar. While I would wager that only a small minority actually woke up one morning and declared, “I will never marry!” these mingling millions have consciously or unconsciously opted for another choice. Their everyday decisions, concerning where to work, what to wear and when to workout, have played a major part in how they live. For most women, it’s been a gradual coupling of financial advancements and rising self-satisfaction with their single lives, which has resulted in their declaring their marital independence. Singles did not make a single choice. They seized a series of opportunities, which led them towards the sensational solo life. (Stewart 2005: 4-5)

Stewart sees a single status as an asset and finds no reason to give up sensational singlehood for marriage. Her book includes quizzes and suggestions for everything from dating, starting a new hobby and blessing your home, to making a “morning-after sex” breakfast. Still, Stewart acknowledges that while singlehood can be fun, many women (including herself) truly desire marriage. Therefore she includes suggestions on how to find a man including being open and upfront in relationships and not afraid to share your true feelings and desires. Other books like, Living Alone and Loving it by Barbara Feldon (2002) and The Single Girl’s Survival Guide by Imogen Lloyd Webber (2007) also aim to increase the well-being of single women.

Numerous books also address singlehood from a Christian perspective, often arguing for singlehood as a gift and something to increase God’s work. As Christianity embraces and advocates for marriage, these publications tread a thin line.

A key issue for Christian theology is what emphasis to give to singleness in relation to the state of marriage. Is it to be treated as pathological: something abnormal that requires either a cure or at least the alleviation of pain? Or should we emphasize it as a privilege: the special vocation of the truly devoted follower of Christ? The middle way is to view singleness and marriage as parallel states, each having their own particular joys and sorrows (VM Sinton in Farmer 1998:6).

The Rich Single Life, by Andrew Farmer (1998) uses biblical scriptures and argues against the stigma placed on singles. Like DePaulo, Farmer’s argument begins
with a discussion on ways singles are seen as deviant, “the good life is defined as marriage. . . any living arrangement is wrong that may make any marriageable individual forego marriage” (Mead 1967 in Stein 1975:489). He suggests this pervasive view of singlehood, makes many singles feel inadequate. Barbara Holland, a single woman remarks, “Happily-ever-after has rejected us. The fairy tale story has spit us out as unworthy, and sometimes we suppose perhaps we are” (in Farmer 1998:6).

Farmer wants single Christians to feel worthy and loved by God. While married individuals’ time is spent concerning “the affairs of this world” and pleasing their spouses, singles have more time to focus on pleasing their lord. "Undivided devotion to the Lord," he argues, is the essence of a biblical identity for the single adult. Interestingly, a similar view exists in Islam, in the story of a Muslim saint named Rabi’ah al-Adawiyya. Born around 717 C.E in what is now Iraq, it is said Rabi’ah remained single to have what Farmer described as undivided devotion to her Lord. A poet, several of Rabi’ah’s poems center on taking God as her lover, “my peace, brothers, is in my aloneness. Because my Beloved is alone with me there- always. I’ve found nothing to equal His love, That love which harrows the sands of my desert. If I die of desire, and He is still unsatisfied – That sorrow has no end” (Upton 2003:9).

American Muslims & Singlehood

Stein (1981) identifies four categories of never married individuals, voluntary/temporary singles, voluntary/stable singles, involuntary/temporary singles, and involuntary/ stable singles. Naturally, single Muslims fall into all four categories and move between and among them over their lifetime. However, Islam presents marriage as the ideal state for humankind. The Prophet Muhammad himself exalted marriage and advised his followers to marry (there are few stories of long-term celibate singles like
Rabi'ah). Therefore, marriage is coveted and singlehood should be seen temporary. Other religious Americans like the Mormons hold similar views (Darrington et al 2005).

My findings show that most college-aged Muslim young adults are voluntary/temporary singles. They plan to marry but are currently focused on school. Post-college however, most Muslim young adults become involuntary/temporary singles. They desire marriage and actively look for ways to end their singlehood. This is similar to many of their fellow Americans. However, one topic clearly reveals the differences between singlehood in popular America and singlehood in Islam: sexuality.

Much of popular culture encourages and expects single individuals to enjoy a healthy sex life. In contrast, single Muslim young adults too have physical desires, but Islam and culture require Muslims to refrain from acting on these feelings until marriage. So for Muslims who grow up in America, a cultural womb often viewed as sexually “loose” and “lewd” (Haddad and Lummis 1987), a tension exists between what is Islamically right and what feels good (temporarily at least) and is considered the norm. The old “biological urges vs. cultural suppressions” argument (Cox 1967) is still a discursive topic in the Muslim community. As one sister declared, “My body is ready for some babies…. I need to get married asap!”

Make no mistake, singlehood is not only about sex. But clearly a ban on premarital sex in a society that follows a “new sexual orthodoxy,” where sex is a natural right of all (Moffatt 1989), presents a challenge. Still, singlehood is socially constructed, not only through religion but also through personal experiences and interactions with the broader culture and members of one's social network, especially family and friends (Gergen in Darrington et al 2005). Just as Islam influences the lives of Muslim young adults, so do college peers, the media, the Internet, music and popular culture.
Methodology

Again, this study centers on semi-structured qualitative interviews conducted with 21 members of the American Muslim community. The thirteen women and eight men I interviewed range in age from early 20's to mid-30's and represent diverse ethnic and culture backgrounds. All participants self-identify as Muslim, are unmarried and either born and raised in America or spent the majority of their development here. The educational levels ranged from some college to doctoral and professional degrees. Although I originally planned to interview Muslims who live in the Midwest only, mobilizing my network of Muslim friends and employing snowball sampling, a system of referrals, led me to individuals outside of the Midwest region. These included Muslims who grew up in the Midwest but now live elsewhere, individuals I met at national Muslim conventions, and friends of other interviewees. In the end, my sample included individuals of Arab, Bengali, Black, Brazilian, Indian, Pakistani, Somalian, and mixed White-Indian heritage. Of these, all were Sunni (the largest group of Muslims), except Tariq who is a devout Shia (a minority group of Muslims). All data was collected in accordance with my approved HSIRB protocol.

The Interviews

My interview methodology borrows from life-story interviewing. Chaitin (2004) argues that life story interviewers wish “to learn what the individual has lived through, how and where the experiences that the person has had figure into their lives, and how he or she understands life in light of those experiences” (Chaitin 2004:5). A common way to conduct a life-story interview is to provide one simple prompt, “Tell me your life story.” My interviews were not quite that open ended, but by leading my informants
systematically through life experiences, I was able to gain a fuller understanding of the individual’s experiences. I also gained insights into the “particular social structures, dynamics and cultural values, morals, and norms in which the individual lives” (Rosenthal in Chaitin 2004:6). Therefore instead of diving right into singlehood proper, interviews generally started with life growing up including K-12 schooling and the ways parents talked about issues such as sexuality, relationships and life in general. We discussed life in college, at the masjid (masjid) and at work.

Naturally, every story was unique and interviewees varied in their openness. Some preferred to have more of a dialogue rather than a strict interview in which I alone posed questions. Others simply took a question and ran with it. Either way, in the end nearly every interviewee, both brothers and sisters stated they enjoyed the opportunity to talk about these issues and reflect on their lives. One interviewee responded, “It’s free therapy 😊.”

**Participant Observation and Review of Cultural Documents**

In addition to interviews, I frequented several masjids and Muslim spaces both in my hometowns of Kalamazoo and Detroit, Michigan, as well as around the country. I learned the history of these institutions and participated in rituals and events such as weddings, community dinners and Islamic workshops. I talked with community leaders and other Muslims, male and female, old and young about Muslim singlehood. Two major conferences, MANA (Muslim Alliance of North America) conference and ISNA (Islamic Society of North America) combined with two retreats organized by Seven Shades (an organization for Muslim youth and young adults), provided both access to greater numbers of Muslims as well as a way to view differences in the organization of
Muslim spaces. These experiences also helped to place the experiences of my informants on a larger, national scale.

Technology has extended the realm of Muslim space into cyberworld and in turn, I reviewed Muslim websites like www.altmuslim.com, www.soundvision.com, and www.islamicity.com. Browsing Muslim matrimonial sites like www.zawaj.com and www.muslimmatch.com, helped to compare the experiences and beliefs of my informants with individuals who anonymously portray their thoughts online. I also found the Muslim blogosphere an interesting site for discourse on Muslim singlehood. Several individuals have taken to writing about singlehood on the internet, as either the entire focus or simply a few influential posts (e.g. www.tariqnelson.com). Lastly, I read Muslim magazines and other publications like Azizah, Muslim Girl, Islamic Horizons and Al Jumah, which often featured useful articles on marriage or Muslim life in America.

**Reflections on My Emic Perspective and Style**

A researcher’s identities and position shape their work and I am no exception. As a 29-year-old married Muslim female African-American, I am molded to approach life with particular values and perceptions. For example, this introduction began with my background and experiences as a single Muslima. I also included the experiences of friends. Clearly, these experiences influence how I approach Muslim singlehood. Yes, I acknowledge I have biases, but my identities also facilitated a smooth entry into this research. Firstly, I am close in age to my participants. Wulff (1995), a youth culture anthropologist, made a point of reviewing the age of researchers that conduct youth studies. She suggests that research conducted by those close in age to their informants may garner conversations that are more open.
Secondly, I am Muslim. Haddad and Lummis (1987) mentioned several difficulties in collecting data amongst immigrant Muslims - including establishing sufficient trust. These problems might ease if Muslim scholars who are members of their chosen field sites carry out future studies (Haddad and Lummis 1987). Accordingly, I found my position as a known Muslim provided an almost instant level of trust and camaraderie.

Finally, I care about the Muslim community. Ravuvu argues, "Concern for other's welfare must be the central theme of most researchers if they are to be acceptable and more meaningful to those who are being studied" (Ravuvu, 1978:74-76). I believe most of Muslims I engaged during the course of this study understood that my motives for conducting this research were to be of benefit to the Muslim community, and thus were willing to support me, either by participating or suggesting a friend. For that, I am thankful.

The Writing

Following gathering and analyzing data, the next step in producing research is writing. In the Taste of Ethnographic Things, Paul Stoller (1989) critiques the mostly "dry, analytical prose" that plagues anthropological writing.

Vivid descriptions of the sensorial of ethnographic situations have been largely overshadowed by a dry, analytical prose. In problem-oriented ethnography, data – excluding in large measure the non-visual senses – are used to refine aspects of social theory. Lost on this dry steppe of intellectualized prose are the characterizations of others as they lead their social lives. Such a trend has unfortunately narrowed the readership for most ethnographies, and has made anthropology a discipline in which practitioners increasingly speak only to each other – not to multiple audiences. One path out of this morass, as I argue in this book, is to write ethnographies that describe the sensual aspects of the field. Such a tack will make us more critically aware of our sensual biases and force us to write ethnographies that combine the strengths of science with the rewards of the humanities. (Stoller 1989:8-9)
Following Stoller, I attempt to forge a text that is accessible and engaging. This should not suggest I neglect standard academic procedures, just that I adopt an open and friendly tone in my writing. I write to fulfill the requirements of a Masters in Anthropology, but I do not write only for my academic committee. In keeping with critical and public interest anthropology’s goals, I endeavor to present a text that is useful for my informants, their families, friends, the Muslim community and greater society as a whole.

Part of making this text accessible includes translating Arabic and Islamic terms. Also because some interviews were conducted online by chat, I often spell out commonly used abbreviations like “lol” for laughing out loud, “iA” for InshaAllah (God Willing), “lmao” for laughing my a*@ off, “brb” for be right back, “u” for you, “k” for ok, and “esp” for “especially”. I include a glossary of Arabic and Internet chat phrases used within the thesis. Some who are not accustomed to parenthetical citations may find them difficult to ignore – this is something I may change in the second edition. Lastly, please note that I adopt the popular tendency to refer to Muslim men as “brothers” and Muslim women as “sisters.”

**Thesis Overview**

Following this introduction, Chapter Two: Identities, Youth and American Muslims, focuses on identity construction, youth culture and ethnographies concerning American life as well as religious minorities. I explore notions of the “third space,” a place where individuals hybridize and negotiate plural identities. Chapter Three: The Cultural Wombs that Bore Us, offers a synthesis of influences shaping the identities, worldviews, beliefs, behaviors and meanings of singlehood for Muslim young adults. The discussion centers on aspects of Islam, American pluralism, individualism and
popular culture, and family and ethnicity. Following this discussion on influences, Chapter Four: Eight Reasons Muslim Singlehood is Hard, presents ethnographic data highlighting specific challenges facing Muslim young adults. The discussion includes levels of religious identification, loneliness, desires for intimacy and difficulties finding a spouse. Lastly, Chapter Five: Conclusions, summarizes the literature review and findings, as well as discusses their implications to the community.
CHAPTER II
IDENTITIES, YOUTH AND AMERICAN MUSLIMS

This chapter explores issues of identity construction in a pluralistic society, and youth culture literature, which examine how youth and young adults produce culture. I also draw on literature examining American Muslim's negotiation of competing ideologies. My goal is to lay the foundation for understanding the complex lived experiences of America Muslim young adults; including various competing cultural wombs (discussed in chapter three) and the challenges of singlehood (discussed in chapter four).

Identity

“Is it really possible to be both a Texan and a Muslim?” asks a Dallas news broadcaster. The news report titled, Turning Muslim in Texas chronicles the lives of three white Texan converts to Islam and posed this question to mostly white Americans in Texas. Responses ranged from “Hmm, I don’t know. That would be a weird combination” to “I’m not sure. What do they believe, do they believe in God?” In the age of digital editing, it is very probable the producers removed the “Yes” responses to achieve a stronger piece of journalism. Nevertheless, at the base of this video are clear ideas about what it means to be a “Muslim” and what it means to be a “Texan,” or more broadly, what it means to be an “American.” The responses given imply many average Americans feel there is a line of difference between a Muslim religious identity and an American national identity, and that that line precludes any sort of compatibility.

However, America is clearly a mosaic comprised of individuals hailing from a variety of religious and ethnic backgrounds. So why do these type of newscasts exist in
a pluralistic society? Well, one of the interesting side effects of multiculturalism is that individuals often see themselves forming an insular group, distinct from other groups. Though they recognize the multi-dimensional nature of identity (e.g. I’m a male white Catholic American), many continue to treat the idea as fixed and one-dimensional (Khan 2000). They view their identity along lines of sameness and group cohesiveness, something Stuart Hall, an influential theorist, sees as “a sort of collective one true self” (S. Hall 1990:223).

This type of view can give authority and legitimacy to visions of community, but can also strengthen stereotypes about communities (Khan 2000). The idea of a “Muslim” identity and an “American” identity put forth in the above story is a vivid example this occurrence. However, when individuals bind together through shared history and collective characteristics, they often form what Anderson (1991) calls an imagined community. He argues that a nation,

is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion ... regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship (Anderson 1991:6-7).

This observation of a national identity extends to other types of identities, whether religious, ethnic, racial, gender or socio-economic. Though the feeling of belonging exists, it is simply impractical to expect all members of any group to enact their identity in the same way. Yet given the nature of an imagined community, it is understandable that many Americans have clear ideas about true “American ideals” which of course form the premise of the newscaster’s question. Still why do they treat a Muslim identity, which is simply a religious identity, along the same lines as a more encompassing national identity? I will touch on Islamophobia later, but just what are the perceived “American” ideals?
Huntington (2004) argues that an American identity is not based on ethnic or race values, but on a culture and creed left by the Anglo-Protestant founders of the country. Key elements of which include, “the English language; Christianity; religious commitment; English concepts of the rule of law, including the responsibility of rulers and the rights of individuals; and dissenting Protestant values of individualism, the work ethic, and the belief that humans have the ability and the duty to try to create a heaven on earth, a ‘city on a hill’” (Huntington 2004:xvi). Huntington maintains this creed has remained stable over time; however, this widely accepted depiction of “American” culture is in reality false and overly simplistic of the array of ideals found amongst Americans.

Thus, Stuart Hall and other contemporary theorists reject identity as one-dimensional and instead situate it as plural, fluid, dynamic and heterogeneous (see S. Hall 1990, 1992, 1996, Bhabha 1994, Brah 1996, Sokefeld 1999, K. Hall 2002, Khan 2000). Individuals simultaneously possess a number of identities and have the ability to identify with several communities. For example, Brah a “Ugandan of Indian descent” examines the complexity of identity and argues that naming a singular identity would render invisible “all the other identities – of gender, caste, religion, linguistic group, generation…” (Brah 1996:3). She sees her identities as meshing and incapable of complete separation. Likewise, through his hybridized Parsi heritage, Bhabha experiences several axis of identity when encountering competing discourses (social, political, economic, ethnic, etc) (Bhabha to Mitchell 1995:83) rendering it difficult to box the meaning of being Parsi – it is not static, but shifting and contextual.

We see living in a pluralistic society allows an individual the opportunity to create and re-create their version of reality based on their interpretation of, and interactions with the several competing ideologies and worldviews they encounter on a daily basis (K. Hall 2005:473). These competing ideologies set in motion, the construction of identities (religious, national and ethnic) along lines of internal difference as S. Hall writes, “in
modern times, (identities are) increasingly fragmented and fractured; never singular but multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic, discourses, practices and positions" (S. Hall 1996:4).

To illustrate this idea, S. Hall and other theorists often utilize Jacques Derrida’s concept of *différance* (see Sokefeld 1999, Ewing 1998, Bhabha 1994, Brah 1996). Derrida, a linguist, points to two meanings of the Latin verb “*differre*”, “to differ” and “to defer,” that is, “to cause delay,” “to temporize,” and “to dislocate.” The first meaning, “to differ” is straightforward. However, the second meaning “to temporize” acknowledges that *différance* is continuously moving and modified (Sokefeld 1999). Applied to identity, *différance* indicates that the meanings of identity are not only in flux, but because they relate to each other, identities they will always be created and recreated.

With Muslims, there is a sense of *différance* vis-à-vis the dominant culture, that Muslims are an American religious minority and *different* from the Christian majority. Secondly, we must also acknowledge that within the American Muslim community there are *several* lines of *différance* drawn upon generational, racial, ethnic and class differences. The American Muslim community does not constitute a homogeneous group. So the question becomes, how do individuals achieve internal balance when these plural identities often include competing values and discourses? For this discussion, we turn to hybridity and the “third space.”

**Hybridity and Identity Politics**

As we have seen, living in a pluralistic society often means belonging to two or more distinct cultural groups simultaneously, e.g. Muslims of South Asian descent or Muslim college students, etc. Individuals who encounter several cultural wombs embrace or reject the cultural influences that play at “parameters of their conscious
awareness” (K.Hall 2002:194). Bhabha’s notion of hybridity in the “third space”, an identity interstice, is a useful tool to understand the process of identity hybridization.

It is in the emergence of the interstices—the overlap and displacement of domains of difference—that the intersubjective and collective experiences of nationness, community interest, or cultural value are negotiated. How are subjects formed ‘in-between’, or in excess of, the sum of the ‘parts’ of difference (usually intoned as race/class/gender, etc.)? How do strategies of representation or empowerment come to be formulated in the competing claims of communities where, despite shared histories of deprivation and discrimination, the exchange of values, meanings and priorities may not always be collaborative and dialogical, but may be profoundly antagonistic, conflictual and even incommensurable? (Bhabha 1994:2)

Bhabha raises an important point. When individuals negotiate their identities, they are engaged with the greater community, resulting in identities being performed not only for self, but also for others (Madison 2005). Identity negotiation is a political process with individuals exerting strategic moves to achieve more power. This “power” does not have to be economic, but can include the more subdued influence that comes with social acceptance. Individuals may engage in behavior that runs contradictory to what they feel is their “core” identity in order to receive positive societal feedback (Rouse 2004:168) and a sense of belonging and peace (Brah 2007).

Some argue that this homing desire for security and belonging is natural (Brah 2007). When an identity performed is not accepted or worse, devalued, not only is the individual’s sense of peace disrupted, but it often brings on a struggle for power. Here, Kondo (1990) vividly illustrates how identity flux, boundaries, hybridity and power are engaged.

Power can create identities on the individual level, as it provides disciplines, punishments, and culturally available pathways for fulfillment; nowhere were these forces more evident to me than in my relationships with the Japanese people I knew. At stake in my narrative of emerging order are the constantly contested and shifting boundaries of my identity and the identities of my Japanese relatives friends, and acquaintances... in that attempt to understand (each other), power inevitably came into play as we tried to force each other into appropriately comprehensible categories. This nexus of power and meaning was also creative, the crucible within which we forged our relationship. In turn, our negotiated understandings of one another enabled me to shape the particular problematic that now animates my research. The sites of these struggles for
understanding were located in what we might call salient features of “identity” both in America and in Japan: race, gender, and age. (Kondo 1990:10-11).

Both Kondo and her Japanese relatives held clear ideas about what it means to be Japanese; and they both struggled to make their version of reality appealing to the other. Likewise, communities, nations and other groups of individuals have clear ideas about how to perform the feature they feel sets their identity apart, whether it be race/ethnicity, gender, age or religion, etc. This type of power struggle often occurs between members of the younger and older generation. Youth, more than any other group, live in the third space where they are more open to outside influences. The next section looks at theories of youth culture, which reveal ways young people produce cultural change.

**The Agency of Youth and Young Adults**

Parents and community are the first to model and mold children's identities, but soon age and life experiences reveal an *infinite* number of possible identities (Adamson and Lyxell 1996). As a result, studying youth (individuals under the age of 35), and their negotiation of competing ideologies (and construction of hybrid identities), reveals a wide range of social issues. It also provides a unique lens for understanding the creativity of culture and the texture of cultural change (Halperin and Scheld 2007). Rather than approaching youth as mere inhabitants of a liminal stage on their way to full adulthood, Wulff (1993) argues for an anthropology that views youth as “cultural agents.” When youth negotiate conflicting messages and create a hybrid identity, they bring about new cultural meaning which affects not only themselves, but also society as a whole (Bhabha 1994:227; Bucholtz 2002).
See for example, the life experiences of British Sikh youth who understand, internalize and shape the racial, social and ethnic inequalities they face (K.Hall 2002). More and more of these youth achieved social mobility by “knowing when to act English and when to act Indian.” It is unfortunate that this process was necessary at all, but these youth made conscious decisions to “be 'successful,' challenge inequality, and find a bit of happiness in their everyday lives” (K.Hall 2002:195).

Traditionally, studies of American Muslims focused on immigrants’ assimilation into American contexts, but second-generation and indigenous Muslim youth are more concerned with identity conflicts (Leonard 2003). Living in a non-Muslim society where common practices such as dating and premarital sex, drug and alcohol use pervade (but are strictly forbidden in Islam), makes it difficult for Muslims to maintain religious values and lifestyles. Again, in a pluralistic society which hails multiculturalism, this struggle is often more internal than external (Moore 2007). Yet pluralism does not expunge social pressures (e.g. peer pressure, family influences, media, lacks of accommodation, etc) that may cause people to question their version of reality.

To cope, many Muslims use Islam as an identity anchor. Investigating the relationship between multiculturalism and identity amongst British Muslims, Gilliat-Ray argues that young Muslims find the ‘core’ of Islam and construct religious identities centered on their faith (Gilliat-Ray 1998). This helps them deal with differences in “selfhood” between themselves, born and raised in Britain and the first generation of Muslim immigrants. Studies of American youth also document this trend (Grewal 2008, Yip 2006).

Likewise, Zine (2001) explores the connection between religion and other sites of social difference like race, gender and language amongst “practicing” Muslim youth in Canadian schools. Zine places their struggle for a hybrid identity within three, often conflicting cultural frameworks; the dominant culture, their ethnic culture and Islam. For
these students, adopting a religious identification and joining other Muslim students anchored their sense of identity. Islam also provided a framework to preserve students' lifestyles and resist unwanted social pressures (e.g. negative peer pressure, gender interaction, racism and discrimination). These students changed the landscape of their schools.

Mir (2006) argues that the dialectical relationship between Muslim women and the dominant peer culture forces Muslim women into the third space to overcome marginality and construct their identities. Relevant to this study are the young women's rules pertaining to gender relationships. Many were shocked at college culture's sexual nature that normalized and even Americanized dating. Muslim women who did not date were often interrogated by their peers. To resist the pressure to date and have sex, some young Muslim women preferred Muslim-only circles. Those who did not separate themselves from non-Muslims often felt “left out because romance and sex were such essential elements to the (college) lifestyle” (226). Resistance and hybridization were daily activities.

**Chapter Summary**

Muslim identities, like all identities are not one-dimensional static concepts, but are dynamic and constructed along lines of difference within specific historical and cultural settings (S. Hall 1990). Current cultural settings present several competing ideologies and worldviews, which American Muslims internalize and hybridize in the *third space*, a liminal site of identity construction. No two Muslims conduct this process equally and thus the American Muslim community is diverse and heterogeneous in its views. This chapter also provided a brief analysis of youth culture, in particular how studying youth can reveal social issues and modes of cultural change. Lastly, we have
seen the ways some young Muslims use Islam as a religious anchor. Having now provided a framework for interpreting the lives of single Muslims, the next chapter contributes by examining three competing ideologies, what I term cultural wombs, which single Muslim young adults encounter on a daily basis.
CHAPTER III
THE CULTURAL WOMBS THAT BORE US

O mankind! Reverence your Guardian Lord who created you from a single person, and created, of like nature, his mate, and from them twain scattered (like seeds) countless men and women. Reverence God through Whom you demand (mutual) rights. And (reverence) the wombs (that bore you): for God ever watches over you. (Quran 4:1)

At a Muslim wedding I attended, the Imam (officiate), used this Quranic verse to illustrate that each individual is born within certain circumstances and conditions. Though the most obvious interpretation of “Reverence the wombs that bore you,” would be to respect your mother and the biological womb that endured pregnancy and birth, the Imam suggested that there are several “wombs” that nurture human beings. For some reason, that has always resonated with me and I often use it to think about the influences in my life.

By extension, a cultural womb is a place/field/space that cultivates and nourishes human development while preparing individuals for life outside of its borders. As the physical womb develops a child with or without the mother’s agency, the socially regulated cultural womb can also instill particular behaviors, beliefs, and emotions - with or without an individual’s knowledge or assistance. Kathleen Hall, who prefers the term “cultural fields,” highlights this process.

the regularities of routine practices in a cultural field both reproduce and create cultural expectations for bodily gestures and dress, for appropriate manners and signs of respect between generations and the sexes, and for the cultural knowledge people use to interpret social interactions (K.Hall 2002:171).

Routine practices become customs, and customs become what Durkheim (1938) termed ‘social facts’, or simply the natural order of things. In the words of Butler, this “performativity”, the process through which “regulatory schemas or ideals condition social practice over time and norms are ‘assumed, appropriated, taken on’” is important
to acknowledge when examining the how's and why's behind individual actions (Butler in K.Hall 2002:171).

In this light, this chapter highlights the ideals and norms of three large, overarching “wombs”: Islam, America, and ethnic and family networks - each of which organizes social life through cultural competences and normative expectations. In particular, I pay attention to each womb's practices and beliefs that regulate or influence the interactions between single young adults, views of marriage and singlehood, mate selection, and conceptions of being “good” and “normal.”

**Womb #1: Islam**

On one *Jumah*, the day of Muslims’ prayer service, I sat on the carpeted floor of the *musala* (prayer hall) listening to the *khutbah* (sermon) with about 15 other sisters. The day's topic centered on using Islam to repair social ills. The *Imam* stated, “Islam is the answer to all our problems, all we have to do is apply it.” In order for this to be realistic, Islamic principles must be quite extensive, and certainly scholars have written volumes on just one small aspect of Islam. Obviously, I am no Islamic scholar. My goal here is not to conduct a thorough reading of Islamic theology, but rather to highlight some of the key doctrines that contribute to a single Muslim's religious identity.

**The Quran and Prophet Muhammad**

Muslims believe the Quran, a compilation book of revelations received by Prophet Muhammad, ranks as the highest source of moral guidance. They study it for direction on everything from legal matters, to orphan care, to inheritance, and of course
sex and marriage. In regards to singlehood, the Qur'an highly regards family and encourages Muslims to marry, if possible.

O Humans revere your Guardian Lord, Who created you from a single person and created of like nature its mate, and from this scattered (like seeds) countless men and women... (Quran 4:1).

And among His signs is this, that He created for you mates from among yourselves, that you may dwell in peace and tranquility with them, and He has put love and mercy between your (hearts). Verily in that are signs for those who reflect (Quran 30:21).

If we think back for a moment to the literature cited earlier, the studies of Stein (1975) and DePaulo (2006) who argue American marriage is on the decline – we can see that for Muslims this is not the case. While long-term singlehood is not forbidden, marriage is certainly introduced as the ideal institution to bring peace and love to humankind. It is also the only way to enjoy sexual activity - the Quran prohibits extramarital sex and praises chastity (see Quran 17:32; 33:35). Yes, sex is seen as natural and innate, but it is a gift to be enjoyed within marriage only. To protect themselves from sexual temptation, many Muslims also ban activities that may lead to sex, like kissing or being alone with someone of the opposite sex.

Following the Quran, the second source of guidance is the hadith, the reliably transmitted reports of what the Prophet said or did. Note: After the Prophet's name, Muslims invoke a short prayer, “peace be upon him”. I shall adopt this prayer in this text but shorten it to ‘pbuh’. Informants often quoted hadith exalting marriage like, “Marriage is half of your religion, so fear Allah with the other half” or “Marriage is my way, whoever does not marry is not of my people” (Bukhari & Muslim). Muslims see marriage as a shield from promiscuity, adultery and fornication, which the most feel leads to the disintegration of family and community.

Likewise, informants recalled hadith like, “when a man and woman are alone together, Satan is the third,” to support their views of gender separation. Most quote the
hadith verbatim, but even without the exact wording, Muslims often generalize a saying to lend extra credence to their argument. For example, Grewal (2008) quotes a parent that guesses at a hadith to justify racial endogamy.

I tell my daughters that I think it’s easier to marry within similar backgrounds. And I can’t quote you a hadith [Prophetic tradition] but I know there is one that says try to marry within similar backgrounds, just to avoid conflict because, as [it] is, there are too many difference in the marriage. That is why we parents say stay in your own race background. (Grewal 2008:15-16, emphasis added).

Here lies what many informants saw as the danger of hadith - Muslims reference to them without understanding the context in which they were used.

**Living as a Muslim**

So Muslims use the Quran and hadith to guide their lives but is that it? What does it mean to “practice” Islam? When Muslims refer to the word “practice,” they are often measuring one’s commitment to Islam, otherwise known as Islamic religiosity. See, for example, Nailah’s response when I asked if her family was “religious.”

I don’t know. I never understood the concept of being religious when I was younger. I thought either you practiced or you didn’t. We practiced. My dad taught us how to pray, taught us about Allah, read us Quran at night, stories about the prophet, etc...

Thus the question, “Is s/he a practicing Muslim or a cultural Muslim?” popularly refers to if someone is a Muslim in deed or in speech. At a base level, “in deed” includes an adherence to the five pillars of Islam:

- **Shahadah** to state belief in One God and the prophethood of Muhammad
- **Salat** to pray five prayers each day
- **Sawm** to fast from dawn to sunset during the month of Ramadan each year
- **Zakat** to pay charity each year
- **Hajj** to make the pilgrimage to Makkah once in a lifetime
At a minimum, Muslims are expected to adhere to these pillars, but several actions extend beyond the five pillars - including a faith in the afterlife. Muslims believe in heaven, hell, and a day of judgment in which humans' fate in the next life will be determined given an individual's actions on earth. Muslims believe in heaven, hell, and a day of judgment in which humans' fate in the next life will be determined given an individual's actions on earth. As we saw during my husband search, this belief can affect an individual's attitudes and behaviors. In my case, the stronger I focused on the afterlife, the less likely I was to do anything I deemed “unIslamic.” Actions take on a deeper meaning for someone who sees this life as merely a part of human existence.

One informant exclaimed, “If it wasn’t for hell, singlehood would probably be a blast. Dating, one-night stands, hanging out... I could do whatever I want!” (This person would benefit from Frietas' book titled Sex and the Soul. Though that lifestyle may seem appealing, Frietas found that though many college students are unsatisfied participants who). Nevertheless, for many Muslims, every action is accompanied by the question: “Does this get me closer or farther from my goal of jannah (heaven)?”

Yet Muslims do not internalize or enact the above beliefs in the same way. She declared, “Do you think I don’t have sex because I’m thinking about hell? (laughing) You’ve got to be kidding. Most people choose to have or not have sex because of pregnancy and diseases, not because of Hell.” Therefore, you will find Muslims who drink (though Islam prohibits alcohol), Muslims who smoke (though Islam prohibits intoxicants) and Muslims who have premarital sex (though Islam prohibits sex outside of marriage). One sister explains,

I know people who hardly pray, or struggle with their prayers, or don’t even seem to try to struggle but they fast, and cover (hijab) and eat halal (Meat from animals slaughtered with the name of God). Or they pray (struggle), fast but don’t cover and believe. ... then there are people who pray, fast, believe and have sex. Not married. (Nailah, 28)
These Muslims are often referred to as “cultural” Muslims. So why the variation? The fact is Muslims are simply human beings. When pushed into the third space, they negotiate the contradictions in relation to their religiosity, beliefs and desires and choose for themselves which parts of Islam to engage. Still when conflicts between individual and collective identities occur, collectively most Muslims desire for “Muslim” to be the most salient identity.

I’m Muslim First

In *Bilal’s Stand*, a film by Sultan Sharieff about a Black Muslim teenager struggling to maintain his Islamic identity, the lead character Bilal is at a party with friends when a few girls approach, grab his arm and lead him to the dance floor. Reflecting on what his classmates would think if he did not “allow her to grind up on me,” Bilal states, “Parties are what I call splitters, it’s like sometimes you can’t be Muslim and a teenager at the same time. You gotta split your personality in order to survive.” Bilal desired the sense of social belonging discussed earlier by Brah (1996). Others would disagree with him and suggest he should not have gone to the “un-Islamic” party in the first place. That he should have been “Muslim First” (Naber 2005).

Naber’s study of Arab American Muslims in San Francisco (and American Muslims in general) argues that the current social context (of multiculturalism and pluralism) has brought about the emergence of “Muslim First” as a possible collective identity (Naber 2005:479). Grewal (2008) also noted this trend amongst South Asian and Arab second-generation youth, Karim (2005) amongst African-American young adults and Naguib (2003) amongst young European Muslims. Fatima, a Pakistani American participant in this study concurs.
I'm Muslim first. So there are things that I can't do that are normal here: drink, dance with guys, have sex. After that there are things in the American culture that if they don't contradict any religious beliefs I can adapt. That's how I think about the American culture. And the South Asian culture? Same thing. I'm Muslim first, if there are things in my culture that aren't Islamic I can challenge them (like the idea of women being your chef and laundry maid).

Womb #2: America – Land of Freedom, Sex and Politics

Individualism

In American culture decisions are mostly made for the comfort of the individual, not one's kin, society or religion (Schnieder 1968). But prior to the 1950s, American individualism focused mainly on the political domain - freedom of religion, freedom of speech, freedom to choose our own place of residence (Yankelovich 1998). During the 1960s, individualism broadened from politics to personal lifestyle and individuals could express their talents, sexuality, dress, and other likes and dislikes without fear of being labeled a social outcast. This trend continued into the 1970s and led journalist Tom Wolfe to label the young adults of the time the “Me Generation” (Twenge 2006).

Today, some 40 years later, individualism is still a major part of American Culture and certainly influences the meaning of singlehood. For example, in discussing her sexuality in On the Edge of Becoming, Khalida Saed, a lesbian Muslim wrote, “I'm not sure I would have had the balls to discuss my sexuality at all, or even consider it, if my American side hadn't told me I had the right” (Saed 2005:86). In another way, individualism influences the decision of marriage or not. Stein found individuals choose to stay single and see marriage as “an entrapment, requiring constant accommodation and compromise and cutting off variety of experience” (Stein 1975:490). As one informant explained,

There aren't any conditions under which I would consider getting married. I want freedom of choice, freedom to do what I want instead of being tied to living with
just one person and doing the same, mutually satisfying, things over and over
(Stein 1975:494).

For Muslims, individualism plays more into spousal selection and delay of
marriage more so than rejection. It also plays into religiosity. Several brothers and
sisters cited their desire to “choose my way (my religion) for myself.” Note that the
Quran also states religion is an individual’s personal choice. When informants
participated in activities that diverge either from Islamic or parental teachings they felt it
was their personal right to decide their own life course, an idea discussed further in
chapter four.

Though supposedly individualistic, someone coming to America for the first time
may be surprised at just how much popular culture advises individuals on everything
from how to dress, what to eat, what car to drive, what color to paint your room, what
centerpiece to use for a wedding, and of course, how to date and get married. Many
decisions are made in reference to these prescripts. Thus, we return to the notion of
cultural “womb” which often acts on an individual with or without their cognitive agency.

The Glamorization of Sex

Sexual imagery ranging from covert allusions (e.g. youthful beauty and sex
appeal), to in-your-face depictions of sexual acts have crept into nearly every aspect of
American life. As a result, while Muslims enjoy and appreciate the freedoms of
America, many view mainstream American society as one of “loose” values and “lewd”
behavior (Haddad and Lummis 1987). Take for example the sexually explicit songs
played on popular radio stations. Nadirah, 21, revealed, “I am serious I don’t even listen
to rap anymore really because of that mess. All they talk about is sex and how good it is
on every song (laughing). It’s true. All I hear is sex, drugs and GET MONEY on every
song!" Some songs like Mariah Carey's *Touch my Body*, not only normalize sexual behavior but also even go as far to label it "American."

```
Touch my body
Put me on the floor
Wrestle me around
Play with me some more
Touch my body
Throw me on the bed
I just wanna make you feel
Like you never did.
Touch my body
Let me wrap my thighs
All around your waist
Just a little taste
Touch my body
Know you love my curves
Come on and give me what I deserve
And touch my body ...
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The remix:

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Oh yes indeed
It's the American dream
When I touch yo
Work yo, taste yo body
I want you to do to my
Get up on my
Sit up on my body...
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Meeting a stranger for sex is the “American Dream?” These songs directly contradict Islamic teachings by glamorizing sexual behavior (without commitment). Through their enticing beats, they appeal and influence the masses. But music is not alone. These sexual messages also fill nearly 60% of television programs (Fisherkeller 1997), and influence the sexual behaviors of both youth and young adults (Collins et al 2006; Aubrey et al 2003; Fisherkeller 1997). Jaydeb, a Bengali-American remarked that television was one of the first things his parents began to monitor when he arrived to America at age 10. He stated, “They said I couldn’t watch it because it would teach me bad stuff, I think they were right (laughing).”

Jaydeb is a good student and pretty much focuses on school but perhaps the type of “bad stuff” Jaydeb’s parents were referring to is the type of activity filling the
storylines of popular TV shows like *Desperate Housewives*. For example, a few of the main characters contract and spread a sexually transmitted disease. One character, is married but is also having an affair with her ex-husband, whom she previously cheated on with her underage gardener. A pregnant teenage girl is sent away while her mother pretends to be pregnant herself in order to preserve her standing in the community. Lastly, during Susan's pregnancy, a teenage boy mistakes her new larger breasts for implants (and she for a stripper). When she corrects him, he replies, "That's hot." (Adopted from www.parentstv.org)

On the other hand, perhaps Jaydeb's parents were concerned about the soft pornography music videos shown on MTV, BET and VH1 where men and scantily dressed women simulate sexual positions. Even television advertisements like for Victoria's Secrets, Viagra, AXE deodorant spray, cologne and even shampoo, contain sexual innuendos. Other depictions of singlehood like "The Bachelor" where several women compete for the "love" of one man, and "Hell Date" where paid actors trick and terrorize their dates, send negative messages about relationships, commitment and the bases of marriage. Also in one of the most popular shows about singlehood, *Sex and the City*, the main characters often had one-night stands and other frivolous relationships. As one male informant's statement said, "sex is everywhere, you can't escape it!"

**Sex and College Life**

Naturally, popular culture's glamorization of sex carries into the lives of college students *Coming of Age in New Jersey*, an ethnography about college culture highlights the complexity of sexual and intimate relationships (Moffatt 1989). Following parental values and religious upbringings, Moffatt found contemporary American culture to be the
major influence on college student's sexualities; students were drawn to sex from an early age. He also rediscovers Heath's (1982) notion of a "new sexual orthodoxy" where sex is an important and normal human right and "central to one's sense of self" (Moffatt 1989:195). Even most virgin students desired sex and were ashamed of their virginity. One student wrote,

I have never had sexual contact of any kind: no intercourse, no petting, no kissing, no anything. And I am not proud of this fact. You see, I am shy.. [but] I am not a prude; I'm not content with my lifestyle. I believe in premarital sex; I just haven't been fortunate enough to have any. I consider sex a basic need in life, comparable to food and shelter. – Junior male. (Moffatt 1989:195)

Similarly, Holland and Eisenhart (1990) find the sexual peer culture of many colleges is saturated with a "cultural model of romance and attractiveness and reinforces patriarchal oppression" (106). Two-thirds of the college women they studied spent much of their time proving their attractiveness to men, hoping to achieve a relationship. Those who received attention from males including gifts, phone calls or sexual advances from men were most admired by friends and roommates. This sex culture sets up college women to be "mobbed by romance" and placed on the "sexual auction block." But universities themselves are also to blame. Campus sponsored events like mixers, presume an interest in finding a boyfriend and create a culture where romance is coveted. The authors use this to highlight the failure of the universities in protecting these women from a sexualized college culture.

While the college women could not completely evade gender relations, some women devised culturally acceptable strategies to escape the "sexual auction block." For example, keeping an absentee or workaholic boyfriend could be useful to avoid unwanted invitations from other men on campus. Black women employed self-reliancy as a resistance strategy, stating that they did not need a man to furnish their needs - something the authors suggest may be due to the low-economic status of many men within the black community although I did not experience this on my college campus.
Some of my Muslim informants simply limited relationships to escape the pulls of sex. Nailah who believes her religious background and parents teaching “protected” her form “undesirable activities” states,

I mean in college there was more at stake, the three letter word. I had my own space, no one could tell me anything. I could have sex if I wanted to, so to avoid that, no boyfriends. I realize that at an older age sex is generally expected or desired in a relationship.

The other side of this is men. If women are working to prove their attractiveness to men, the men are the recipients of such flirtation. Several men in this study recounted being chased by “girls” and how the peer culture rewards the guys who “had a lot of girls” or “could prove they had sex.” Many brothers described the difficulties they had trying to maintain their “manhood” without engaging in the sex culture.

Religion, College and Sex

So how does religion factor in? Well, students with a strong sense of religiosity tend to be less sexually active and are more likely to hold conservative attitudes regarding premarital sex, and use abstinence or withdrawal as a means of contraception (Beckwith and Morrow 2005). Less religious students tend to hold more “sexually permissive attitudes, less conventional values, and less traditional values or roles regarding sex or sexual behavior” (Beckwith and Morrow 2005: 357-367).

Returning to Moffatt’s (1989) study, only three of his 144 participants self identified as “intentional virgins.” All three were women and all three were Catholics who saw their virginity as a personal decision.

I don’t consider myself a prude, but I strongly believe that for me sex without commitment (marriage) is wrong. I stress “for me” because although I feel that my morals are right, I generally don’t judge other people. – senior female (Moffatt 1989:196)
Interestingly, of the sexually active students, 20% expressed some form of sexual guilt, which Moffat attributes to their Roman Catholic background.

All in all I feel my sexual experiences were very enjoyable.... Sometimes I feel a little guilty about sex – caused by my up-bringing and my religious beliefs. I sometimes have the urge to confess about my "pre-marital sexual experiences" to a priest and give up these experiences until married, but I realize that I am too tempted to ever commit myself against indulging in such activities. - Senior female (Moffatt 1989:203)

This leads to Freitas (2008) who studies the intersection between religious identities and the sexual attitudes/behaviors of college students. Freitas discovers that most evangelical Christian college students are virgins, or at least strive to have a commitment to abstinence, while “secular” students tend to be more sexually experienced. However, the most interesting finding for me was though students were active participants in the campuses’ sexual peer culture, they often found sex “unsatisfying” and longed for relationships that are more “meaningful”. As one student explains,

We’re not happy with the hookup culture.... We feel a constant pressure to do things that make us feel unsettled. We want meaningful relationships that integrate spirituality (whatever that turns out to be) into our dating lives (whatever that turns out to mean).

Freitas states,

they wanted the right to demand more from their peers when it came to sex and relationships – more joy, more satisfaction, more commitment- and less sex. Maybe even no sex (Freitas 2008:xiv).

The students at evangelical and secular colleges have different college experiences but they are alike in many ways. Both felt religious and/or spiritual identities are important. They desire sex and long to act on that desire but often feel sex is not necessary for romance. Reconciling sex and the soul was a struggle and students experience a great degree of shame, regret or angst with regard to sex. Lastly, students do not know where to turn to for advice (adopted from Frietas 2008:215-216).
The study is an important contribution to literature on college students and religion, but Freitas' failure to include Muslim perspectives is disappointing. In addition to evangelical Christianity, Frietas included brief looks at Judaism and Buddhism, but not Islam. My study reveals that Muslims have much in common with both the evangelical as well as "secular" students. Muslims who are more religiously conservative tend to be more concerned with monitoring their sexual behaviors and more in line with the evangelical students. These types of people were the majority of those I studied. Interestingly, those Muslims who "explore" life as a "secular" student, like those of Freitas' study, often in the end find it unsatisfying. After exploring, many return to life as a "Muslim" in the end, usually when they are in more of a marriage mindset.

Islamophobia

Lastly, the current "war on terror" and the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centers turned an unwanted and negative spotlight on American Muslims (Turner 2003). Though its effects on singlehood may be indirect, Islamophobia can be an important factor in constructing Muslim identities. Yvonne Haddad, an Islamic scholar explains, "In the last decade and a half, it (Muslim identity) has also been profoundly influenced by what Muslims feels is a hostile American environment in which they are being held accountable for the activities of others overseas" (As cited in Al-Johar 2005, 557-574). Media associations of Islam with terrorism push many Muslims to feel America is "Islamaphobic." Post 9-11, "feelings of confidence, faith, and pride in the United States were replaced with fear, apprehension, and uncertainty, especially among the immigrant Muslim population" (Ba Yunus and Kone 2006:172). American Muslims navigate this environment of "moral panic" (Cohen 2002) and are often deemed in the words of Mary Douglas (2002), "matter out of place" and something to be feared.
No, none of my informants specifically mentioned 9-11 and Islamophobia as having an effect on their psyches. However, what is important to note is that Islam bashing is a pervasive part of the social world in which young Muslims live and can subconsciously affect on their religiosity and in turn their attitudes and behaviors. At a minimum, it can certainly put a Muslim in a defensive mode where they are the “Muslim ambassador” to friends, colleagues and even other family members.

We see, like any country, America has both positive and negative aspects. While Muslims are free to practice their religious identities without pressure to convert to Christianity, they also face the challenge of resisting values that contradict their own. The sexual culture and accompanying peer culture push many single Muslims into the third space where Muslim young adults who are have both American and Muslim identities, work to negotiate contradictions.

**Womb # 3: The Dinner Table – Family Values & Expectations**

The model, the first structure in society that we learn from, is the family – two individuals not related by blood, who have come together to do things they couldn’t do as individuals. From there you get a village, a tribe, a nation, a world.” (Nur Ali in Dannin 2002:215).

Family values create a child’s moral foundation and form the cornerstone of their sense of right and wrong. However, youth make their own decisions and often disagree with their parents’ prescriptions. Still, to reduce conflict, many individuals follow tradition in courtship and spousal selection. Here I highlight particular parental values and expectations beginning with religious tenets.
Religiosity

Young people are socialized into parents' religious denominations and frequently adopt their levels of religious commitment. For example, young adults with religious parents often decide not to cohabit without marriage even if they, themselves, do not oppose the practice (Thornton et al 1992). Likewise, young Mormons are shown to hold their parents' views of marriage and singlehood, often feeling positive about their single status if their families support their singlehood, and vice-versa (Darrington et al, 2005).

Parents' also influence the courtship, marriage values and behaviors of their children by influencing the child's own religiosity through either guidance or supervision. For Muslims, the preservation of an Islamic identity is of the utmost importance. One Arab immigrant says:

I think that the one danger of interaction between my children and non-Muslim children is loss of Muslim identity. I think that integration into the non-Muslim environment has to be done with the sense that we have to preserve our Islamic identity. As long as the activity or whatever the children are doing is not in conflict with Islamic values or ways, it is permissible. But when we see it is going to be something against Islamic values, we try to teach our children that this is not correct to our beliefs and practices. They understand it and they are trying to cope with that (Aswad and Bilge 1996:19).

During singlehood, Muslim parents are often concerned about male-female relationships and many do not allow their children to date (Haddad and Lummis 1987). One Lebanese immigrant father says,

Dating is not our way of life. The way it is done is ridiculous. I see some people who date one person for three days, then drop them... I am not against finding yourself a partner, but I am against the way they abuse this ‘dating.’ I don’t have as much problem with boys dating girls as I do with girls dating (Haddad and Lummis 1987:139).

Setting gender differences aside for a moment, both quotes above hail from studies focused on the Islamic values held by immigrant Muslims, namely Arab and South Asian (Aswad and Bilge 1996; Haddad and Lummis 1987). However, many of the same values are held by indigenous Muslims, e.g. African-Americans. In African-
American Islam, McCloud (1995) argues that African-American Muslim parents “pay a great deal of attention to their children’s level of sexuality and feel that American society is far too permissive with respect to the sexual relationships of youth” (McCloud 1995:112). If we remember for a moment, that the sexuality of youth and young adults has long been a major concern and often the subject of investigation, for example Mead’s Coming of Age in Samoa, we see that Muslim parents are not alone in this regard.

Ethnicity/Race

Muslim families may share a universal religion but they come from diverse range of ethnic/racial heritages (Carolan et al 2000). A rough estimate of American Muslim demographics is 20% South Asian, 24% Arab, 26% African American, and 24% other (African, White, Latino, Asian, Native American and all –in-between) (Mir 2006). These racial lines of difference often become the bases of Muslim family values. In fact, several informants interpret their parents’ actions and views as more cultural, than Islamic, in nature. For example, Mirza, a 24-year old Pakistani-American states,

Even Pakistanis who aren’t outwardly religious will behave in a certain way. For example, I know a lot of people who won’t pray 5 times a day but they’re totally against something like dating, pre-marital sex, consumption of alcohol. That’s how my family was for most of my childhood and much of my adolescence. It’s not like my parents were against religion, it was just more apathy and they simply needed something to trigger some sort of change.

Fatima, also Pakistani American, believes these actions are often based on the family’s need and desire to maintain their social status. As a result, religiously acceptable activities, like men and women hanging out in a group, or dating with a chaperone, are often prohibited. Fatima says,

You can go out but with family, but usually that doesn’t happen. It’s more like you’ll get to hang out at each other’s houses because no one wants to look bad and send their 23 year old daughter with a man (or men) she’s not even engaged
to. Even if they take a chaperone with them (hence it would be halal (Islamically permissible!).

Endogamy

Contemporary Muslim young adults also criticize endogamy, the cultural tradition to marry someone of the same background (Grewal 2008). Grewal’s analysis of inter-racial Muslim marriage highlights “a generation tug-of-war between ‘cultural’ (immigrant) parents and ‘religious’ children” (Grewal 2008:3).

The first generation grew up in Muslim societies where particular cultural practices (constructions of beauty, marital endogamy, etc.) are naturalized and taken for granted. However, the second generation, raised in the U.S. often dismisses its parents’ practices as both racist and “un-Islamic” (Grewal 2008:3).

Young Muslims who choose to be “Muslim first”, with religion the most salient aspect of their life, will be more willing to marry outside of their racial/ethnic background (Al-Johar 2005). Grewal raises an interesting point. While the term “cultural” often takes on a negative connotation amongst the younger generation, it is ironic that the younger generation does not “recognize its own American sensibilities as cultural and constructed in the same way as those of their parents” (Grewal 2008:3). In response to one mother who preferred cousin marriages, Grewal notes, “young Muslims raised in the US have also internalized the secular, anti-racist rhetoric that permeates American media and school curricula as well as the cultural norms couched in medical terms that stigmatize practices such as cousin marriages.” One Arab informant who acknowledged the role of America in her feeling recounts,

It’s so hard to marry [someone] of your same race. We’re in America, we go to school with different people our entire lives. And then parents say I don’t care if you’ve been friends with white, black, red, whatever, brown [Muslims]. Those are not people that you can fall in love with (Grewal 2008:17-18).

Ajeenah, a Pakistani informant in this study stated,
Well a simple explanation (for endogamy) is that they haven’t been exposed to other cultures like we have so the thought of marrying their daughter in another culture is scary to them. They think they might dissolve me or something.

White Skin. Not surprisingly given the history of colonization and racial stratification within the U.S., spousal selection continually extends beyond religious endogamy, beyond racial endogamy and even beyond ethnic endogamy to phenotypical characteristics – in particular skin color (Grewal 2008). Grewal argues that many Arab and South-Asians privilege whiteness and that intra-racism is “a reflection of self-hatred, the internalization of notions of inferiority and defect (and) perhaps the most tragic scar left by systematic racism.” Abdullah, a young Syrian states,

I think [whiteness] is the ultimate beauty standard. “She’s so pretty, she’s white-skinned.” That’s always the line [in Franklin and] in Syria... My mother is very white and people are always surprised she’s Arab. And she wants me to marry someone who looks like us (Grewal 2008:9).

Grewal argues that passing as white, was and is one way immigrants distance themselves from racial minorities and “climb the economic ladder.” In the quest of seemingly economic and social benefits, the spirit of Islam, which promotes cohesion between Muslims “despite any racial or cultural differences,” is neglected (Yamani 1998). We also know from Islamic history, that Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) engaged in and conducted inter-tribal/ ethnic marriages in part to create political and social alliances amongst peoples. It appears too, that that benefit is no longer seen as a major influence on parents' views on acceptable mates.

Naturally, racial endogamy is not particular to Arab and Desi Americans. Black/White interracial relationships have a long history in America. Think of Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner, a revolutionary 1967 film in which a black man and a white woman attempt to marry. The woman’s father speaks volumes about the ways interracial marriages were viewed (and are often viewed today):

As for you two and the problems you’re going to have, they seem almost imaginable... I’m sure you know what you are up against. There will be 100
million people right here in this country who will be shocked, offended, and appalled at the two of you (line from Guess Who's Coming to Dinner 1967).

Though the Supreme Court legalized interracial marriages that same year, now over 40 years later, U.S. society still has racial borders (Childs 2005). Child's recent investigation on Black/White interracial marriages highlights how prejudice against interracial marriages still exists but is now expressed differently. While interracial marriages were openly defiled during the 40s-60s, there is now a more passive discursive strategy of acknowledgement, without personal engagement, in interracial relationships (Childs 2005). You often hear comments like, “I don’t have a problem with it. But I prefer if my children did not marry outside.”

Blacks often consider racial endogamy an important African-American community norm (Hill Collins in Childs 2005).

choosing to date or marry interracially is frowned upon because it is seen as an effect of white domination and internalization by black people of a complex and debilitating prejudice and self-hatred against themselves that makes them perceive whites as superior, and that by associating with whites they can elevate their position (Childs 2005:80).

Others focus more on self-protection from prejudice than self-hatred. For example, one of Childs' focus group respondents stated she wanted her daughter to find a “black husband,” because there is no reason for her child “to go over to that other group that don’t want you anyways.” She did not want her daughter “in a situation where she could get hurt.” Other members of the focus group agreed that discouraging interracial relationships for loved ones was often not only an acceptable practice, but a necessary one. The White college students of Childs' study felt the same. One student said, “My parents are not prejudiced … they are completely open-minded, but [their concern] comes out of how others would act” (Childs 2005:112).

Naturally, many young adults go along with parental expectations in order to facilitate greater social approval and “easier” marriages (Thornton et al 1992). For
example, Nadia, a Pakistani sister in this study said, “They (Pakistani parents) have to show face in their respective communities... [I'm sure] they personally could deal with it (inter-racial marriage) but people who know them is what they probably don't want to deal with.” Nadia is open to an interracial marriage, but for family reasons plans to marry another Pakistani.

So Who's In and Who's out?

How do families decide who constitutes an “outsider”? Is the decision based on shared values, language, phenotype, geography? What happens when for example, two people from different cultures have more commonalities than differences -perhaps due to a shared level of education and professional social groups (Breger and Hill 1998)? Grewal states interracial marriage between Muslims,

poses a ‘boundary dilemma’ that forces them to consider the meaning and consequences of ‘marrying out’ and to ‘confront questions about the definition, meaning and significance of the boundaries that mark their identity’ (Kibria 1997:524 in Grewal 2008:13).

Thus, who may constitute an outsider today, may not be an outsider tomorrow. I will not attempt to make overarching generalizations, but the discussion goes back to Anderson’s idea of an “imagined community.” People feel like they share common values with others in a particular group based on blood, some shared historical, social or political construct. Often times this may be more geographically based than socially based. I’ll just cite one short example from Grewal:

The young people... think that, well, it’s not haram [forbidden, sinful] to marry out, so what’s the big deal? But the prophet didn’t say that. I mean, you have to start in and then go out. Nowadays, girls just say no[to suitors= without a good reason and that's haram. First you have to consider your cousins. If they are not good, then you look at other Indian boys. If you still can’t, then Pakistanis. Arabs and other Muslims should be last. But the first thing some of these girls do is look outside even though they have very good cousins. They say nobody marries cousins in America but that's our tradition (a South Asian mother in Grewal 2008:16).

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This brings me to one final thought on interracial marriages. I have noted that passing and coveting whiteness have been used to climb the economic ladder. Interestingly, it has been documented that the social acceptance of interracial marriages is stronger amongst marriages between peoples of more wealth, adding yet another level of ambiguity in the realm of acceptable spouses (Breger and Hill 1998).

**Gender**

Within each of the cultural wombs mentioned - Islam, America and family - gender expectations come into play, however families are often the first structure to genderize children. As the Lebanese father quoted above states, “I don’t have as much problem with boys dating as I do with girls dating” (Haddad and Lummis 1987:139). Both males and females spoke of these types of double standards. Irrespective of race/ethnicity, families tended to restrict female social behavior more so than that of males. Take for example, the statement found in an advice column on Muslim Girl magazine, a bimonthly for Muslim teens,

> My parents seem to think that my reputation will be ruined if I sleep over at my best friend's house after her 16th birthday party. The other girls who are sleeping over aren't Muslim, and their parents are fine with it. Why can't my parents trust me, and why do they have such unfair rules for me? They never object if my brother spends a weekend at his friend's house" (Excerpt from Muslim Girl Magazine in Garfoli 2007).

Often parents employ these types of restrictions for the protection of “vulnerable” and “weak” females. For example, Nailah, a 28 year old African-American states,

> I remember them (parents) saying boys play rough. Don't play with them. At one point, don't talk to them. In my neighborhood kids used to mess around a lot, like in the laundromat of the building..... I must've been under ten. Kids started around that age, maybe a little younger, you were bound to get felt up if you didn't hold your guard. A little older and there was sex too. It was kinda scary but, I knew they were right. It was restrictive, but I learned from experience that boys really did play rough and once you start playing with them, it's hard to control the situation."
While the males were not protected from physical harm, many young men were raised to protect themselves from emotional harm. They were pushed to guard their feelings, prepare to accept the responsibility of taking care of women and to be strong members of the community. Often the biggest impediment to marriage was a lack of finances. This study revealed several assumptions about Muslim male singlehood. For example, many assumed that men primarily marry to fulfill physical needs. However, while that was certainly one factor in the decision to marry, the men of this study also longed for companionship and family life. Experiencing legal sex was not the only reason to end singlehood. In addition, many women assumed singlehood for men is easy, “they don’t have to be single if they don’t want to be.” This study also debunks that myth. Muslim men struggle to end singlehood just as much as Muslim women. It is a community problem, not simply a gender problem.

In conclusion, because of its importance, I explored both “family talk,” the ideas expressed by parents, siblings and extended family, as well as family structure (e.g. marital status of parents, number of siblings, etc). Naturally, parental attitudes varied from liberal attitudes towards Islam to strict interpretations of Islamic law. For example, some informants were allowed to have mixed-gender friendships as long as the relationships were “respectful” and of course non-sexual. However, other families did not allow mixed-gender friendships or even conversations.

Chapter Summary

In order to contextualize the beliefs and attitudes of single Muslims, this chapter focused on three cultural wombs that contribute to the development of young Muslims: Islam, America and Family. Under Islam, basic tenets of Islam were highlighted; a
belief in God, the Prophethood of Muhammad and, an afterlife, affect the actions of Muslims. Islam also covets marriage as the ideal state of humankind. Moreover, Muslims perform certain daily actions such as prayer, and yearly actions like fasting, which contribute to the construction of an Islamic identity. However, how Muslims “practice” their Islam is in part based on the other two wombs explored, i.e. America and family.

Under America, I focused on individualism, the sex culture, and college life. Individualism, and the view that each individual has the right to take control of his/her life outside of parental or societal expectations, can impact several parts of singlehood including spousal selection and religious choice. Another pervasive aspect of life in America pertains to sex. Though Islam prohibits pre-marital sex, American popular culture portrays extramarital sexual behavior as a normal, perfectly acceptable part of life presenting a moral challenge to Muslims. Finally, Muslims live in a society that equates their faith with terrorism, which could sway some Muslims to “play down” their Muslim identities.

Lastly, families influence not only the religiosity of a young Muslim but also how they relate to their ethnic and national identities. Although American Muslims can all relate to Islam on one level or another, various ethnic identities often trump the prescriptions of an Islamic identity. That is to say, families’ expectations and behaviors, like marital endogamy, may be more in line with their ethnic/racial backgrounds than Islamic theology. These distinctions also seep into the gender differences. For example, women’s actions were often restricted more than their male relatives.
CHAPTER IV

JIHAD OF THE SOUL – EIGHT REASONS AMERICAN MUSLIMS STRUGGLE WITH SINGLEHOOD

*Jihad*, an Arabic term, means to “strive” or “struggle.” The Prophet Muhammad is quoted as saying, the greatest jihad is the jihad of the soul, an individual’s personal efforts to do right and to discipline themselves (in the sight of their Lord). Muslim singlehood is a sort of spiritual and emotional battleground created from the intersection of various cultural wombs that present competing sets of values and expectations. The ambiguity, complexity and hybridity therein generate manifold challenges and “mini jihads” for Muslim young adults of all backgrounds. In this chapter, I move into a more critical analysis and present eight reasons Muslim singles struggle with singlehood.

**Reason # 1: To be or not to be Muslim**

*Shahadah*, the first pillar of faith in Islam, is to declare a belief in one God, and to affirm Muhammad as God’s last messenger. When born, children of Muslim parents vicariously live their parents’ shahadah who groom them to speak like a Muslim, eat like a Muslim, dress like a Muslim, think like a Muslim and behave like a Muslim, at least according to their parents’ definition of “Muslim.” However, there comes a time (usually in either high school or college), when young Muslims become aware that parental expectations are often not valued or even considered “normal” in the greater society. When confronted with this reality, they may question Islam and their Muslim practice. As a result, judging the morality of singlehood behavior is difficult because they have not yet decided whether or not to be Muslim, and whether or not to follow Islamic rules.
For example, Nadirah, an African-American college sophomore, was born and raised a Muslim. Her parents are active in the community and she and her three siblings grew up attending the masjid on a regular basis. However, Nadirah has never studied the religion on her own and though she currently self-identifies as a Muslim, she is not sure she will always be Muslim. Here she explains why she is open to marrying a non-Muslim.

I haven’t really found myself religiously yet so I do want to keep my options open. I already know two different religions married won’t work. But I’m not sure if I want to be Muslim. You know everyone is born into a specific religion and I believe you don’t have to be that for the rest of your life if you don’t want to. I’m just trying to explore my options.

Muslims like Nadirah demand the right to choose their religion for themselves. Being born Muslim does not mean they will remain Muslim. Though this may appear to be a spin off from individualism, the Quran states, “Let there be no compulsion in religion” (Quran 2:256) meaning, no one can force another person to be Muslim. Islam is something a person must decide for themselves.

The Popular Guy

Like Nadirah, Ali was born and raised Muslim but has also explored his options and made his own decisions about what is right and wrong. As a Californian teen, Ali desired to be just a regular teenager and accordingly began to build a life outside of the masjid. He stayed busy with several extra-curricular activities like debate and sports. He also had several girls with whom he “fooled around,” though he postponed having sex.

I did not want to even think about having sex. My dad told me that if I got a girl pregnant that I would not be able to go away to college, and I would have to get a job and support the girl and the baby. That scared the crap out of me... I like kissing, and “fooling” around but I was not interested in sex. I had been helping to raise my younger siblings so I understood what babies meant. I had a few intense crushes, one White, one Jewish and one Black.
Ali admits his behaviors may have fallen outside of his parent’s and community’s expectations but he never played the “guilt game.” “I knew it was not what was traditionally acceptable so I kept it in my own realm and did not blast it to the world. Most people saw me as a happy guy who did not date.” Ali wanted to be a good student and respectful of his parent’s rules. But when Ali left home for college, he used the freedom to experiment with different lifestyles. He began to read about Buddhism, Hinduism, and spirituality more generally and hung out at parties, drank alcohol, smoked marijuana and used other drugs.

Ali’s lifestyle may have changed dramatically, but he always identified as Muslim. He still attended jumah (Friday prayer service) and observed many of the regular prayers and during Ramadan, the Muslim month of fasting, he would “clean up real good.” He lived in what Bhabha described as the liminal third space between Islamic ideals, popular American singlehood and his own personal desires.

As for relationships, during college and beyond, Ali describes himself as a smoking hippie who was into “secular” women. He began a slew of intimate relationships, none of which culminated in marriage. For example, when one girlfriend revealed she did not want to raise her children as Muslims, Ali realized their lifestyles were incompatible. Disappointed and heartbroken, he began to reevaluate his life.

I moved to a new city and finally decided to stop drinking. To finally start growing up and get my Islamic studies on. I went to study Arabic at ** and was for the first time in my life around a cool group of Muslim peers. Allahu Akbar! (God is Greater!) ... I thought, I have come a long way away from where I was in my parent’s house. How do I get back there? But I was not hard on myself. I made gradual changes so that I could internalize them.

Ali’s changes included increasing prayer and studying the Quran more. He discovered that what he truly desired was a family and the other activities simply provided him with an excuse to postpone marriage. Upon reflection he states,

[Alcohol was] fun. I only drank when I had finished my work and I was a lightweight. I like to smoke weed more than that but I had a blast in college
experimenting with different drugs. I guess it was a big smokescreen that veiled me from my real purpose and responsibility [which was] figuring out how to make money and be a man so that I could hold down some woman financially and also be her spiritual anchor!

Ali slowly began to really desire marriage and fatherhood. But finding a wife, a Muslim wife was now the issue. Ali felt like he did not know any Muslim women who “seemed like they understood the nuances of life a bit.” So he continued to have relationships with more “secular” women. He also viewed many of the Muslim women he knew as “rigid” in their behavior and unwilling to accept someone with his background and worldview.

sadly it seems I am not MAN enough. Many men feel that way, that they are not worthy. Its a lack of confidence I have struggled with that and still do. Lately I have been more aware of it and am addressing that

In addition to his personal insecurities, Ali felt like an outsider in the Muslim community. His father was well known in the community but he was not. It took the Imam of the masjid’s personal attention for the member to “really accept me in the way black people can approve or disapprove each other.” Feeling rejected, Ali reverted to what was comfortable - his relationship with Leila, a Palestinian-American whom he had been dating off and on for over four years. Though they tried to make it work, by the time we had our follow up interview, Ali and Leila had ended their relationship for good. Leila was perfect in every way except Ali discovered she was even “more secular” than he thought and had covered it up to appease him.

I have to find a woman that wants to be with the whole me, not just the dunya (worldly life) part. At the end of the day, she said we just argued too much and I just got mad that I “wasted” my time trying to be with someone that did not see the value of placing Allah at the center of a relationship. I’m not interested in marrying a non-Muslim. I want someone who can balance this life and the next life. Brains so that my children (inshaAllah) will have a fuller understanding, not just some rote belief or blind faith

Given Ali’s own gradual personal transformation, his stance on Leila was surprising. Perhaps Leila would also receive a “religious awakening.” But Ali was now at the point where he knew exactly what he wanted in a wife and was not willing to
compromise on those key characteristics. So Ali is now single. He doesn’t have a girlfriend and is working on his relationship with himself and God. Yet now that Ali is more dedicated to living his life within the boundaries of Islamic behavior, singlehood has become even harder.

I wish I was not [single] and that I had a halal outlet for my physical desires. But I have been blinded by secular society. I’ve been really going internal to cull out the ways that I have played a victim and thereby being unclear and not confident and it was all based on my relationship with Allah. So I am strengthening that so that I can be an anchor to a woman. [I mean] singlehood is boring.

Ali’s sense of manhood as well as religiosity certainly play a factor in how he lives his singlehood. In delaying marriage, he effectively delayed his responsibility to “be an anchor to a woman.” But Ali also recognizes that only through his other experiences did he get to where he is today. He can see how drugs, alcohol and intimate relationships interfered with the real source of happiness and peace, which for Ali are a relationship with God and a family.

Living a Dual Life

I met Tahira when she was in Kalamazoo on business. While giving her a tour of the city, I explained my research and Tahira excitedly agreed to share her experiences. Like Ali, her story is a vivid example of a young Muslima (female Muslim) struggling with conflicting desires, to be a “normal” student, to be a ‘good’ Muslim and to find solace in her hybridizing both. For a number of years, Tahira lived a dual life - one that she showed to only a few individuals. While managing two lifestyles was stressful, now that she has come into her own, there exists a new struggle: to find a Muslim husband whom she loves.

Tahira was born and raised in a tight knit Muslim community. Her family lived around the corner from the masjid and she attended the neighborhood Muslim school
founded by her mother and a few other Muslim sisters. With boys, Tahira remembers hanging out with male classmates until she received her menarche, “My parents definitely weren’t down with me just chilling with boys past puberty…or really before if there wasn’t a reason… so no male friends.” But in 8th grade, Tahira moved to another Muslim school where post pubertal interactions as well as public boyfriend/girlfriend ‘situations,’ were more commonplace. Tahira, too, desired to have a boyfriend, though she never found the courage.

I guess it was a combination of things. I thought it was wrong inherently, plus I have always been logical to a fault and I couldn’t figure out a way that my parents wouldn’t find out [laughing]. I was scared of them finding out, I think more so of their disappointment than their initial reaction. That fear kept me out of a lot of possible trouble during that time.

During a two-year hiatus in Saudi Arabia, where her father’s job took the family, “Tahira decided to get more serious about her deen (Islamic way of life).

I think I became Muslim, meaning really deciding that I wanted to be Muslim, while living in Saudi, so that was high school for me. At the time I was practicing more so than I ever had on my own, but the reality of it was that it was so easy to practice when you’re secluded.

Upon her return to the U.S., Tahira entered her senior year of high school, this time at a public school where for the first time in life, she found herself as a religious minority.

It was complete culture shock… I hadn’t interacted with the opposite sex in any way in years, or had normal interactions (American normal) with peers. So I think the last year of high school and my first year of college was a huge transition where I was trying to get back to ‘normal’ – whatever that was...The same temptations that I had prior to leaving crept back into my life... except this time the fear of my parents wasn’t as much of a deterrent. I got into things with full knowledge of wrong and I kept away from other things because I felt that was going too far. I always prayed that Allah (SWT – glory and magnified is He) allowed me to live through the phase because I had the consciousness to know I was in the wrong and I needed to get right. So I would say I knew that I wanted to be Muslim, but I wasn’t willing to accept everything that I felt Muslim to be while in college. I allowed myself to explore, with the plan to get right at graduation.

Not many know Tahira’s other side. She was able to conceal her other life and effectively escape the judgment of other Muslims. Seeming embarrassed, Tahira asks if
I am surprised by her disclosures. When I explained that in fact her story was very similar to my own she seemed to relax a bit. In college, away from her parents' rules, 'natural instincts and societal norms' pushed Tahira into a liminal third space between her Islamic upbringing and her college environment. She began to date and visit the clubs.

...there were things that I wanted to experience even though it may have been against what I felt a 'good' Muslim was - like going out, less modest clothing, relationships, etc. Basically I kinda gave myself a break from practicing the way I felt I should be in order to experience the 'life' - that I had always been curious about, but I knew I was putting my soul in danger. And I had every intention to get back straight after the break, which I set to be my graduation from undergrad. For example, just to give you insight on my screwed up mentality (laughing). My most serious relationship in college was very tumultuous because from jump (the beginning) I told the guy that I only planned to marry a Muslim. Now we weren't thinking about marriage or anything but it really bothered him....and why shouldn't it! It's just flat out telling someone 'this is for now, it can go nowhere, enjoy it while it last.'

Though she is embarrassed to think about it now, Tahira feels these experiences were a necessary but hidden part of her development. She lived a double consciousness (Dubois 1903), "I really perfected my duality in college, I had my Muslim life and hung out with Muslim circles, then the other life...most privy to the other side were my non-Muslim acquaintances in college, I never really mixed the two circles or identities." Living a dual life became difficult to manage and created feelings of despair. Tahira gave one example.

one break while I was in college I was hanging out with one of my childhood Muslim friends in California. She was one who got married after high school as a virgin, was now in college and considering having a kid. She was very much on the good girl path at that time. Her and her friends were talking about so and so who goes to the club, 'what is she thinking, etc.' All I did was feel so guilty and stay silent because I knew I was going to do that as soon as I got back home. Honestly, it is not until very recently that I have actively started to break that duality. I think it's an epidemic with our generation, where we are more comfortable around John our co-worker, classmate, friend than we are with Muhammad... and vice versa. So I have said screw that recently and decided I needed to be the same around both.

Tahira's level of anxiety was significantly lower around her non-Muslim friends. They did not operate within the same Islamic framework. As such, with them, a tight
shirt or flirtatious talk with a man would not be cause for judgment like it would with other Muslims. In fact, several informants recounted keeping secrets from other Muslims because they did not want to be seen as a “bad Muslim.”

Tahira felt like she was slipping away from Islam, and needed something to keep her strong. Though she tried to join the Muslim Student's Association, the group of mostly South Asian and Arab men made her feel like she wasn’t a real Muslim. Rebuffed, she gave up on being with them. And in turn found a hijab (hair scarf) effective in maintaining a connection to Islam. Covering her hair became the main thing she refused to let go of, “I felt on some level that if I let that go, I would never come back. … So I was one of those scandalous hijabis. I tried to rock my scarf in a less Muslim way when I was being really scandalous [laughing].” Laughing I interjected, “the bun in the back?” Tahira, “You know it! (laughing), black scarf..... Baby hairs out...bunned (laughing).”

Outward expressions of dress, and hijab in particular, is one of the most visible differences between single Muslim women and men. Women portray an inner level of Islam (as I discuss later, hijab is often a requirement for many Muslim men) through the cloth they use to adorn their bodies. For Tahira, the bun style effectively blurred the lines between her definition of a completely “Muslim” identity, (i.e. not showing the neck and ears), and a regular college student identity, (i.e. no scarf at all). However outward expressions are not always in congruence with what one feels is their “core” identity.

The way I was brought up, you weren’t Muslim if you didn’t cover, like you were ignorant if you didn’t or something. But when I really looked into it (I went through my deprogramming phase in recent years, actually I am still in it in some ways), I realized that the Arabic language in the Quran doesn’t say you have to cover, it infers hijab. The hadith that is always mentioned is weak and that the requirement of hijab comes from scholarship, so with that, that leaves room for other interpretations. Personally I haven’t seen the full evidence making it required, but I am sure the scholarship has researched it more than I have dedicated my time to it, so my personal decision is to stick with it. It’s my visible Muslim identity, and I feel it is ridiculous for me to make myself comfortable without it. So I stick with it but I understand that knowledgeable Muslims can take another route because there is room
Having learned Islam from her parents, Islamic school and her time in Saudi Arabia, Tahira had internalized a brand of Islam that until recently went unquestioned. Her ‘deprogramming phase’ is one in which an individual study of Islamic texts allows her to weed out culture from Islam. Tahira has now determined that there is room in the hijab debate. However, she continues to wear it for another reason, to publically mark her Muslim identity.

To marry or not to marry

During college and for five years after, Tahira resisted pressure from family and friends to get married. She would use every excuse from their age, to even their shoes to reject someone. But her change of heart was slow coming.

You have to realize... I tried to turn this magic stick where I had relationships and people I had genuine feelings for, but had reconciled that these weren’t long term because of the non-Muslim thing. Then after graduation, I tried to be all muslimy, cut all these people out of my life, and just look at people for the purpose of marriage from the get go. Yea that wasn’t realistic. That wasn’t the way I was used to getting to know people. And plus I had unresolved feelings from old situations, and I just had to grow as a independent person and really live life on my own to understand and want to share my life with someone.

Tahira began to let her guard down. She even tried her hand at talking to a Muslim man (for the purpose of marriage), someone she had a crush on growing up. But the process was awkward, “neither of us had ever really talked to Muslims before so we didn’t know what the script was.” Little things that would have seemed so natural before, like hugging, required more forethought. Is this appropriate? The relationship did not succeed but Tahira learned a lot about herself and her mate preferences. Tahira is now playing the waiting game - she is single by fate, not by choice. This time the difference is that she is more serious about adhering to what she believes is right. She wants to find a husband, not a boyfriend and when the singleness gets to be too much, she leans on her friends.
When I am really ready to go crazy, I tell a friend and they talk me out of it (laughing) and sometimes, Allah (SWT) just stands in my way, because every now and then I get determined to act out (laughing), but MashaAllah (Allah has willed), I have maintained for some time. But inshaAllah (if Allah wills) the single thing will be remedied sooner rather than later (laughing).

In the mean time, Tahira is taking advantage of her singlehood and personal time by advancing her career and travelling internationally. While she travels extensively for work, it is not something she anticipates continuing once married. She is now comfortable in her skin, which for her meant relinquishing some “questionable” activities like clubbing.

**Reason # 2: I've Got Needs (Physical and Emotional)**

**Loneliness**

“Something odd happens when people notice someone who is (or who may be) single or when they think about an adult who may be alone, even temporarily. Their mind seems to leap immediately to notions of loneliness” (DePaulo 2006:55). Though DePaulo positions this assumption as a stereotype, but I found that indeed, most Muslim young adults who are involuntarily single are lonely. Specifically they long for the type of feelings that accompany a meaningful romantic relationship. For example, Nailah mentioned,

I remember the first time I felt really lonely. I was in Europe in 2003 and I was like, I want someone to share this with. I mean my life is good a lot of the time but I would like to share it with someone. I mean singlehood is Waaaaaaack! I need some luvin! (Nailah, African American female)

The situation is similar for Aminah, a former print journalist and current resident of Los Angeles. Her former lifestyle in the arts was exciting, but she thinks it pales in comparison to what getting married and having children will provide her.
Although I've traveled all over the world, I didn't feel like I lived. I wanted to do something significant, like get married and have a child...every time I traveled, it was by myself. I was so lonely and I didn't feel like my job was making me grow, I still felt like I was 18 but I was 28... I should feel different, like sophisticated, and mature. ...I love Islam...Although I've been extremely lonely, I've been protected from many, many things, and that is due to Islam... just imagine me in the entertainment industry and not having my Islamic values to protect me...who knows where I would be.

Aminah views Islam's prohibition on intimate relationships outside of marriage as having contributed to her loneliness, but also as a protection from unwanted dangers like HIV and drug abuse. Currently, Aminah is involved with a non-Muslim man whom she may consider marrying. She’s torn between waiting for a Muslim man and marriage and fulfilling her current emotional needs. She sighs, “I do (like his companionship) and I didn’t have companionship in a LONG time. I thought I was going to die from loneliness.”

For Jaleela, an African-American author, the situation is a bit different. Having married during her junior year of college, shortly after converting to Islam, most of her life as a Muslim was spent married. When she discovered that the man she met online and later came to love had several secrets, (he was already married with a child), Jaleela was devastated. Her Senegalese husband explained that he was planning to divorce his wife, but as time went by it became apparent he wanted her to accept his wife back home. Jaleela began to have a change of heart. When her husband began to hang out late at night and see other women Jaleela found the courage to leave. Now two years after their six-year marriage ended, she finds the transition to living as a single Muslim again very trying.

Singlehood? It’s ok but I’d rather be married (laughing). It’s difficult to be around couples because it makes me miss being married. And it’s hard to go to events and things alone... sometimes it’s hard to come home from work and be alone and eat dinner alone especially during Ramadan.

What Aminah and Jaleela describe is not a “women’s issue,” yet whenever I broached the subject of loneliness people often assumed it was women who expressed loneliness more so than men. In reality, several brothers expressed emotional desires,
albeit without using the word “lonely.” When I asked one African-American brother “Do you ever get lonely?” he responded, “Yeah, we all do. Everyone has needs; it’s not only about sex with us guys.” The issue seemed to be more with word usage than meaning.

One of the reasons men in this study may not have used the word “lonely” is that it is not socially acceptable for men to desire a real emotional attachment or to display their emotions at all. Petrie writes, “One of the roles men play is that of the rational being devoid of strong emotions. Profound feelings, it is thought, will interfere with the male task, whether that means making it at the nine-to-five or making it at war” (Petrie 1982). In our society, tenderness and expressions of companionship are often seen as signs of weakness. Accordingly, the men in this study often used other phrases to describe their feelings. I was much more likely to hear statements like “Yes, I’m really ready to get married and start a family” more than “I’m lonely.”

Creating an active social life can loosen the focus on marriage and help Muslim young adults cope with the loneliness. Some like Fatima, a Pakistani-American student throw themselves into school, work or other busy activities to keep their minds off of their single status. In an online chat she explained, “that’s why I love being a grad student. You get so busy you can forget ...(plus) a lot of us try to make ourselves feel better by having large circle of friends so that at least we have somebody 😊.” But even with tons of great friends, Fatima revealed that she sometimes gets those “lonely moments.”

From the outside, Muslim singles can appear to have it all - great jobs, clothes, friends..but often deep down there lies a longing for something more. Though many are willing to delay marriage, they still feel robbed of the love, intimate touch and joy that a meaningful relationship can bring.
Dear Bilqis, I am a 17 year old Muslima. I always try to follow the religion of Islam. It is the month of Ramadan right now, and lately I just feel like I really really want to get married. I feel like I’m getting tortured or something because I am not married yet. I do know I am young, but there have been times where I have had dreams or visions where they kind of gave me good tidings. Those cheer me up a bit, but I dont know what to do. I definitely dont want a boyfriend or any haram relationship but I’m so confused I dont know what to do. Can you help me? Qudsia from USA Reprinted from a marriage post on www.zawaj.com

The above online post on a Muslim matrimonial site illustrates Robert Dannin’s statement “the institution of Muslim marriage has been a source of confusion in the United States.” My findings show that that is an understatement. When asked, Muslims first describe courtship and marriage within the ideal Islamic setting: “Premarital sex is not allowed in Islam,” or “boys and girls are not allowed to be alone together without a chaperone.” However, when probed, almost every participant in this study spoke of examples or experiences that contradict that ideal. For example, during one conversation with Lisa, a 22-year old White convert, it was not until I asked specific questions regarding her activities with her fiancé that she moved from stating “it is wrong to be alone with a male” to describing a typical outing with her and her fiancé going to the movies unaccompanied. When asked if her behavior could be categorized as dating, she hesitated and said “Well, I don’t really have any choice, my family is not Muslim and his family is not here in the country.”

I can understand Lisa’s hesitation. Other than to God, there is no confession in Islam and it is very difficult for Muslims to admit to a researcher that they have sinned (according to Islam) – whether by going out with someone of the opposite sex or having committed fornication. Many are worried they will be labeled a “bad” Muslim. The Muslim community understands “unIslamic” actions before being Muslim. However, once accepting Islam, all of that behavior was to have ceased. Muslims are no longer afforded the ability to speak without reservation about experiences which go against
Islam. Post-conversion and post-declaration (for born Muslims) temptation was to have been met and defeated with strong faith.

So Muslims do indeed date. So why the taboo? Well, because an often quoted hadith of the Prophet Muhammad states that whenever a man and a woman are alone together, Shaitan (Satan) is the third person. Embedded in the gender separation that many Muslims practice is the attitude or belief that humans are highly physical beings and that our physical needs can overtake our ethos or our psychological understandings.

In other words, sex is a powerful force in human action. Elijah, a 30-something African American states,

It's (a friendship with the opposite sex) is obviously looked down upon due to the risk of potential mistakes. Even if people do not intend to develop feelings for one another, they can after a time and it can lead to people committing actions that they should not commit. Aside from obvious sins like adultery or fornication, it can also introduce doubts and the habits of sinning, which can have further ramifications for people.

The following question posted on a public website highlights a similar view. Though the question is from a teenager, the dilemma raised could easily affect one of my informants. The response, given by what appears to be a somewhat traditional conservative Muslim, is the type of advice young Muslims are often given in response to their desires.

Question: I am 15 years old. I feel that I am a fairly religious person and try to pray five times a day. I respect and honor you and your teachings of Islam. That is why I need your advice. I must admit that I kind of have a girlfriend at school that I like very much. She is oriental. I know I shouldn't have a girlfriend but it just happened, I didn't plan on it. She is 16 and neither did she. She has led a very bad life with several foster parents and physical and sexual advances. She cares for me very much and will almost do anything I say. My original goal was to make her Muslim but then I started liking her. No the Shaitan had nothing to do with this because I have prayed very long and hard for this to happen. My question is whether or not I should ask her to change her religion. I don't want her to do it because of me because she would not have real faith in her heart. I wish to leave my name anonymous. Please help.

Answer

I am pleased to know that you consider yourself a religious person and try to pray five times a day. It means that you want to obey Allah and His Prophet Muhammad - peace be upon him. If that is the case then you should not have a girlfriend. It is
not allowed for a Muslim boy to have girlfriend or for a Muslim girl to have a boyfriend. Howsoever pure your intentions may be, the danger is that it will lead you to sin. Or at least you will be alone with each other and spend more time together. The Prophet -peace be upon him- said that whenever a man and a woman who are not related to each other as Mahram meet alone, the Shaitan comes as a third person in their midst. You should be friendly with your classmates, boys and girls both; but do not take a girl as your intimate friend. Of course, homosexuality is also forbidden in Islam. So do not take a boy either as your intimate friend in the "gay sense" of the word.

If your friend, not girlfriend, is interested in Islam, by all means help her to become Muslim. Give her the Islamic books and ask her to attend Islamic meetings and lectures. Let her accept Islam by her own will. Do not force her or put any pressure on her to become Muslim. You are still very young. I suggest that you give more time to your studies now. Do not worry too much to go out of your ways to show sympathies to other females. May Allah bless you and keep you on the right path.

The example above illustrates the complexity of the ambivalence of Muslim youth and young adults concerning romantic feelings and the common response from the adult community. Most often, the feelings of the young person are simply pushed aside and the individual is expected to simply “focus on school”. Because their feelings are not validated, many chose to simply live their lives in private like Ali and Tahira or may choose to leave Islam fully.

Like Lisa, many others are looking for solutions to the issue of male/female relationships. Asma Gull Hasan (2000) recounts an online discussion in which a man “seemed to suggest that American Muslims needed to come up with solutions to the problem of what young Muslims should do who are not being allowed to date because of Islamic traditions, yet are not marrying at a young age. Was there any room for dating in American Islam?” (Hasan 2000:125) When I posed this question to Eric, 26 he responded,

I think everything is really about intentions. So you can shake hands, hug, do all types of stuff. Anything that has a non-suggestive connotation to society, meaning suggesting a sexual interest. I do think dating is helpful for some people. Too many times we set our selves up for failure in the society because we try to adopt exotic or non-indigenous gender interaction norms. But then at the same time we want to get married and our chief complaint is ‘I want to get to know the person but what do I do?’ so that always poses the question, ‘How do you get to know somebody without doing the quote/unquote “haram”? ’ and so is our plight. I think if two families say that ok, yall can see each other but just know
down the line y'all better have something going on, I think it's fine. I mean people do it anyway, like talking on the internet. So this way you could involve the family. Talk to your mom about her and stuff like that.

For Eric’s suggestions to take root, the stigma on male/female relationships would first have to be removed. His discussion also leads me to a point of clarification. Though most Muslims agree that dating in the sense of a woman and man going out alone is prohibited, the rules do vary with dating in the sense of getting to know someone for the purpose of marriage. In fact, there has recently been an explosion of the usage of the term “intended” to signify two people are planning to marry. They may or may not be formally engaged, but their intentions should be to see if they are compatible for marriage. Depending on the family, dating rules are sometimes relaxed during this “intended” stage. Still overall, the predominate view is that dating should be either prohibited or limited because it can lead to sex, a belief substantiated by several studies (e.g. Thornton 1995).

Sex and the Single Muslim

So does sex lead to dating? Clearly single Muslims do not live in a protected, asexualized bubble. As Holland and Eisenhart (1990) argue, even college campuses support the sex culture, something I recently realized while working in the university computer lab. In the lab’s restroom, I was shocked to discover a condom vending machine. I had seen tampons and other feminine products being sold for $1.00, but not condoms in a university computer lab. To me, the message conveyed to students is “sex is always just around the corner, here’s a condom.” While some argue that condom machines promote safe sex and reduce unwanted pregnancies, abstinence does also. However, signs promoting abstinence on college campuses are often absent - perhaps because sex, not abstinence sells in our economy.
So, how are young Muslims negotiating these types of environments? Are they having sex in large numbers? Well, most informants were comfortable expressing a desire for physical intimacy – one of the benefits of Muslim marriage. Though I did not ask, about 30% of my informants mentioned whether or not they were virgins. Of them, thoroughly half were virgins and half were not. But Nailah, who is saving herself for God and marriage, believes prolonged virginity is unnatural.

I have hormones. It's serious. I feel like my body is like, we need to make a baby soon. Or at least see the possibility. But it's not only about having kids because I don't want to have kids immediately. But, I do feel a way about it when I am with my friends and relatives who have little children and husbands. It's like - that's really nice [...] Because virginity is not supposed to last for decades. And then the people who are out having sex, probably don't feel rushed (to get married) because what does marriage have to offer that would make them rush? I think we are denying ourselves of our own humanity.

During college Nailah was able to resist the urge to engage in sex (partly by limiting relationships), but as she grew older her physical desires coupled with emotional desires and loneliness have become a source of pain. She believes many of her friends feel the same. When I asked her if she thought many brothers were in her position, she replied, “hmm, it's hard out there for the brothers.” Like Nailah, many women informants assumed that Muslim brothers experiment with sex prior to marriage at a much higher rate that the sisters.

However, contrary to popular belief, virgin Muslim men do exist. While they often find resisting the sex culture a struggle, they would never think of stepping outside of the boundaries of Islam. For example, Adel is a 23-year-old recently married African-American man. Prior to getting married, he had never had a girlfriend. For him, removing the opportunity was key to his success.

I think it was partly because of my upbringing. I mean I really just believe it is wrong. But I also just didn't have the opportunity. I never dated nor had a girlfriend. I mean if the opportunity is available, nine times out of ten someone is gonna take it.
Though dating may indeed offer the opportunity to have sex, it appears that for most people, the decision to have or not to have sex is more connected to the level of integration in Islam. The more someone identifies with a Muslim identity, the less likely they are to engage in pre-marital sexual behavior. Sure, the temptation may arise, but many feel the love of their Muslim identity and Islam trumps that desire. However, for others, the definition of fornication is limited to intercourse only. So what does sex mean?

**Promiscuous virgins**

In many cultures around the world, virginity is a requirement for marriage. Of course the burden of proof has always been placed on women. For example, in India, Pakistan and parts of Africa, a new bride may bring out the bloodied sheet to prove her virginity. Naturally, many immigrant American Muslims hold the same cultural values here in the United States and have passed them on to their children. A few sisters mentioned while growing up they were sometimes afraid of breaking their hymens and as a result, limited activities like riding bikes and other sports. I also discovered a shocking trend; some European Muslim women have sexual intercourse and then have a surgery to repair their hymens prior to their wedding date. A newspaper article quoted a cosmetic surgeon who performs the surgery, “If you’re a Muslim woman growing up in more open societies in Europe, you can easily end up having sex before marriage. So if you’re looking to marry a Muslim and don’t want to have problems, you’ll try to recapture your virginity” (Sciolino and Mekhennet 2008). Clearly, in this case, the reasoning behind the repair is for more social and cultural reasons rather than religious reasons. The doctor’s statement suggests that individuals have no will power and that they are easily taken over by society.
While a discussion about hymens was not a major theme of this study, a discussion of what it means to be a virgin is. For some informants, virginity applies to sexual intercourse only and did not include outercourse or other sexual activities. One informant indicated that she has “received a few favors in her day,” (namely oral sex) but she has never *had* sex (intercourse). Often people engaged with the peer sexual culture by engaging in sexual activities but stopping shy of actual intercourse, effectively protecting their virginity. For example, to abstain from sexual intercourse, some Muslim young men turn to pornography and masturbation to release their sexual tensions.

Obviously, a pornography addiction is a sensitive subject that I did not attempt to investigate. However, one brother, a college junior, did in fact discuss his struggle with a pornography addiction (something he believes is quite common among other men). Though he tried to stop over the years, he has only recently been able to reduce his time on the internet. Armed with his revelation and out of curiosity, I conducted a brief investigation into pornography addictions and Muslims. I discovered that SoundVision, a popular website among American Muslims, publishes both a “12-step guide to fight pornography addiction” as well as a “29 tips for teens struggling with an addiction to pornography” page. Some of the tips include,

Tip #2: Surf the Web or Watch T.V. When Others are Around
Tip #3: Remember Allah is Watching You
Tip #4: If It Happens, Seek Forgiveness & Don’t Insist on doing it
Tip #5: Just get up and leave
Tip #9: Avoid those involved in pornography
Tip #10: Avoid things that lead to sin
Tip #11: Develop a More Productive Schedule
Tip #17: Look for alternative entertainment

Some single Muslim men also use masturbation in order to resist having “real” sex. However, Muslims are taught that masturbation is not acceptable in Islam. Like other secret habits, these behaviors often become a source of shame and guilt for many
people. Further, sensitive subjects like these are not easy to discuss and as a result, individuals tend to deal with these on their own.

Suppressing the Desire

After “get married,” the most common advice given to Muslim young adults regarding the desire for physical intimacy is follow the hadith, "Young men, those of you who can support a wife should marry, for it keeps you from looking at women and preserves your chastity; but those who cannot should fast, for it is a means of cooling passion" (Prophet Muhammad in Bukhari). Of course, this fast would also involve an increase in prayer and spiritual reflection. However, many find this solution to lack effectiveness. One male informant stated, “All they say is fast, fast, fast. Man I would be fasting every dang ole day! How is that gonna work?” Another said, “Fasting? Yeah, but that doesn’t really work in my opinion, that hunger doesn’t die easily.”

When I raised the topic of pre-marital sex and natural desires during an impromptu discussion at a masjid I visited, one brother, a Tunisian immigrant in his 40’s related a story that goes along with “Tip #19: Remember your mom and sister” from SoundVision’s tips for teens dealing with pornography addictions.

A youth approached the Prophet and asked him to permit him to commit zina (fornication). The companions of the Prophet were outraged, and rebuked him, but the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) asked him to draw closer and sit before him. He asked, “Would you accept this from your mother?” to which the man replied “Certainly not, who could accept this from his mother?” The Prophet went on to ask him, “Would you accept this from your daughter, your sister, or your aunt?” to which the man repeated the same answer “Certainly not, who could accept this?” So the Prophet put his hand on his chest and said “Oh God, forgive his sins, purify his heart, and safeguard his chastity”. The youth left so repulsed that the desire left him.

Brother Muhammad followed the story with his own advice, “We have to tell them it’s wrong. It is wrong and a grave sin. Abstinence is the key.” Although everyone in the group agreed with Brother Muhammad, they were looking for real world solutions. Naim,
an African American convert age 28 added, “Everybody knows that it’s wrong, that’s not
the question. The question is what are we going to do in response? People need real
life solutions, not just holy words.” Naim feels that Muslims should not only recognize
that physical desires are natural, but that there are real life tactics to quell the desires.

Elijah, a professor in his mid-30s suggested,

The best way is to obviously GET MARRIED! But if they cannot, then aside from
fasting there are many mental and physical disciplines one can adopt to combat
the urges and desires when one is single. Serious intellectual or academic
endeavors combined with a strong study/practice of spirituality can be quite
formidable. Exercise and physical rigor are also great ways to alleviate the stress
of strong carnal desires.

When Muslims give the advice “get married”, they take for granted that getting
married is not a 1-day process. In fact, this entire study is based on the difficulties in
ending unwanted singledhood. Not only must individuals find a spouse, they must find
the right spouse.

**Reason # 3: Everyone is Pressuring me to Get Married**

While carpooling to a Muslim conference in Chicago with a few Muslim sisters,
recently married Nicole told a hilarious story about a woman, whom she was only faintly
familiar with, but would regularly inquire about her marital status. Nicole retold, “I mean
she would literally climb over stuff, people, whatever was in her way to come up to me
and ask, ‘Excuse me, is you Maaaarried?’” Nicole held the word married for a good four
seconds with extra emphasis on the ending consonant d. As she told her story, we all
laughed at the audacity of this woman! Nicole could look back at it with humor, but she
remembered how hurt and disrespected she felt when the woman would ask her that
question. It was as if her single status was a weakness, something for people to point
out to others. Though this experience was obviously a bit extreme, we all laughed, both at Nicole’s comical retelling, but also because on some level we all had similar stories.

Family members and community members like the woman in Nicole’s story who consistently inquire about someone’s marital status cause a lot of unwanted mental stress and to put it bluntly, single Muslims are tired of it! One young man recounted, “My parents keep trying to get me married off, they wonder what’s wrong with me.” Another stated, “I’m tired of hearing ‘Oh wow, you’re still single? But you’re so nice. Isn’t there anyone in your area?’” One sister said, “I hate it. I come to the masjid and this sister is like ‘oh, are you married?’ When I said ‘NO’ she cocked her head to the side and sighed, ‘aww, that’s too bad’ …I mean come on…. nobody wants to hear that all the time!”

The Muslim young adults like Nicole who grew up in a family or culture that places a high value on marriage and children often feel conflict around their single status, especially post-college. In response to these types of experiences, single Muslims have begun to bind together in support groups. One group on Facebook, the social networking site is named Happily Single in the Muslim Community (HSMC). They list themselves as “A network advocating for equality and respect for single and/or unmarried Muslims, promoting their meaningful representation and participation in American Muslim communities, organizations, and Islamic Centers.” The group serves as a place where Muslims who are in a period in life where they “do not desire considering marriage can find affirmation and support for their temporary choice of a single lifestyle.” Several member posts highlight the persistent, unwanted marital pressure.

Salaam (greeting of peace)! How tired we all get of the question, “When are YOU getting married?” Akhe (brother), since my younger cousin got married my aunt always brings it up when I talk to her on the phone. I think this group is great. Personally, I am currently single by choice because this is just a bad time for me to get into a partnership. But whether someone has a partner or not shouldn’t open them up to criticism, ostracism, or less respect. (Facebook Post #1 from brother)
Another post reads,

My family is in a panic that I'm not married yet. Especially since my younger sister, and three younger cousins are married. It really is not in my control. A good guy is hard to find :-( (sad face) And I'm in no rush :) (happy face) Whatever happened to having faith in Allah that everything will work out for the best? (Facebook Post #2 from sister)

You may ask if singlehood is a natural state of being, what causes a shift from family, friends and society accepting singlehood as normal, to deeming it negatively? Everyone is born single and naturally must remain single for at least some part of their lives, right? Well, one answer is age. The most socially acceptable marital age appears to be early 20's for women and mid-to-late 20's for men. Every year past that ideal range exposes a young Muslim to increased family and community pressure. Fatima describes how her family and community feel about the ideal marital age.

I think if you’re single and say near your thirties, people talk and wonder why you’re not married yet. Even my mom has said ideally she wants me engaged by the time I’m 25 (laughing). And it’s just in our [conservative Pakistani] communities with girls as young as 17, 18 getting married you are sending a message that marriage is very important, even more than education. You know the trend is still to marry young (in our community). So if you’re older and not married you’re different, you’re not following the normal pattern. So don’t we usually associate anything different as a bit strange and wrong, no 😞

And then there’s the guys! They’re the worst! They reinforce this idea of “ideal age to marry”. The first guy my parents set me up with said that. I think I must have expressed that I wasn’t sure if I was ready for marriage, felt young, etc, and he assured me (maybe he was trying to be nice but I didn’t take it like that) that 21 was when girls usually got married, it was perfect timing. But there really is no perfect timing... its whenever you’re ready and find the right guy.

Fatima also brought up gender differences. Many men in her community look for younger women, often passing over older women. Conversely, as young men in her community grow older, they are seen as more mature and stable, more “marriageable.”

Internalizing the Shame

Being single can begin to feel like being unemployed in a house where everyone else is working – it becomes a mark of devaluation. After a while, single Muslims learn
that to display their single status can invite the stigma of being perceived as desperate.
Answering questions like “So have you met anyone yet?” in the negative can be
humiliating. For example, when asked if she would ever attend a singles’ event, Nailah
responded,

I’ve never done that either. I have had issues about feeling ashamed to do that
sort of thing… embarrassment. I think I’m [almost] over it now but I was
ashamed to be single. To tell people I’m looking. To tell a guy I’m interested. A
lot of stupid stuff.

In this day and age of romantic movies and “falling in love,” American Muslim
young adults have been conditioned to believe that they will meet their soul mate in
some type of random fashion. Maybe in a class, perhaps at the grocery store, or maybe
at work. Then, after a period of time, they will marry this person and live happily ever
after. Unfortunately when that does not happen, they sometimes begin to imagine
certain personal defects like personality and/or physical flaws that may be preventing
them from achieving marriage. Am I pretty/handsome enough? Am I religious enough?
Do I have enough money? Am I doing enough to get a mate? In the end, many singles
see themselves as the reason for their prolonged singleness.

Why does something that seems so natural seem so hard for me in a way? I
think I focus a lot of energy on other things. But I’ll admit that I have not when it
comes to marriage. So I’m trying to reorient myself. …I’m just trying to be
prepared for the good that is ahead of me, marriage being high on that list.

Muslims’ desire for marriage is strong enough internally without the added
pressure from the community. But while singles often feel as if it is their ultimate goal to
get married, they also believe the Muslim community is not conducive to finding a
spouse. In particular, several informants point to the spatial gendering of Muslim spaces
as a major hurdle.
Reason # 4: I Don’t Know How to Talk to the Opposite Sex!

The only time we ever talked to Muslim girls while growing up were at the family or friend gatherings that our parents would organize, summer camp, Eid (Muslim Holiday). Not really at the masjid though. (Hakim, 28)

Walk into any masjid and one of the first things an outsider may notice is a separation of the sexes. While several studies including the works of Muslim feminists, have analyzed gendered space in relation to a differential of power between Muslim men and women (see McCloud, 1995; Ahmed 1992; Schmidt 2004; Rouse 2004), gender studies of Muslim space rarely highlight a differential of power between the parent generation and the younger generation. The parent generation is those who control the organization of the space. Yet the younger generation is often more accustomed to mixed-gender interaction. Overall, this section analyses the hegemonic practice of gender separation and the ways in which some Muslims resist this most salient mark of masjids.

Several of the Masjid leaders I spoke with roughly divide the physical setup of masjids into four categories:

I. **Total Separation** – Men and women enter through separate entrances as well as pray in separate prayer halls. Segregation extends into the communal spaces (halls, etc) as well as to any community event.

II. **Segregated Prayer with divider** – Men and women may or may not enter through the same door. They have separate prayer areas either delineated by a wall or other type of divider. While communal space is usually mixed, it usually includes spatial distance between men and women.

III. **Segregated Prayer without divider** - Men and women usually enter through the same main door and pray in one hall without any physical divider. Women continue to pray behind the men and communal space is also segregated.

IV. **Segregated Prayer without divider / Non-Segregated communal space.** Men and women enter through the same door, pray in one hall with no wall or other physical divider. Communal space is mixed with free intermingling.
Experiencing a Strictly Gendered Masjid

*Masjid* Al-Hakim is an example of a *masjid* with total separation. The sisters and brothers enter through separate doors and the two sides of the *masjid* are completely gender segregated. The *musala* (prayer hall) is separated by a wall of dark tinted glass and the women listen to the *khutbah* (prayer sermon) over the PA system. Personally, coming from a *masjid* in which cross-gender interaction is the norm, I initially found this *masjid*’s physical separation, which extends beyond prayer services and into the Islamic classes, dinners and social events, both physically and intellectually stifling. Though I could understand how separating the prayer may be more comfortable for women, especially those breastfeeding women for example, I could not understand why social functions, like dinners or lectures would be separated. My biases began to surface and I thought, “These same men and women who push for barriers in the *masjid* work in offices with members of the opposite sex, go to school and sit side by side with members of the opposite sex and shop at Meijer with members of the opposite sex. Why the seemingly hypocrisy?” But even more relevant to this study, I wondered how a single Muslim meet and interact with a potential spouse within this gendered space?

Later when I spoke with Salima, a second-generation Pakistani-American, I was given an ‘insider’s perspective’ of gender separation. In her view, many community pioneers attempted to recreate “back home” at the *masjid*. Salima shared, “I think they thought ‘if women don’t go to the *masjid* in Pakistan, why would we do anything different just because we’re now in the US?’ The thought never occurred to them that by moving to the United States, they should also change their customs.” Salima reminds us of an interesting point, American culture does not wash away the cultures of immigrants. Though immigrants may hybridize their behaviors, traces of their previous cultures remain.
However, Salima also raised another point, that the struggle of new immigrants to maintain their culture came with unexpected consequences. Firstly, many American Muslim women, including Salima’s mother are highly educated and integrated in the larger American community. Often, these women resist importing the cultural values of ‘back home’ to the U.S., which may not value their educational statuses (Haddad et al 2006). Secondly, many masjids are attended by both immigrants of other nations (see D’Alisera 2004) as well as indigenous Muslims whose cultural views may not always correspond to those of the predominate immigrant group: Pakistani-Indian and Arabs (see Turner 2003, Dannin 2002, Rouse 2004, Jackson 2005). Lastly, the parent generation neglected to predict how recreating ‘back home’ in America may adversely affect their children.

It appears that Salima and other informants raised in strictly gendered environments where it was taboo to be friends or to even converse with the opposite sex, often feel anxious, nervous or “weird” around Muslims of the opposite sex. She states, “I think a lot of us just didn’t know how to talk to the Muslim boys, I mean we weren’t really allowed to even sit by them and they came in separate doors.” Salima is now post-college and works alongside men every day, yet she states she still has some ambivalence around Muslim males (except the few she interacted with at college). Moving between masjids and sometimes Islamic schools which follow a strict gendering of space and public schools, libraries and universities where mixed-gender interaction is normative often facilitated strong relationships with non-Muslims. As Tahira states, a young Muslim woman may not be able to talk with “Muhammad” freely at the masjid, but she can talk to “John” at school all day long without any social consequences or taboo.

Brothers described the same problem. Nazir, a self-described semi-conservative Pakistani-American explains, “I have a harder time talking to Muslim girls than I do with non-Muslim girls.” When I asked him to explain he continued, “I’ve been trained to
believe that talking to Muslims girls is wrong. If there's a Muslim girl around, you start hearing your parents and your Islamic school teacher.” The Islamic spaces Nazir traversed socially regulated mixed-gender interaction – basically it didn't exist. In order to position oneself as a “good” Muslim and to receive social acceptance, members of the Muslim community often times follow these gender prescriptions whether they agree with them or not.

The practice of gender separation has both Islamic and cultural origins. Many Muslims point out that in the Qur'an, the Prophet Muhammad's (pbuh) wives were commanded to not interact with general society. Further, because the Prophet (saw) wives are seen as an example for Muslim women as a whole, many Muslims feel that the directive should extend to all women.

O wives of the Prophet! You are not like any of the other women. If you fear God, do not be complaisant in speech so that one in whose heart is a sickness may covet you, but speak honorably. Stay quietly in your homes and do not display your finery as the pagans of old did.”

“And when you ask (his wives) for anything you want, ask them from before a screen. That makes for greater purity for your hearts and for theirs.” (Quran 33:32-33 & 53).

The practice of gender segregation is also tied to the concept of sexual desires between men and women. As I previously mentioned, social interaction, mixing and intermingling between unrelated men and women is regarded as potentially leading to immoral sexual activity. Temptations and desires may arise and because Islam prohibits extramarital sex, some Muslims believe that unrelated men and women should have no contact with each other. Lastly, the practice is often cultural rather than religious in nature. As Mirza put it, “Most Pakistani's regardless of religion are against things like dating and kissing.”

Whatever the reasons behind the prohibition on mixed-gender interactions, several young Muslims have internalized feelings of guilt and ambivalence surrounding
interactions with the opposite sex, Muslims in particular. Many find there is a learning curve upon entering a new masjid and some time must be spent just getting to know the culture of the space. The “rules” for appropriate interaction between men and women not only vary between masjids, but also between various cultures. For example, Suliman, 25, is a grad student now living in an area with a small Muslim community. He is the only African-American at predominately immigrant masjid and he happens to hold divergent opinions of gender separation. He says, “It can be awkward because you don't know the proper greetings or how to properly address the opposite sex... some are and (some) are not okay with talking or looking at each other.”

These circumstances certainly lead many men and women to adopt the strategy of no-conversation. Rather than engaging in a conversation that may later be deemed “unIslamic” or inappropriate, many simple chose to remain in single gender interactions in the masjids. But often, many Muslim sisters interpret brothers’ actions and avoidance as disrespect. These sisters describe feeling angry when they see the same Muslim brothers who do not speak to them on campus freely conversing with non-Muslim women. “Why don’t they talk to us, it's like they are ashamed of us or something” said Kelly, a While American 27. The following excerpt from Jamilah Karim’s article on the construction of American Muslim identities includes an interesting retelling of a gender relations workshop held at a Muslim young adult conference. One of the questions raised was a common point of Muslim women in this study. “Why does it seem that Muslim men are afraid of Muslim women or that Muslim women are somehow not good enough for them?” (Karim 2005:506).

A male panelist answered, “Fortunately, I don’t feel like that. Alhamdulillah (praise be to God) my wife is Muslim. I don’t see why anyone would feel like that.” However, a female panelist had a different opinion, “My husband is not Muslim. I wanted to marry a Muslim, but brothers in this community would not approach me at all. I know scores and scores of sisters who are educated, financially established, firmly rooted in their Islam, but brothers are reluctant to approach them.” One brother tried to give the brothers’ side: “We have been
raised to respect Muslim women, and we are afraid of approaching them in an improper way. A lot of times we just don’t know how to approach.” A male audience member added, “It’s easier to approach Christian women because they will do certain things that a Muslim woman wouldn’t. A Christian girl would probably go to all kinds of places with you, but with a Muslim girl, you would have to have another person with you because they say Satan is the third party if a man and woman are alone. A woman sharply rejoined, “Why are you approaching them differently? She is still a woman. I don’t care what religion she is, she is also to be respected in the same manner. Why are you approaching the situation different if either is potentially supposed to be your mate?

Sakinah commented: “If brothers don’t know how to approach sisters, why not have someone else, perhaps a parent or an imam, approach them on your behalf? Islamically, to maintain a sense of respect and dignity, a brother should approach her wali (usually a male family member who acts as an initial mediator between a woman and a potential partner, counseling the woman on whether the interested party meets her requirements). Also, a sister can make the first move and have her wali approach a brother on her behalf” (Karim 2005:505-506).

Informants of this study raised several of the same points as those in Karim’s workshop. They feel that while they have been told what not to do, i.e. date or have premarital sex, they have not been told what to do. For example, is it ok to approach a man if you are interested in him? Should you use an intermediary or is personal contact ok? But again this would preclude individuals having a chance to interact. If young Muslims are often too scared or nervous to talk to each other about non-personal matters, talking to someone for the purpose of marriage is even more difficult. But several Muslims are working to change this environment.

**Redefining Gender Interactions**

Many Muslim young adults do not wish to continue the gendered practices of their parents. Isam, an Indian-American, who is accustomed to mixed-gender interactions understands his parents’ cultural values regarding a separation of the sexes, but is still hopeful for change in his Muslim community. “They (parent generation) will never let go. The only way change will come is when they die and we take over (laughing)” Isam, 24. Though it may sound harsh to speak of the eminent deaths of
parents, Isam uses humor to express his frustration over a masjid culture he believes does not foster community. As for now, many single Muslims are hybridizing gender interaction rules by crafting new spaces in order to build understanding and mutual respect between both Muslim men and women.

Many of these new environments begin in college, a space where gender interaction is no longer taboo. In particular, Muslim Students Associations (MSAs) often serve as alternate locations for gender interaction amongst Muslim young adults (Schmidt 2004). Growing from just 75 students in 1963, the MSA now boasts of hundreds of chapters in North America (www.msa-natl.org). Naturally, MSA’s treat gender relations in a variety of ways with some more strict than others. Still for Muslim young adults who grew up in gender separated Muslim communities, MSAs that do not practice the same level of separation afford the first opportunity to freely interact with Muslims of the opposite sex.

In California, I had the opportunity to befriend two members of an ethnically diverse MSA chapter. Every Friday night about 10-12 active members hold a halaqa (Islamic study circle). Beginning at 7pm, the halaqa, taught by the host (an Arab graduate student) lasts from 1-2 hours. After the lesson the group usually orders pizza, socialize and philosophize until roughly 1:00 or 2:00 a.m.. When I asked one member for his thoughts on the late hour, he responded, “At least we’re socializing with other Muslims and not out at the club!”

During the lesson, men and women tend to sit on different sides of the carpeted floor but after the lesson, everyone is free to mingle and talk. The air is one of familiarity, with lots of teasing and practical joking and the members see themselves as true friends. Though not their primary goal, they also see the MSA as a great place to find a Muslim spouse. They could watch and observe someone’s manners in a relaxed Muslim environment. I know of several couples that have grown out of MSA environments.
College also provided an opportunity for Nailah to meet Muslims of the opposite sex. Growing up, she did not have any Muslim male friends and did not have a real encounter with Muslim brothers until she was a freshman at Xavier, a Louisianan university.

I was walking around at this restaurant. These two brothers from the MSA gave me salaams and one offered me some of his Belgian waffle. [laughing] Over the years, they became some of my closest friends.

Nailah is now 27 and based on her college experiences, her attitudes regarding gender separation have changed.

We don’t follow those rules anymore, the whole ‘don’t talk to brothers.’ I can be at a gathering with non-Muslim men and women and we’re talking about things so why shouldn’t I do that with Muslim men and women. So I think it’s hypocritical, and why should I do that? So if we want to have Muslim men over and we talk and get to know each other then that’s what we do. We’re creating bonds.

Nailah and her Muslim friends (male and female), now get together at each others’ homes on a regular basis. However, Nailah feels it is unfortunate this group has yet to result in a marriage. According to her, their common singleness is still the “pink elephant in the room.” She explains that often the friends do not want to “ruin what we have going by talking to someone. What if it doesn’t work out?”

Mixed-Gender Conversations Should be “Strictly Business”

Not all young Muslims fight for interaction or agree that men and women can be “buddies.” For Layla, a Pakistani American, personal experience has shown that ‘weird’ feelings can also occur when you get too close. While on a study abroad in the Middle East, she became friends with two American Muslim brothers and another Muslim sister (who was comfortable with gender interaction). One of the young men, Israel, a real “Indiana Jones”, proposed they all take a trip to Palestine, something that would normally fall outside of Layla’s comfort zone.
We were there for two weeks, staying with people and in random hostels. ... I think I decided I wouldn't let the whole gender thing hold me back from such an amazing opportunity. I just tried to keep it halaal (permissible) as much as I possibly could. [laughing] We got very close because we were all starving together or being held at gun point by the Israelis so it was one of those experiences you never forget, the checkpoints are soooo scary.

The four college students continued their friendship throughout their study abroad. Now back home and once again in a gendered Muslim environment, Layla has a few regrets and wonders if the trip was a bad idea.

I don’t necessarily agree with the way I treated them (as brothers). They were too familiar with me, I think I should have just keep it business with guys, not necessarily have a heart attack, but just be cool about it and assertive. I mean I know it’s ok to joke once in a while but I acted like Dave and Israel were my BUDDIES [laughing], I basically treated them like my girlfriends, I should have calmed down a little. Cause I think that in Islam there are certain ways of dealing with guys. I dunno Zarinah, you just have to see the way I talk to my very best friends. I'm always cracking jokes and saying dumb things. I think in Islam you’re supposed to keep it business like, get what you need and then get out of there.

Layla is not alone. Some informants never really analyzed the way some masjids are organized by gender. For example, Nazir, who grew up in Masjid Al-Hakim, the strictly gendered masjid stated, “I guess I just never said to myself Gee, I wish there were sisters at this [masjid] dinner. I never really paid any attention to it. But I guess if there was some type of community event, maybe (gender integration) would be more important.” Nazir simply accepted the atmosphere as “the way it is” and did not think of changing it.

For Fatima, the lines between appropriate and inappropriate behaviors are also more blurred. Though she feels like hanging out with boys in group settings is ok, she still believes women should not hang out with non-mahram (men she could legally marry) alone. She states, “You’re supposed to have respectful professional relationships with your male colleagues and friends.” Now that Fatima is older and in college, the definition of “respectful” has changed. She is very in-tune with her religious boundaries and does not try to cross them. Her parents seem to have changed as well.
And of course now I can call up a guy or talk to them on MSN and it’s not weird because my personal beliefs and my personal line for what’s appropriate and how to act with boys is very close to my mother’s ideas and beliefs. So I don’t think it bothers her if I do call up a guy from school... maybe she’s liberated out a bit, maybe she sees me as a woman and not as a little girl who can do something foolish without thinking or knowing what the consequences will mean. I drive home guys to Chicago and stuff (from college) and my parents don’t seem to mind (which in my eyes is uncharacteristic with what we were taught as kids) but either they’ve changed, or the rules have changed or having someone drive you home is an exception. I guess the rules have changed... they have to a bit with time and needs.

Fatima and her mother trust her to do what’s “right.” But her story also indicates that the rules are fluid. Riding home in the car with a man may be a sin for some, but simply a free ride for others. Though the spectrum of mixed-gender interaction is wide, it appears that people at every point are experiencing some type of ambivalence.

**Reason # 5: I Need a B.A, Money and a Career Before I Get Married**

Most Muslim young adults want to get married at some point in their lives. However like everyone, the questions posed are, “When to get married? Who to marry? And how do I find that person?” Beginning with the first question of when to get married, education (for women and men), and money (for men) are the two most commonly quoted pre-requisites for Muslim young adults to seriously consider marriage. A third less common response would be personal development and/or career.

**Education**

Many parents see the value of having a college education in today’s economy and as such, the pursuit of education is seen as a justifiable reason to delay marriage. Thus for social and economic advancement, many Muslims delay marriage in favor of
completing at least a bachelors (and increasingly higher education degrees) - a trend also documented in studies of American singlehood (DePaulo 2006; Stein 1975). Take Nadia for example, who says, “I always knew I would get married after I finished my bachelors because that's what my parents always told me, so I never sat down and planned my wedding in my head. I (now) think more about life after marriage, which is so weird...how life would change.”

In another case, Layla’s parents were also pretty firm about “no marriage license without at least a bachelor’s degree (for both parties).” Though Layla’s family valued education, her sister Lameena tested their resolve when she decided to accept her boyfriend’s proposal. Sure, her boyfriend was socially acceptable to her parents (he was Muslim and South Asian), but her parents did not agree without them finishing school. Layla agrees that they made the right decision.

I agree with my parents. You should have a degree or at least be in some sort of a program so that you have some way of supporting yourself later on I wouldn’t want my daughters getting married right out of high school. And even with my sister I agree with my mom making her wait ... because she was just flopping around in college, trying on different fields/careers. I think it's good that she had to focus a bit and figure out what she wants to do (teach) and GET INTO a program before my parents take this seriously...it all depends on your situation ... how focused you can be, is school going to take you apart (different cities), will you be able to handle that?

Obviously, marriage does not automatically prevent an individual from attending and completing school. However, because marriage comes with particular responsibilities (tending to your spouse’s needs as well as your own), it involves extra energy that many parents feel may prevent the student from completing their degree. Another criticism of marriage for college students is that they may get pregnant and be forced to change their lifestyle which could make it difficult to finish school.

Interestingly, Muslim parents do not appear to evaluate the impact of dating and other relationships on schooling. As the literature on college students reveal, students are engaging in romantic relationships. Though they may not be married, college
students, including many Muslims, date, fool around and have sex. Even those who do not engage in these activities are often “mobbed by romance” and the culture of sex (Holland and Eisenhart 1990). Like marriage, dating and extra-marital sexual relationships can also capture the energy of students. As a result, many youth who want to get married but are told to wait by their parents believe the reasoning should change and often see early marriages as a solution to navigating the sex cultures. If married in college, they would not only be able to focus on school, but also able to engage in Islamically agreeable sexual activity.

**Money**

The second pre-requisite for marriage mostly pertains to Muslim men and it concerns the means to support and protect a wife. The Quran states,

> Men shall take full care of women with the bounties which Allah has bestowed more abundantly on the former than on the latter, and with what they may spend out of their possessions. (Qur’an 4:34)

A Muslim husband bears the financial responsibility for clothing, feeding and sheltering. The wife has no obligation to contribute to the family expenses unless she has the means and the desire to do so. According to Islamic law, this is a legally enforceable duty that is required for a period of time, even in the event of divorce. As a result, Muslim young men often must wait to get married until they have the means to support their wife. A typical undergraduate income living on student loans would not be able to bear this responsibility. For example, Ali thought he would get married at age 23. However when that time came, neither his financial status nor marriage mentality were ready for a wife. He also blames Muslim women’s material requirements.

Most Muslim girls, man the standards are high... I was hanging around a bunch of Muslim women and they seemed like they wanted a perfect man. Which I am obviously not.... Who knows (what the perfect man is). I know Muslim girls are hella materialistic so you have to have a lot of money to even think about it. Especially these urban college educated women. They have standards of living.
their parents gave them. They have been coddled so it's intimidating. I am being honest. It's hard to figure out how to buy a house, a car, etc...and stay in a city that has some soul. If I marry one of these younger sisters that has been "raised right" then I have to have a HUGE bank account. And they are so rigid! Islamically, life experience wise. I feel like I could not be my full self...they want some virgin man... some moneyed man.... someone that will do what they say as well. In many ways they are as bought into the feminist ethic as non-Muslim women.

Whether realistic or not, Ali certainly felt that without money, marriage to a Muslim woman would be impossible. While Ali's view of women is correct in some cases, most Muslim women do not expect a mansion with marriage. In fact, they often focus on the characteristics and potential of the man versus his bank account. As we shall later, money may not be the huge obstacle, young men think it is.

While Mirza is not as critical of Muslim women as Ali, money has also served as the major obstacle in his fulfilling his dream of getting married.

Of course (I want to get married). I feel like I've been ready for a while but there are sometimes obstacles that get in the way of this readiness. For example, I knew I couldn't actually get married in college because I wouldn't want to rely on my parents financially. So I thought if I could get a good financial aid package and a TA job in grad school, then I could support a wife, that was the plan.

Career

The third pre-requisite is related to both education and economics, and concerns more personal ambitions. Increasingly, young Muslims are delaying marriage in order to become settled in their careers. Marriage is often seen as the old "ball and chain" And individuals should do as much "fun" stuff as they can before marrying. When I asked Nailah why many Muslims delay marriage she responded,

I think we have gotten caught up in the material things in this world and have become selfish. I think we have figured that marriage is a hindrance so we have to do as much as possible before getting married, so it will be less likely that marriage can ruin our plans. ... and as Muslims, if you think u can hold on to your chastity for long enough then marriage is not too pressing. But then we are fooling ourselves.
Nadirah, the young lady who has not yet decided if she will be Muslim or not, is an example of Nailah’s statement. She has decided that there is too much she wants to do right now to be concerned with marriage.

I want to get comfortable in my new life first...I want to move and start my career...I don’t need extra baggage. I want to get married around 26. Well actually nowadays relationships are as close as u can get to marriage (laughing)

I asked Nadirah to explain what she means about relationships being close to marriage. She responded, “People do the same things in a relationship as if they were married. That’s why a lot of men just wanna shack up (laughing). Why buy the cow if u can get the milk for free?” Nadirah’s statement reiterates literature which highlights the decline of marriage in response to the wide availability of activities (sex and economic freedom) which were once classified as “marital behaviors” (Stein 1975; DePaulo 2006).

Others like Hakim, an African-American male, want to delay their marriages until they have completed their Islamic studies and completed hajj. He feels like a wife may detract him from accomplishing those goals. But for those who have a degree, money and career, there is still one thing they must do before they can get married. That is to find a spouse.

\textbf{Reason # 6: I Don’t Know What Kind of Person to Marry!}

Well marriage is something that I’ve sort of been looking forward to for a while now. I mean people make all sorts of plans but what ends up happening is by the will of Allah... you know as they say man proposes and God disposes. [...] so to be honest, my plan was to already be married once I started grad school. I had these lofty visions of being a married grad student and thought how cool that would be... just supporting each other as a young couple, only one problem.... I didn’t find the girl lol. So you know, although I’m kind of anxious, I’ve sort of come to grips with reality. (Mirza, 22)

The quote from Mirza above indicates how many of my respondents felt. They were ready to marry but were not able to find a spouse. While Islam itself provides
guidance on how to choose a spouse, I have not seen specific prescription on how to find that person. The Prophet Muhammad is reported to have said, “Men choose women for four reasons: for their money, for their rank, for their beauty and for their religious character. So marry one who is best in religion and you will succeed” (Bukhari, Muslim). Muslims (men and women) are encouraged to consider a mate’s religiosity first, and other qualities second. Also, the Quran states, "Women of purity are for men of purity, and men of purity are for women of purity" (Quran 24:26), indicating that virgins should marry other virgins. Other verses pertain to religious requirements. The following verse is often interpreted to mean that Muslim men are able to marry Muslim women as well as “people of the book,” most commonly described as Christians and Jews.

.... Also, you may marry the chaste women among the believers, as well as the chaste women among the followers of previous scripture, provided you pay them their due dowries. You shall maintain chastity, not committing adultery, nor taking secret lovers. Anyone who rejects faith, all his work will be in vain, and in the Hereafter he will be with the losers. (Quran 5:5)

The predominant view regarding spousal selection for women is that Muslim women should marry Muslim men only based on the following verse,

... and give not your daughters in marriage to idolaters till they believe, for a believing slave is better than an idolater though he please you. These invite unto the Fire, and Allah invite you unto the Garden, and unto forgiveness by His grace, and expound His revelations to mankind that haply they may remember. (Quran 2:221)

Although lately there is some dissension amongst Muslims in reference to the correct interpretation of this verse, the popular view remains that marriage amongst Muslim women and non-Muslim men is haram (not permissible).

Though those are the most commonly understood Islamic prescriptions on marriage, naturally every individual has personal preferences in regards to appearance, personality and family background. Next, I explore some of the responses given in regards to what single Muslim men and women are looking for in a spouse.
What a Muslim Man Desires In a Wife

Muslim men, like all men and women have varied mate preferences, likes and dislikes in regards to mate preferences. While it is Islamically and socially acceptable for Muslim men to marry non-Muslim women, all of my informants stated they prefer to marry Muslim women. Mirza is actively searching for his mate and has contemplated marriage for several years. He is very clear about the type of young Muslima (Muslim woman) he would like to marry.

Fundamentally, I'm looking for a partner in the path towards paradise - in other words, a sister whose number one priority in life is Islam. A practicing muslima who is in tune with her purpose in life and is zealous about following her faith and someone who tries to implement the Qur'an and Sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) in everyday life. I prefer someone who wears hijab. Beyond that, I guess I have a bunch of secondary preferences (doesn't everybody?) ... I prefer someone who is down to earth and easy to talk to. Also someone who likes to discuss Islam, someone with good character and a sense of humor too!

Though Nazir, also a Pakistani-American begins his list with more physical attributes, he too desires a Muslim woman.

Well I'd like to be physically attracted to her. I know that sounds shallow, and in the long run it doesn't matter, but for me it's important. Which doesn't mean she has to be a supermodel or anything, I just have to be attracted to her, even if everybody else in the world thinks she's hideous. Second is I want her to be a pious woman. I'd like her to be religious and I'd also like to get to a point where my first priority is her piety and everything else secondary. Unfortunately I'm not at that point yet. And if she can cook, that's a huge plus because the only thing I can make is pasta (laughing).

For Ali, the young man who went through a major spiritual transformation, the choice is not that simple.

I've been looking for what I call a Doomsday Girl. A woman that when the world is ending, I do not want to be anywhere else. She needs to be adept in the country and the city. Needs to be able to shit in the woods (sorry for the expletive), tend plants, and heal wounds in case I had to go off and fight or die. ... (I want) the kind of woman that would make certain that any kids we had would never go hungry: spiritually or physically.

Before they ended their relationship, I asked Ali if Leila, his long standing girlfriend was his Doomsday girl and if he was going to marry her. He replied that she was perfect, except that "her relationship with Allah is lacking."
I guess it's that she defers to secular explanations of things and science over the Quran. She sees the Quran as a book of stories... she has not really investigated it from what her parents taught her... and they were not very religious at all. There's no perfect woman it seems...I just need to make a choice.

Ali believes Leila's positions are a product of the times including feminism. He views today's society as victims of "group think," individuals who simply absorb the messages of popular culture. Though long, his passage reveals one man's deep reflections on where society is headed.

I blame feminism and the whole secular cult that wants women to be in competition with men on almost every level... think about it, think about all your independent friends, about the emasculation of men and liberal enlightenment that separated mans law from God's law and took the divine out of our relationships. They needed to do that to enslave people, to do the colonial project. And now we are totally disconnected from ourselves, God, and nature. Roles have no meaning. Secular society puts us equal to animals so then sex is a sport. Men and women have no roles so women are trying to prove equality when that does not exist. We are not equal...we have our special characteristics. [...] look at the popular movies that we also laugh at...look at how men are portrayed as shiftless, as lazy, as sex obsessed. We play into that as well and women are portrayed as victims. Group think is the way that we are not independent thinking, not thinking as Muslims, not being critical of the whole framework of our arguments. For example... sisters always talk about men who ain't worth much, who do not have the same level of education, its like a broken record they have been hearing and are repeating. Chris Hedges said this: part of the problem is people who create a morality based on their own experience, which is what of course the New Atheists and the Christian fundamentalists have done....Feminism is the perfect example of that principle.

Many young Muslims are beginning to critically analyze the state of society. Ali's discussion reflects on the influence of popular culture, and lack of critical thinking which many feel run contrary to human nature and have weakened the institution of marriage. But Ali's discussion also touches on the role of religion in a society as well. The but forth by Islam are seen as protections from many of the current problems experienced by women are humankind.

Elijah, an African-American 36-year-old professor likes to engage in philosophical discussions like Ali, but his discussion of Muslim women and why he is single was on a much more simple level. Elijah has used several outlets to meet a wife, including online matrimonial services, through school and work but he has not yet met his dream wife.
Either I met someone I really liked but the whole Arab/Desi culture clash thing (see the section on endogamy below for more discussion on this issue) or, with people from my own background they just didn’t have their stuff together. Some were really pushy up front like, “Hi. My name is so-and-so. Let’s get married tonight” (laughing). …. Or they’d drag it out for weeks without any pics… very hesitant to show pics like pics are haram (not permissible) or something… and then of course, I see the pic, and the sister isn’t very attractive and then people’s feelings get hurt because they get attached.

Like Mirza, Elijah is very open about the fact that physical appearance is important to him. However one woman was a bit too revealing. Elijah revealed, “Some sister sent me butt naked pics after just two emails…. Totally outrageous!!” Funningly, Elijah stated the woman was on the da’wah committee (the committee that goes out to invite people to learn about Islam). Elijah joked, “Brothers will definitely be takin’ shahadah (becoming Muslims).”

Over the years, Elijah has had quite a few women approach him for marriage, he believes in part because he speaks Arabic. Muslim men who appear strong in their Islam are a “hot commodity.” Still, within the 18 years Elijah has been Muslim, not ONE woman peaked his interest. Elijah then revealed the deeper reason he is still single, “I’m very choosy, not like cats (men) who jumped in not knowing who they were or what they were looking for.” Elijah then went on to explain that his future wife must have quite a few characteristics. For one, Elijah is very keen on hijab (scarf covering a woman’s hair), he also has very strict ideas about how a woman should wear their scarf.

(I want a wife that) COVERS…not the lamp shade hijabi…..I don’t mean niqab (veil)…I don’t care for any of that…but you know what I’m talkin’ about, sisters that wear a head wrap like Badu but still walk around with the front exposed, the hijab ain’t never really on tight…I prefer hijab. If the sister isn’t ready to cover like it’s meant to be done, may Allah guide her…but naw, that ain’t for me…yeah. I’m old school

For Elijah, there are specific rules regarding the way a woman should cover her body, in this case cover everything except her face, hands and feet. By “lamp shade hijabi” and “head wrap” like the R&B singer Eryka Badu, Elijah is referring to a Muslim woman who wears a scarf on her head but exposes her neck. His interpretation of
Islam is that this form of women’s dress is un-Islamic. While these are clearly personal choices, Elijah’s response about hijab is telling. For many people, hijab represents a level of understanding within Islam (remember Tahira who choose to wear her hijab in different ways depending on her behaviors). A woman who wears hijab is often assumed to be more knowledgeable about Islam than her non-hijabi counterparts. Though it is not a representation of how one feels about Islam, or even practices other aspects of the faith, hijab is a deal breaker for some men. Their fellow women suggest they look deeper than hijab to the heart of the person, as one sister stated, “I know several niqabis (women who wear a face veil) who have been knocked up.”

Suliman

Suliman grew up in a variety of cities and cultural environments and his life experiences are reflected in what he’s looking for in a spouse. Though his father has always pushed him to marry a “beautiful righteous hijabi,” his preferences are a bit looser.

I prefer a muslima that’s not too serious; but striving on her deen. That loves me. Is intelligent in both worldly and religious knowledge and attractive. Arabic is not required for me, but I certainly see it as a bonus

Suliman is also leaning towards an interracial marriage.

I dunno, the older I get the more I think that it makes sense to be with someone of the same culture; but my eyes are drawn to women from all over the world. I see a lot that I like in an international spouse like extension and global relationships: A cultural enrichment/infusion into the family. Giving your children a broader perspective, like how Obama’s experience benefits him

Though Suliman is open to marrying just about any type of Muslima (Muslim woman), he now lives in an area where there are three strikes against him: 1) he is new to the community; 2) there are very few Muslim sisters; 3) there is no interaction between the sisters and brothers. He explained the gender relations,
There are no, single muslimas (Muslim women) here. Most men keep their wives at home inside all day until they get there and then they walk around campus together. That's it so I don't want to offend any sisters or their husbands by talking etc. It can be awkward because you don't know the proper greetings or how to properly address the opposite sex because some are and are not okay with talking or looking at each other, etc.

Gender separation also organizes the social events. Suliman gave the example of a community BBQ. While women are present at the barbeques, they are separated on the women's side of the masjid “by several walls and locked doors.” When I laughed at the thought of going through several walls and locked doors, Suliman said, “You laugh but its true. I cook the meat and we send plates over to the sisters' side.” Suliman is in an area that is in conducive to finding a mate, he estimates 70% of the mostly immigrant men are single, “Most of the brothers all go back to India or Jordan to get married because there are none here. The closest place to find sisters is El Paso... about 40min east of here into Texas.” In response to his situation, Suliman has thought about ways to find a spouse.

I can try a conversion move like some brother’s do; or use the Muslim websites to find someone; or talk to brothers and see who they can hook me up with. A brother did hook me up with a sister in Egypt. She’s very nice, but young and really wants to stay in Egypt

Suliman met this sister over the Internet and thinks that is probably his best bet.

Even though Suliman has reflected on the type of woman he wants, he’s not certain he is ready.

I want a wife, but I'm not sure what I really really want...I don't really wanna revert someone using the relationship as pressure...my family hasn't made any really efforts to do anything...they just kinda threaten me every now and then with the arranged marriage bit...and it's something that I'm not even opposed to...It's just getting harder and harder to do the right thing...especially out here

Suliman is on his own to find a spouse. His family is not actively participating in a search and the culture of his local community does not help the situation. His main options are to use the internet or as he said, to find a non-Muslim sister and hope she converts to Islam.
Again, one of the most interesting findings was that Muslim men prefer to marry Muslim women. Though it is socially acceptable to marry a non-Muslim, many feel a Muslim woman would be able to provide the most spiritual training for their children as well as be a source of spiritual enhancement.

**What a Muslim Sister Desires in a Husband**

Muslim women described wanting men who are compassionate, loving, generous, religious and accepting. They want someone who appreciates their **Again, all of these sisters are educated and accordingly expressed a desire to marry a man who would appreciate their education, as well as be willing to help with household and domestic chores. Many are looking for individuals who share the same values and level of education. For example, women who remained chaste want to marry a man who is also a virgin. Aliyah states, “I prefer a virgin. I don’t want a man who has been all around and then decided to settle down and get married. Why should he get me after I’ve been struggling to do good all this time. Uh uh, I want a virgin man.”**

Fatima, a Pakistani-American is very concerned about finding a spouse that is sensitive and egalitarian in his beliefs, traits she thinks many traditional Pakistani men do not carry.

I would LOVE it if just once I asked a guy hypothetically, “if I was making more money than you and one of us had to stay home and I said I would like to keep working, would you mind being at home with the kids” and he said yes 😊😊 (laughing) but let’s be honest. If that was my criteria, I’d never get married 😊. There are some things growing up here you just become. Like I’m independent and I want to be an equal. I guess I borrow, I mesh, I blend, I pick and choose. I know our culture is very family orientated so yes, I’m willing to live in an extended family. I’m willing to treat your parents as my own. But as an American I’m used to this idea of “respect me too if you want to be respected” so I would expect him to treat my parents the same way. If they need someone to take care of them, I will/we will. I don’t think I can marry a South Asian. I know South Asian men and I’ve already told my mom please try to find me an ABCD 😊 not that they all suck…. My cousin, her husband is Pakistani and she is just as Americanized if not more Americanized than me.
Fatima explained that an ABCD is an American-Born Confused Desi (A South Asian American). Salima also desired the same type of person, “I guess I want to marry the male version of me, a Pakistani man who grew up here in America. Who likes having fun and doesn't mind a professional wife.” However, now that Salima has graduated from college, she is not sure where she will find a Muslim man on her own at all. For Nadirah, the young Muslim who wants to delay marriage until she is more settled in her career, goals and ambition appear to be high on her list of priorities.

I want someone who isn’t lazy, someone who understands me and who wants the best things for me, someone who is up for change....someone who is sweet and giving and loves his family, someone who HAS GOALS, I'm not taking care of anyone. Some men have an ego problem if I make more than them... but I want someone who has a career. Of course I don’t want a broke man. Money does mean something to me because I’m a brat (laughing). It really doesn’t matter if he makes a little less than me but he can’t just be lazy and laying on the couch playing video games. But you know most men want to make more... and if they have a woman who makes more than them it makes them wanna get out and try to do something better

Nadirah consistently returns to the idea of hard worker in her list of desired qualities. Every sister in this study preferred to marry a Muslim man, a “practicing” Muslim man. One Pakistani-American 24 year old indicated,

I am looking for a spiritual Muslim. By that I mean I don’t really agree with the term religious sometimes... because the connotation is that someone who prays 5 times a day, fasts, etc. But I’d ideally like someone who really desires to further a connection to God, Islam, etc in their heart. They read books, articles, go to lectures, be an active Muslim... but in the end, really really feel it and believe it.... and someone I can improve my faith with together

Still other women are indeed materialistic in their preferences. Many times this seems to be the expectations of the young lady’s parents. When I chatted with Nadia, a 22 year old Pakistani American about marital preferences she stated that some individuals are “unrealistic” in their expectations.

I think we are very unrealistic in our expectations of partners. For girls and parents of the girl, when they look, they always want a guy who is making a lot of money (doctor, lawyer, engineers, dentist ← in that order. And if anything less, they will look elsewhere. For guys, they want us as housewives, beautiful and someone they can show. The real concept of marriage is left behind to have a
person who would stick with you through and through, with good religious and moral values.

When I told Nadia that many informants stated those to simply be their personal preferences, she revealed that though she critiques the idea, she too has adopted those expectations as her own. She states, “You know those are becoming my personal preferences, my parents will not accept anything else so I have to pretty much agree to the same.” Even in the age of individualism, family preferences often trump personal choice for many young Muslims. Nadia’s statements are examples of the ways tradition become doxa, or the natural order of things (Maira 2002). Young adults often preserve the cultural purity of their parents by adopting their parents’ views of “moral authority.” The traditions become “incarcerated in the doxic prison of innocence (Brow 1990:3 in Maira 2002:52). As Nadia reveals, she will accept her parents’ preferences as her own in order to maintain kinship and ethnic ties.

Singlehood is Harder for Women

Another aspect about Muslim women’s views on Muslim men is that many Muslim women feel that marriage is an easier task for men to achieve than women. Because it is socially acceptable for men to marry Muslim women and non-Muslim women, it appears that they would have a large number of potential spouses. For Muslim women on the other hand, marriage is limited to Muslim men only. Therefore there exists another stigma on single Muslim men, that is that Muslim men who are not married choose to be single. For example, when I spoke to Tahira about a single man I knew, she asked “what’s wrong with him?”

He must be looking for something very particular...cause a Muslim man doesn't have to be single if he doesn't want to be. There are single sisters everywhere. When men start having particulars that is what holds you up (laughing). Maybe I am biased (laughing).
I tried to present the brothers side, that many obstacles prevent men from marrying like being unknown in the community and not having enough financial resources. However, Tahira shot those ideas down.

Please! There are women who would marry if you don’t have the funds. Shoot I would marry someone without the funds..as long as they were being proactive to get there in the last two years

I asked if she would really consider someone who was broke but with “potential.” She responded, Yea! That’s what I was trying to say, I am tired (laughing)! As long as they are working towards being able to have the funds. I can’t deal with broke and no work ethic or ambition lol.” Many Muslim women like Tahira are more interested in ambition and the promise of a beautiful life together than finances. However, with the seemingly narrow pool of eligible Muslim men, Muslim women are stepping into new territory.

“Convertibles” - Marrying non-Muslims

I mentioned earlier the majority of Muslims adhere to the understanding that it is prohibited for a Muslim woman to marry a Muslim man. Therefore, it is shocking to discover that one of the most interesting trends regarding mate preferences for some single Muslim young adult women is their openness to marrying a non-Muslim man. In fact three women mentioned that though they prefer a Muslim man, they are now considering marrying a non-Muslim.

For example, Zahra is a 27-year-old physician who lives in Florida. She converted to Islam from Christianity and is the only Muslim in her family. She loves Islam but finds it a struggle to stay within the boundaries of Islam. Her relationships with men have been “interesting.”

I can’t seem to get a Muslim brother to pay me attention for anything. (laughing) All of the sisters in the community say it is because the pickings are slim up here.
*shrugs* .. I wanted to marry a Muslim but I was wondering where I was going to find one. Especially if I decide to return South after school. That means that I am going back to the Bible belt. I was thinking that I may have to import a brother from the North or Atlanta or something. (laughing).

While Muslim men do not approach Zahra, she receives a lot of attention from non-Muslims.

I tend to attract conservative, yet open-minded Christians and the "conscious" brothers, regardless of religion. At first, I said "no dating...no dating...good Muslim...no dating..." but coming from where I come from, that was very, very hard. So I date. I have my Muslim friends check him out, though. (laughing)

Zahrah thinks her appearance, she usually dons a headwrap and a long skirt, is what attracts the "conscious brothers and Christians." She now has a 27-year-old boyfriend Michael, that she really likes even though he has other things, "career and education", that he needs to work out. Spiritually, Michael was from the Church of God in Christ but he eventually left them. He is now considering Islam.

He had been taking the spiritual route for the longest, but started studying Islam before he met me. He keeps talking about taking his shahadah (becoming Muslim). I just want him to do it for the right reasons. Even if he does, I could still seem him being "spiritual but not religious".

Zahra says she is pretty serious about this relationship and there is an 80% chance she and Michael will marry. I asked her how she envisions her future marriage and what qualities drew her to her boyfriend.

I see our marriage as being a happy one. The intellectual discourse is great. I have learned a lot from him because he associates with more of a diverse group of people than I do. Our families are different so it has been interesting learning from his.

Qualities...patient, understanding, faithful (he made a vow never to cheat in a marriage or a relationship because his father was not faithful to his mother and he saw the effect it had on her), family oriented, intelligent, driven, good work ethic.

Though Zahra likes the differences in religions right now, it does worry her.

Some things that I tell him about rituals in Islam (i.e. the lamb sacrifice at Eid (Muslim holiday)), he doesn't understand. He wonders why the sacrifices have to be made, why Muslims circle the kabba a certain number of times, what is so great about Zamzam water, etc...Because of these rituals, he tries to put us on the same page as Catholics, and wonders where the spirituality is behind these acts.
Zahra says she truly desired a Muslim man but she felt she would never find one, leading her to keep her options open and to consider non-Muslim men. One may assume that Zahra’s situation is unique or limited to converts without a Muslim family. However, Tahira grew up Muslim and is extremely active in the Muslim community. Yet, she too has run into the same problem of finding a good Muslim man and she too is considering marrying a non-Muslim man.

I need a man (laughing) ... I was just considering going back to the “drop top” plan this weekend. In the last year in the half I have met the craziest Muslim men. “Drop top” = convertible, i.e. non Muslims (laughing). That’s me and my friends code...I try not too but it’s always the temptation. My neighborhood is full of beautiful convertibles who want to shower me with praises (laughing). Sometimes you just need some attention as a female but inshaAllah (God Willing) I try to stay away.

Tahira is an active Muslim whose interactions with men have just not worked out. But for Aminah, her interactions with Muslim men have been extremely painful. Amina lives in fast paced LA and is former print journalist who worked in the industry for eight years. Because of her job, she states other Muslims often perceive her to be a “party girl,” someone who is not serious about Islam and “probably” sexually experienced. She wants to get married but is facing a few obstacles.

I'm looking to get married...it just that there are so many non-Muslim men that I'm attracted to. Muslim guys are so not interested in me (even though) I cover, I'm in the community, etc. They know my family...I'm not a random person. Everyone knows I was a journalist and they think I hang with the "stars"...and that I travel all the time...they don't think my former lifestyle was Islamic...people have many opinions about me traveling alone, etc...I really think I'm not Muslim enough for these folks.

Aminah described one particularly trying courtship experience with a Muslim man. She met a Muslim man at a diner for dinner and “the guy walked away after five minutes because my scarf wasn't proper.” Aminah’s date like my informant Elijah held particular hijab preferences. Ironically, the incidence also shows how the young man himself hybridizes Islam. He was on a “date”, something others could have also viewed as “unIslamic.” Instead of acting with respect and compassion for another human, the
man left Aminah stunned and embarrassed. She states that experience was “disappointing.”

These guys make you feel bad because you’re not Hafiz (someone who has memorized the Quran) or if you haven’t memorized Bukhari (book of Hadiths) you’re just not serious you should hear them...if you are not a scholar, they reject you....but then they go and marry a Christian woman I began to resent Muslim men.

These interactions with Muslim men have caused Aminah much hurt and pain. Like Zahra and Tahira, she is “tired of being lonely” and feels like she almost has no choice but to marry a non-Muslim man.

I want to marry a Muslim man! But they act like I am kryptonite. I feel like I have no choice, sometimes I think I’m not trying hard enough, but I’m around, and available .... Everyone knows my family, my cousin works in the masjid. I mean, I want to be part of the community, but I know if I marry a non-Muslim man, it’s a wrap. Kiss the community goodbye. I know sisters who are not in the community because they married non-Muslims.

Like Zahrah, Aminah now has a non-Muslim semi-boyfriend whom she would consider marrying. They are great friends and Aminah enjoys his company. Given Aminah’s preference for a Muslim man, I inquired about the seriousness of their relationship. She feels as if she is backed into a corner between her desire for intimacy and a serious relationship and her desire to be a part of the Muslim community.

I wish (he would propose). I think he’s scared of me because I’m Muslim...not scared of me, but scared that I will not take our relationship seriously because he’s not Muslim. The non-Muslim men think I am untouchable because I’m Muslim. And the Muslim men think I am not Muslim enough. I would love to marry him, but who would marry us? These Imams do NOT marry women to non Muslim men...i’ve seen it over and over and these mixed couples then get married at city hall and are ostracized from the community...no community for their kids, etc I want to get married at the Masjid, etc

Having a Muslim community is very important to Aminah. She states “I’m not the best Muslim, but I’m proud to be a Muslim and I would love an Islamic wedding.” Aminah is also very concerned about raising her children in a multi-religious household.
Asalamu alaikum warahmatullahi wabarakatuahu,(Peace Be Unto You)

InshAllah (SWT) this email reaches you in the best health and iman. I am going to be blunt. I have been looking to get married for almost a year now with absolutely no success. I want it to be as Halal as possible and following the Sunnah of our beloved Prophet (SAW). The reason I'm sending this email to you is because I have an extreme amount of respect for you and you yourself are married, mashAllah. Therefore, if possible, I would kindly appreciate it if you could help me out in this unfortunate predicament. If you would be so kind as to help me find a girl (through your wife or other means), inshAllah (SWT) Allah (SWT) blesses you and rewards you tremendously. Please let me know when you are available to talk, as I would like to discuss this further inshAllah. JazakAllahu Khairan for you time, asalamu alaikum. (Email forwarded to me by my husband)

Like the young man in the email above, many Muslim young adults who desire marriage have a tough time finding a spouse. The social regulation on mixed-gender interactions, coupled with a perceived lack of eligible spouses that fit their marital preferences, have considerably narrowed the number of potential spouses for Muslim young adults. There appear to be three ways people expect to find their spouse: through their family, through the Muslim community, or on their own.

**Through Family**

In many countries, marriages are often arranged through family connections. However, though open to family help, most Americans expect to find their Muslim spouse on their own. One informant joked, “maybe we’ll meet in the grocery store, or take a class together, or something like that.” Nailah sees family support as essential for single Muslim, it’s the responsibility of the family to network and connect in order to find spouses for their children.
I think people should be encouraged to marry soon after college, and parents should be trying to surround their kids with good potential spouses so they have good pickings. I think I am going to be that type of mom. The one who has cute, good brothers and sisters over so, my kids will see good potential and just so happen to marry someone I like. I think community is important. The girls in my community whose parents are more networked with other parents got married at good ages, like 22-25 and they married mostly to people in the community... a lot of them married people they’ve known most of their lives, or for many years. I think parents should be supportive of their kids getting married young. That means money too. It is a trade off for their deen. (Nailah)

Nailah’s plan to create an environment conducive to finding a spouse for her children is similar to midang, a traditional Indonesian courtship practice which involves the courting of an unmarried woman in her natal home (Bennett 2005). Bennett describes midang as a way to allow Indonesian youth, the majority of whom are Muslim, to court and yet remain within the boundaries of Islam. During midang, the man usually arrives at the woman’s home in the early evening and retreats some time before 11pm. Upon arriving at the woman’s home, the young man is greeted by her parents and offered light refreshments. Following a short conversation with parents, the courting couple is either left alone to enjoy each other’s company, though parents typically remain within earshot. Bennett describes how young men who have become accepted by the family are gradually allowed more access to the more private areas of the home. Midang appears to be a practice enjoyed by both the youth and their parents. Youth are able to enjoy each other’s company and parents are able to become familiar with the young man who may become their future son-in-law.

While support for Nailah means facilitating an environment to meet potential spouses, like midang, others see family support in the form of arranged marriages. It was interesting that though we live in America where arranged marriages are not the norm, many of my informants, both Desi and non-Desi were open to arranged marriages. However, what I discovered is there are several types of arranged marriages. In some arrangements, parents have full authority of choosing the spouse, with or without the consent of the child. However, in other arrangements, the final decision and
approval must come from the future spouse. For example, Fatima assumes that she will have an arranged marriage. She took the time to explain how she envisions the process working for her.

Well like someone who knows someone who’s looking for a wife for their son will approach my mom and say “oh you know we know this eligible bachelor.” This intermediary can be anybody, a relative, a friend of the family, (but) unfortunately if a friend of mine approaches me, it’s not the same thing because if my parents don’t pre-screen the guy then I guess it’s not arranged. So my parents screen the guys first, get their information, start talking to their families, etc. If my parent okays the guy (that’s step one: parent’s okay guy, his family okays me), then our parents might arrange a meeting. Maybe I’ll meet the guy and he won’t be impressed by me. Maybe his family and him will come over and I’ll say no. If something happens to click then we go onto stage three (laughing). We might exchange email addresses or phone numbers and talk to each other, see if we have things in common, goals, etc. Then there’s this iffy part. Maybe we’ll talk for two months, agree we like each other and how we both see the world and get engaged. Or maybe we’ll talk, maybe we’ll see each other again, maybe we’ll decided this isn’t for us. Maybe this will take a month, maybe it will take 5, I don’t know 😊. If we get engaged, hopefully (laughing) you’ll get married. But even an engagement can be broken off.

Though I had never thought of my own marriage as arranged, Fatima’s description fit exactly how I met my husband. In fact, when my aunt, who is Christian told everyone I had an arranged marriage, I flipped. To me, an arranged marriage was one in which the betrothed had no choice. I chose to meet my husband and I chose to marry him. Fatima’s description helped me understand that there are many forms of arranged marriages. She continued with her explanation.

But it’s not as Islamic as it should be I feel... An Islamic process should be easier, less confusing, or maybe that’s the beauty of it, that no two arranged marriages are the same. Just like no two couples dating have gone through the exact same thing.

Wow, I don’t know why, but for me this was such an eye opener. “Arranged” had such a negative connotation in the Black Muslim community. But it seems like most things, when people are uninformed, they tend to dismiss it, or label it as a “bad” cultural practice. We continued and I asked, “While you are deciding if you like each other, do you also interact in natural settings, e.g. community events or activities, movies, etc?” Fatima responded,
yes and no, those are limited which is what sucks 😞. You can go out but only with family. But usually that doesn't happen, it's more like you'll get to hang out at each other's houses because no one wants to look bad and send their 23 year old daughter out with a man she's not even engaged too, even if they take a chaperone with them (hence it's halal!).

So here we were again, back at the notion of identity and how decisions are often made in regards to cultural differences more so than Islam. I began to think further about the meaning of identity. Was it true that Muslims are “Muslim First?” My brother and I talked about how it appears that other aspects of identity surpass Muslim identities. That Muslim identities only add a few select things to our agenda: prayer, chastity, desire for marriage etc. But other than that the bulk of the decisions made were more in reference to ethnicity and geographical location. For example, Muslims marry, but to whom do they marry? After following the Islamic prescript of marriage, it is to their culture (not Islam) that they turn to for a description of a desirable mate, or desirable courtship practice.

**Through the Masjid**

While *masjids* are the places where Muslims congregate, many have not instituted practices or programs aimed at helping single Muslims get married. When I asked one *masjid* leader of a predominately immigrant *masjid* about the *masjid*'s role in helping people find spouses, he responded, “Well that is the family’s not the *masjid*'s ultimate responsibility.” But we have seen that in addition to dropping the ball on programming, many are in effect hindering the process. The strict gender separation of *masjids* has, in the words of Hasan put marriage “far reaching.” He states, “sis, at my *masjid*, I never even saw a sister. No how am I supposed to meet someone in that situation?”
Due to the reduced role of the masjid, many are seeking other ways to fulfill half of their religion. In the past decade, a few Muslim matrimonial companies have been established with the goal of providing a service to those Muslims who find it difficult to marry. For example, my friend and I organized a singles event in which 35 members of the community came. Likewise, Muslim conferences like those of The Islamic Society of North America (ISNA) usually include a matrimonial event. However, these events are annual. I only know of one masjid, the ADAMS center of Virginia, a pioneer in matrimonial services, that run a regular program for their local community. The Imam and his wife’s program called Companionships is set up like a group speed dating event where tables of singles rotate and chat with others in their age bracket.

While these few events are useful, they do not help address the accompanying stigma. Often informants saw these events as a last resort, something to try only when you have been unsuccessful in your search. In addition, these events often do not address the multifaceted nature of Muslim marriage. Again, not everyone “practices” the same. Often patrons do not know the appropriate steps to take after they have met someone. You often get questions like, “is it ok to talk on the phone?”

Cyberislam

For Muslims whose family and masjid are not helping the cause, and who think their chances of running into their future spouse at the grocery store are slim, the Internet may be their best matrimonial tool. Sites aimed single Muslims interested in marriage are becoming more and more popular. When I searched for “Muslim marriage,” “Single Muslims” or “Muslim Matrimonial” in Google and over 20 websites dedicated to Muslim marriage including MuslimMatch.com and zawaj.com, will appear.
But these small niche companies are not alone. Muslim also frequent the larger American companies like eHarmony or match.com. For many like Suliman, who lives in an area with no access to Muslim women, or Zahra who does not attract Muslim men in person, websites like these offer access to a great number of single Muslims. Plus, the internet is a site where interactions between men and women cannot be strictly regulated. A brother and sister can talk all night by chat, in the privacy of their homes without worrying about what some other Muslim may think about them.

Also, the distance the computer provides helps many individuals like Nazir who are sometimes uncomfortable talking to someone of the opposite sex in person. I asked one brother why he met his wife online when there were several single sisters at the masjid. He responded,

At the masjids you don't know who is single or not. – they need some type of singles' programs. The Internet was easier, I could meet a lot of people looking for the same thing. I also didn't have to worry about being rejected to my face.

Before I met Halim, I, too, experimented with finding a spouse online. I posted profiles on www.muslimmatch.com and www.zawaj.com. Though I received some hits, I never felt comfortable talking to someone I did not know. I just felt there was no way I could trust them. In fact, this was one of the major complaints of singles in this study. While the internet is convenient, many people prefer face-to-face personal contact. As one sister said, “there are some weirdos out there.” However, I personally know several great couples who met online. Therefore I have concluded that it is more about the individual than how you meet. By getting family and friends involved, rather than courting in private, one may be able to weed out the “weirdos.” Muslim families have even been known to post on behalf of their children. The following post is from www.zawaj.com:

Write Something about Yourself in Your Own Words
She was born and raised in the USA, but is of Syrian descent. Her faith in Islam is strong, even though she continually trying to improve her faith. She wears hijab, prays, and fast. She is very close to her family, and loves to hang out with friends. She does not smoke, drink, go to clubs, and has never dated.

Write Something about the Type of Person You are Seeking

Someone who like her has never dated, and is trying to improve his faith. A man who is not afraid of a strong-willed woman who speaks her mind and has a successful career. Her greatest pet peeve is dishonesty.

But families typically have very clear ideas about suitable spouses. And unfortunately, even when people find a spouse, sometimes their parents do not agree. The next two stories highlight the bad and good sides of ethnic endogamy within Muslim communities.

Reason # 8: My Family Won’t Accept Cultural Differences

Oh Mankind! We created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that you may know each other. Verily the most honored of you in the site of God is the most pious of you (Quran 49:13)

Muslims often like to think of themselves as a model community but marriage is one topic that reveals some of the uglier sides of the Muslim community, including discrimination and racism. Here I share the stories of Tariq, and Rahma and Isam, who are living through these dark sides of endogamy.

Tariq – A Man Who May Never Marry

At a time when most kids are worrying about fitting in and what to wear to school the next day, Tariq a high school freshman, was worried about his soul. A Black-Mexican American, with a Catholic mother and Baptist father, Tariq has always known and appreciated diversity, “I saw the beauty and meanings of both the Catholic and Baptist teachings.” But when Tariq witnessed firsthand the effects of alcohol on his
peers, he began to search for his own religious path. Later in the 11th grade, at a shi’a masjid, Tariq officially embraced Islam and has not looked back since. But to his surprise, Tariq soon discovered that the community he embraced was less of a cultural utopia and more of an intra-racial group. He says,

> When we first become Muslims we think that South Asians are good Muslims, but you find out that they are like everybody else. There are good Muslims, there are bad Muslims. You take a while to realize that they don’t know more than you. Being Muslim is not (always) their primary identity; they’re often more Arab or South Asian.

Tariq, a black man of mixed heritage, often felt isolated from the predominately South Asian and Arab believers who tried to “recreate back home.” Though he sometimes visited the predominately African-American Sunni community, which was more “open, tolerant and accepting,” he still preferred the immigrant masjid for a shi’a perspective.

It was on campus, where Tariq found the openness he longed for. Though still one of the few Blacks in the Muslim organizations (many African-American Muslims chose to join the Black Student Union over the MSA, a “cultural association,”), Tariq found that his new fellow Muslim peers, mostly second generation Muslims, did not hold the same views of their immigrant parents. They were more “multicultural” and very much a part of the diverse, socially active campus. “Having engagement with other friends adds so much flavor to my life.” That ‘flavor’ included a relationship with a beautiful young muslima.

Shazia was active in the community, and like Tariq, willing to take a stand on important issues and put herself on the line for what she believed. In many ways, she and Tariq were the perfect couple. But Shazia was Pakistani and her parents were not fond of their daughter’s choice of suitors. Tariq remembers them telling her things like, “He’s tricked you, he’s just saying sweet things to you.” It was if Shazia’s parents treated their relationship like they “were in middle school.” After almost seven years together,
Shazia called off their relationship. She could no longer handle the stress and it became apparent that her parents, who desired a Pakistani groom for their daughter, would never accept Tariq.

Tariq was devastated. The woman he loved and wanted to marry had chosen to preserve ties with her family over marrying him. In protest, Tariq took a personal vow to never marry anyone else. “I told her parents if I can not marry Shazia, then I will not marry at all,” recounted Tariq. Though he wishes it had been his fiancé Shazia to make the vow, (he unconsciously still calls her his fiancé), he understands the importance of family. It has been two years and Shazia has now accepted to marry a Pakistani man. We discussed his plans now that Shazia’s imminent marriage is here. Interspersed with talk about being with Shazia in Jannah (heaven), Tariq states his vow to never marry another woman is final. He made a symbolic contract with Allah that he does not plan to break.

However, there is a twist. I was itching to understand if Tariq’s vow of ‘No Marriage’ also extends to “No Sex.” Tariq explained that within Shi’a Islam there exists muta’a or temporary marriage. In the marriage contract, couples specify the date upon which the marriage shall end. The practice is highly controversial; one that Sunni Muslims (95% of the Muslim population) believe was outlawed during the Prophet’s time (Haeri 1989). While Tariq is not sure he will take advantage of muta’a which could legalize sexual relationships for as short as a few minutes to several years, he plans to leave the option open if he is desperately in need.

Tariq now speaks publically about his vow to never marry and about the marital racism he has endured. He vows to change the system by “coming out of the closet”, drawing an analogy to the similarities between the stigma placed on those who never marry and to those who are gay. Both unacceptable behaviors in the Muslim community.
“Rahma and Isam are officially engaged!” Though they never publicized their relationship, most in their Detroit masjid and university suspected they were a couple. From the first time I saw Rahma, a tall Palestinian-American and Isam, a tall Indian-American, I too had a hunch they were romantically involved or at least had a mutual crush. And the more I ran into them in Detroit, the more obvious it became. For example, at events, Isam would be sure to purchase the 100% juice Rahma desired, and Rahma’s stories always included Isam. Though I never asked directly (I didn’t feel it was my business), I felt stifled by their secrecy. Should I acknowledge the relationship or play along with the game?

And when I began to do my research, it became even more awkward. I had approached nearly every single Muslim I knew, including Rahma. While she agreed to an interview, I soon abandoned the idea. I could feel that she was not very comfortable with the idea and honestly neither was I. I did not want to put her in position to lie and I knew she would not/could not tell her story in full. So I simply made myself unavailable. When the interview came up a month later, I decided to change the interview’s focus from personal experiences, to safer questions like masjid relations or gender separation.

I sent her a text message with the new topic, but ironically, just a few hours later the news of their engagement broke. Finally! I was so excited for them but I admit I felt a selfish sense of relief. Now I could to talk to her without having to let on that I suspected she was in a relationship. In response to my text message, Rahma called back and for the first time in 3 years, she and I had a real conversation. Though I did not audio tape our spontaneous talk, I choose to represent it here in dialogue format. Consider it paraphrased (Rahma has read and approved of this rendition):

Zarinah: Congratulations! I heard the news!
Rahma: Thanks! So you heard?

Zarinah: Yeah, Hasan called me. I am SOOO excited for you! This is beautiful. Alhamdulillah!

Rahma: [Laughing] Yeah, Alhamdulillah. I so wanted to tell you yesterday (we were at a wedding together the day before) but I couldn't.

Zarinah: I know. I mean everyone knew that you two would eventually get engaged, it was just a matter of when. I mean why were u guys so dang ole secretive?

Rahma: I know it was so hard. Not being able to tell anyone. I mean Isam and I have loved each other for the past 4 years but we couldn't tell. You know how Muslims are, our reputations would have been ruined! But we also had to wait for our parents to agree and that took some time.

Zarinah: I understand, but girl you can't worry about those people! They're gonna talk anyway.

Rahma: I know. I remember when you asked me for an interview, I really wanted to tell you but I couldn't.

Zarinah: Yeah, I figured so. That's partially why I didn't pursue it. Well anyway I'm so excited for you! I feel so much better because now I can talk to you for real! [laughing]

Rahma: What do you mean?

Zarinah: [Laughing] Well, I always felt kind of weird around you. I was always watching my words, trying not to let on that I viewed u and Isam as an item. I mean it was just so awkward! I really tried to avoid you!

Rahma: [laughing], you could have just asked me (laughing). Amina and Didi did. They came up and asked me if I liked somebody in the MSA. I admitted yes... go on facebook and see who is in all of my pictures! They came back like “Isam!?”

Zarinah: (laughing) Well it seemed like a secret plus it's really not any of my business anyway! I mean we don't hang out on a regular basis and we're not as close as you, Amina and Didi so I shouldn't ask you about your personal business. I'm just glad everything is out now so that we can just be free!

Rahma: Me too! Now we can hang out, go to the movies, do double dates and stuff!

... 

Zarinah: I definitely want to use your story because I think it would help a lot of other people. We don't want our kids to have to go through the same stuff we did.

Rahma: I know, I think the beauty of Isam and my relationship is that we will be able to build the ummah (Muslim community). I mean we’re from two different backgrounds, maybe it will help.
So Rahma was concerned about their reputations? And their families did not agree? This was getting interesting! Now that she could explain, Rahma and I set a date for when I returned to Detroit and for the first time, I was not hesitant about calling her back. When we met, we talked about secrets, cultural differences, parents and how the past four years have been pure hell for them both. When walking on Oakland University’s campus, they were always looking over their shoulder to see who is there.

But how had it all started? Rahma recounted,

I had just started to be more religious and I had decided I was not going to have a non-Muslim boyfriend again. I was a freshman and I went to my first MSA meeting. Honestly I think I also wanted to meet a Muslim guy too. So I saw Isam and I really liked him, but all the girls liked him. He was the only American (smiling)! But Isam and I became friends. We talked about stuff and I really started to like him! Only my non-Muslim friends knew. So one day a mutual (Muslim) and I were out shopping. I can remember it so vividly. We were looking at some clothes and she asked me if I ever thought about Isam. I flipped out and went into this long explanation, ‘Noooo! I don't like him.... how could I like him? Ugh, he's like my brother!’ My friend was like ‘aww man Rahma, this is terrible because he is so in love with you!’ Man I got scared because I realized I might mess this thing up for good. So I confessed that I really liked him too but that I wanted to tell him myself. So the next day we (Isam and I) talked and I punked out (laughing), I was too shy. But then the next day he called and he just asked me point blank. I said yes and the rest is history!

For the next four years, Rahma and Isam cultivated their relationship through phone calls and Muslim events. Isam said, “I would have married her from the first time we talked.” Rahma continued, “Our parent’s didn’t agree.” Due to cultural differences and their student status, neither set of parents agreed to the marriage or courtship. Both parents wanted their children to marry someone of the same ethnicity (Palestinian and Indian). The fact Isam was a “broke college student” did not help the case. Rahma and Isam were devastated. When I asked if they ever thought of getting married without their parents’ blessing Isam replied, “Well I knew my mom wouldn’t come.” At my surprised face, he explained, “I remember one day when I was talking to my mom. I mentioned that there was a girl...that’s all I said. I didn’t even say Rahma (laughing) and my mom didn’t talk to me for 3 months!” After four years of negotiations with their
parents, Rahma and Isam finally won their blessing and they both sigh, “Alhamdulillah (All praises due to God) it’s over.” But is it over?

On the Sunday prior to our interview, the new couple held an engagement party with forty members of their family and closest friends. It was a beautiful occasion “filled with blessing” but it also foreshadowed a few hurdles their new combined families face. The party was split, not only by gender (as is customary) but by race with the Indian and Palestinian women on different sides of the room. However, the men were more intermingled. Isam explained,

I think that has more to do than just with cultural differences. I mean these are all professional men with careers. They are used to being outside of their comfort zone and intermingling with people. The women who were there don’t work, so they are not used to that. I mean my mom has a job but it is not a career. [...] But I was mad they (my family) were speaking Urdu.

Language barriers are often one of the main reasons family members site the necessity to marry within. Without communication and a conscious effort to be close, language can be a natural divider. Wedding traditions are another. Isam described how the party would have been different with an Indian fiancé.

They would have had these huge wooden trays filled with gifts for Rahma and covered with a velvet heavily embroidered cloth. The women of my family would each present Rahma with a small gift and then her side would do the same thing for me. That’s why I think my mom still doesn’t look at this as the engagement party. She said it was more like (Urdu term that translated as “talk confirmed”). I think she still wants to do another engagement party later.

Traditionally Indian engagement parties are extremely expensive, something Isam and his parents were unable to afford. Both he and Rahma are more than satisfied with their small intimate gathering. The engagement party was just one experience but the wedding will be another and reveals just how much negotiation will be needed to please both families. In a traditional Indian wedding, the bride wears a red dress and adopts a very subdued demeanor (not a lot of smiling or talking, etc). But Rahma’s Palestinian mother prefers a white wedding dress. So Rahma is caught in the middle. They may have found a solution. Isam writes,
Well for my family the signing of the *kitab* (Islamic marriage contract) is the most important so for that she'll wear the red. And for her family, the Walima (celebration party) is the most important, so there she'll wear white. So hopefully everyone will be happy.

Obviously, family is very important to both Rahma and Islam and they have gone through a lot of trouble to appease their families' traditions and desires. Not only did they wait four years to get engaged, they are making compromises to their wedding ceremony. And though they want to get married as soon as possible, the couple is now negotiating the complicated terms of their future marriage, there is a possibility of conducting an Islamic marriage contract prior to the licensed marriage.

Islam explains that in Indian culture, the couple would probably be married now. At the ‘engagement ceremony,’ Rahma and Islam would have signed an Islamic marriage contract stating the stipulations (including dowry) of their marriage. Though they would then be married Islamically, the couple would not move in together until after the big *walima* (wedding party and ceremony with the state marriage license). In this scenario (according to Indian Muslim culture but not Islamic law), Islam would be absolved of his financial agreement until the *walima* at which time the marriage would be consummated. And that's where the problem lies.

In Rahma's culture, both the Islamic marriage and legal marriage occur on the same day. Her parents are not comfortable with Islam's scenario in which the couple is Islamically married but waiting to consummate, “accidents could happen.” For Rahma and Islam to consummate their relationship, not only must they be married, but Islam must take full financial responsibility for her. It seems that sex is on everyone's mind except Rahma and Islam. Islam explained, “I don't think our parents understand. It was a fear of God that kept us from *haram* (sin) during these four years, so it will be the fear of God that keeps us from wrong now too.”
Now that their families have agreed, there is just one last hurdle to jump, Isam’s lack of financial resources. At the time of our interview, Isam was a full time graduate student with graduate student income, “less than a quarter of what a plumber makes and I have six years of higher education!” With the responsibility to provide for his wife in mind, Isam has agreed to follow his dad’s decision and wait to get married until he is financially able to support Rahma. Isam’s mother has always had to work and he does not want the same for Rahma. “I want her (Rahma) to be able to stay home if she wants to, at least when we have kids ... I don’t expect for us to make a whole bunch of money but I do want to be able to provide for our necessities and maybe a few of the wants.”

Isam is now saving money. In the meantime, they are simply ecstatic. Isam replied, “Alhamdulillah, we can finally walk on campus without having to look over our shoulder!” They both laugh. With their formal engagement, Isam and Rahma have made their intentions publically known. And while their parents still have parameters on what they can and cannot do (e.g Rahma still hasn’t been given permission to drive to Baltimore with Isam alone), they now have much more leeway and freedom.

**Exogamy - A Shift in Marital Traditions**

Popular discourse and research (Grewal 2008) indicate that young Muslims are increasingly more open to marriages and relationships outside of their race. However, as Tariq learned, though Muslims often exalt the beauty of a global *ummah* (community) where, “an Arab has no superiority over a non-Arab nor a non-Arab has any superiority over an Arab; also a white has no superiority over black nor a black has any superiority over white except by piety and good action” (Prophet Muhammad farewell sermon, emphasis mine), when it pertains to marrying outside of one’s racial/ethnic background, the true “imagined” nature of this community is revealed.
Young Muslims who reject the endogamous marriage practices of their parents' cultures often incur huge obstacles. Parents often threaten to disown their child or not offer financial support for the wedding ceremony. Earlier we saw how Grewal's study of the intra-racial color preferences of second-generation Muslim immigrants and their parents show how racism is rampant throughout the Muslim community (2008). Several informants and their families coveted whiteness as the ideal sign of beauty and marriageability. However many in the second-generation refer to the Quran to “Islamify” their actions in the hopes that faced with Islamic evidence, their parents will have no choice but to agree.

Though a struggle, some single Muslims have successfully negotiated the reluctant approval of their families. Rahma and Isam's experience highlights a number of both beautiful and troubling parts of Muslim American singlehood. Their struggle to do something Islamic (get married), has been met with severe opposition and complications from the start, again revealing that when it comes to marriage, parents and individuals are often much more attached to their cultural identities than their religious identities. But on the beautiful side, the next generation of Muslims is pushing for a new agenda, a new way of business. Rahma and Isam could have given up their quest for marriage but they chose to fight back, supported by the knowledge that their behavior was perfectly legal in the eyes of their Lord. Their relationship and future marriage is one of opposition to the status-quo of Muslim ethnic endogamy, and perhaps their experience may change the tradition. At least for now, they take comfort knowing the story will be different for their future children.
Chapter Summary

As religious minorities in a pluralistic society, single American Muslims are influenced by a multitude of cultural systems including religion, personal beliefs, popular culture, family, and ethnicity. This chapter highlighted some of the ways these systems produce ambivalence and challenges for Muslim singles negotiating singlehood, religion and desires. The stories of Malikah, Ali and Tahira highlight the choice to be Muslim and how some young Muslims live dual lives, a Muslim life inside of the masjid, and a “normal” student life outside of the masjid and Muslim spaces. Many young Muslims are curious about life outside of Islam and choose college, a time away from parents, to fulfill their curiosity. The often feel torn between an Islamic prohibition on premarital sex and physically intimate behaviors, and the normative sexual behaviors of their peers. While some Muslims remain within Islamic boundaries, many others step outside those boundaries. As the literature suggests, that the Muslims who strongly identified with Islamic teachings tend to experiment less with drugs, sex and physical intimacy than those whose Islamic identification is less salient (Freitas 2008).

Secondly, post-college, family and community members begin to pressure Muslims to marry as soon as possible. While most Muslim young adults are not opposed to getting married, they feel the culture of the Muslim communities do not foster marriage. For one thing, interactions between Muslims of the opposite sex are few and far between and single individuals often have no way of identifying each other. Further, many Muslims who grew up in strictly gendered Islamic spaces are uncomfortable around Muslims of the opposite sex, and couldn't imagine approaching someone Muslim for marriage. However, experiences in non-gendered settings like college and office environments, allow for cross-gender interaction facilitating much more conversation
amongst non-Muslims. For example, Tahira states, many people are more comfortable with “John at work than Muhammad at the masjid.”

As a result, the question is not one of whether to get married, but of who to marry and finding a spouse has proven difficult. American Muslims overwhelmingly expect a "love marriage," one in which they are familiar with their future spouse prior to actual marriage. Unfortunately, cross-gender interactions are socially unacceptable. Lastly, tensions often arise between young adults who are open to marrying outside of their ethnic background and their parents who do not agree to these inter-ethnic marriages. Though their children are within the boundaries of Islamic behaviors, these examples highlight how ethnic identities sometimes trump religious identities.
CHAPTER V

CONCLUSIONS – LIVING MUSLIM SINGLEHOOD IN THE THIRD SPACE

Muslims’ identities are complicated and multifaceted, yet interestingly this research shows that most American Muslims across ethnic and racial boundaries are facing common issues with singlehood. It is the negotiation of competing cultural wombs coupled with the natural human desire to maintain a sense of inner peace and harmony (as well as social acceptance), that pushes single Muslims into the third space (Bhabha 1994). Here, in this liminal identity space, young Muslims internalize and hybridize their influences and enact their singlehood accordingly. Naturally, this process is fluid and by extension, the singlehood of Muslim young adults is a historicized contextual process. With this in mind, I have attempted to highlight the diversity of how Muslims negotiate their Muslim singlehood; specifically how three cultural wombs; Islam, America, and their family/ethnic backgrounds influence single Muslims’ decisions and emotions.

All of these various, competing ideologies force Muslims to actively and consciously define their brand of Islam, their morality and their singlehood. Hence, this book used a critical lens to highlight the difficulties of American Muslim singlehood. For example, with religion, basic Islamic tenets of a belief in God, the Prophethood of Muhammad and the afterlife greatly affect the worldviews of single Muslims and play a huge role in deciding whether to act on sexual desires. Young Muslims who are Muslim in speech, but not heart, naturally feel freer to explore life outside of Islamic boundaries. And as they grow older, how they choose to practice and enact a Muslim identity is their decision alone.
While single Muslims agree that singlehood should be temporary, many feel as if they have no prospects for ending it, they are simply putting their faith in God that their spouse will someday arrive. Though there are obviously male and female singles that are looking to be married, there appears to be no intermediary, no process by which they meet. This uncertainty adds an additional layer of stress because there is no light at the end of the tunnel. In addition, the gender segregation practiced at many masjids is not helping the situation.

The masjid is the center of the Muslim community, the major place where Muslims congregate in a non-Muslim society. Accordingly, one would assume that it affords the most opportunity to meet someone of the opposite sex. Yet it is here where interaction and even conversations between the opposite sexes are taboo and cause for community judgment. The Muslims who describe feeling “weird” around Muslims of the opposite sex ask, “How can I find a spouse if I can’t even see them!”

When I talked to one Detroit Imam about organizing singles events, he suggested that if the Muslim community was organized the way it should be, singles events would be unnecessary. Two Muslims would be able to get to know each other in a Muslim environment without the pressure of making a quick decision of whether to pursue marriage or not. He argued that being able to observe a person’s mannerisms, the events they attend, and the activities they volunteer for, would be the best pre-marital situation.

What the Imam describes is creating a culture of marriage. Not one in which individuals are pressured to marry, but one in which individuals are cultivated and prepared for marriage in an Islamic environment. In that environment, expressing interest in someone would not be cause for stress, but instead a normal part of getting married. With the whole community committed to fashioning an atmosphere that supports single individuals (whether by providing opportunities to create an active social
life or by facilitating ways for them to meet), there may be a flicker of hope for young Muslims trying to end singlehood.

This type of environment may also strengthen the Muslim community as a whole. By fostering a community of dialogue, individuals, both brothers and sisters will be more likely to work together to further the mission of the Muslim communities. Organizations must have open and clear lines of communication to succeed. While men have traditionally run Masjids and Islamic organizations, women are becoming a stronger force in American Islam. I shall cite just one recent example. In 2006, Dr. Ingrid Mattison, a Muslim woman, became the president of the Islamic Society of North America, one of the largest Muslim advocacy organizations in America. In this pivotal role, imagine if she or those she works with were unable to work through some of the ambivalence informants of this study articulated around interactions with Muslims of the opposite sex. The organization would certainly fail.

### Does the Third Space End?

I have argued that the third space for many Muslim singles is filled with ambivalence. But is it indeed liminal? And is it temporary? Will ending singlehood effectively move young Muslims out of the third space and into a more cemented, less negotiated way of life? In Bhabha’s view, third spaces are “discursive sites or conditions that ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, and rehistoricized anew” (Bhabha 1994:37). That is, the third space insures that Muslim culture is not static. That the conditions that created the third space of Muslim singlehood will shift and bring to existence new conditions which shall again lead to ambiguity and necessitate hybridity.
Thus, the social contexts in which American Muslims live will undoubtedly always include contradictory worldviews and truths. Though marriage may bring an end to some of the challenges articulated in this study (i.e. finding a spouse, not having an outlet for physical desires), others like how to traverse gendered spaces will remain, thus leading to the seemingly infiniteness of the third space.

**Cultural Evolution**

Though in different ways, one thing is apparent, the struggles and experiences of this generation are contributing to culture change, both within the hegemonic ideals of American Muslim communities (e.g. no dating) and within the American landscape. Muslim young adults are negotiating, contesting and challenging the assumptions behind both the Muslim ideologies and the cultural systems they encounter and choosing their own path. For example, Rahma and Isam’s impending intercultural marriage serves as an example for those Muslim communities who practice marital endogamy (what Tariq experienced as martial racism). As the first marriage of this kind in their families, they may be able to loosen the traditional hold of marital endogamy on other family members and friends.

**Changing the Muslim Community**

Young Muslims may bring about cultural change in other ways too. The story of Mirza, who has always desired marriage but did not have money to support a wife, may highlight the need for the Muslim community to come up with ways for young Muslims to get married with temporary assistance from the family or community, an idea I discuss further in the final chapter. Further, women like Tahira, Zahra and Aminah who
contemplate marrying non-Muslim men, may force the community to examine the feelings and angst of Muslims who desire marriage but are unable to find a spouse. If they do indeed decide to marry non-Muslims, this will naturally change the makeup of the Muslim community in drastic ways. It will also lead to several children of mixed-religion households that is if the spouse does not convert to Islam. While these trends are already occurring, Muslim communities do not appear to address them in an open way. But the experiences of these young adults are contributing to major changes in the ways Muslims see themselves now, through the institutions they are constructing (e.g. Seven Shades), and will certainly change the landscape of American Islam within the next 20 years when they inherit the masjids and Muslim institutions that their parents have built.

DePaulo (2006) and Stein (1975) would argue that marriage is dying. Yet, this study has shown that for Muslims, marriage is very much alive. It is an important part of Muslim communities and Muslim ways of life and has no markings of slowing down. For Muslims who believe in the afterlife and strive for the afterlife, marriage is still the only way to achieve both a sense of well being (through intimacy) and a family.

Yes, many Muslims delay marriage for education, but they do not reject marriage as a whole. Thus a better question would be, is Muslim marriage changing? Does this study on the attitudes of single Muslims highlight any major trends in Muslim marriage? I have already mentioned the stories of those who reject marital endogamy as well as the sisters who consider marrying non-Muslims. However, this data also suggests that given the negative singlehood experiences of current Muslim young adults, the trend for the next generation of Muslim youth may very well be to marry early. To protect their children from struggling to find a spouse, or even from the sexualized college experience, many future parents may decide that it may be in their best interest to allow their children to marry prior to finishing college. In fact, Robert Dannin’s work among
African-American Muslims reports on the Universal Islamic Brotherhood of Cleveland that conducts teenage marriages to control adolescent sexual behavior (Dannin, 2002).

Also, the experiences of many Muslim young adults may lead them to experiment with different ways of courtship and loosen the gender segregation of *masjids* (at least during social events). Perhaps “date night” at the *masjids* will be a way for individuals who are looking to get married to have fun while getting to know their intended spouse on a deeper level – within a Muslim environment. While I am aware that many Muslims will object to the word “date,” I am simply suggesting that some how, some way, I anticipate that Muslim leadership will have a different face.

**Changing America**

Also, though this study focused on the influences of American culture on American Muslims, the relationship is dialectical. Muslims in college affect their peers and Muslims in the workplace have the ability to influence their co-workers. Sure, the peer culture pushes many to the boundaries of Islam, but several Muslims have found ways to resist these external pressures. Through their resistance, by perhaps limiting relationships with the opposite sex or setting certain boundaries, the attitudes and views of others they encounter may be altered in ways we have yet come to know. It would be interesting to study the non-Muslim friends of Muslims to investigate their views on Islam and what they feel about Muslim lifestyles.

In addition, as much of the discourse in the general American public concerning Muslims revolves around terrorism and war, this exploration may also change the public perception of American Muslims. Non-Muslims will be able to see the everyday real life struggles American Muslims face and also realize most American Muslims are not much different from the average American. They believe in God (like most Americans) and
work to create a sense of well being (through physical and emotional desires). Other than religious endogamy, the experiences presented here could easily have been those of evangelical Christians (like those of Frietas (2008), Jews, Hindus, Buddhists, Mormons or other religious minorities. Also, we have seen how religion can be a tool of resistance for religious minorities uncomfortable with both racial endogamy and the sexualized nature of popular culture. By enacting a Muslim identity, one may be able to escape these cultural forces.

And to close again with my main point: Muslim singlehood is a kind of silent battleground found within the hearts, souls and minds of Muslim young adults. A complex, ambiguous and hybrid place which involves a daily spiritual and emotional jihad (struggle), yet is off the radar of much of the greater world. To support single Muslim young adults, we must first assess the situation on the ground. We must discover what issues are at hand and the only way we can accomplish that task is to ask single Muslims themselves. I hope that this thesis has helped in that way.

The Muslim First Myth

Throughout this thesis, I have argued that we must examine singlehood with a contextual lens because of racial, ethnic and generational lines of difference. But one thing that we discovered is that the idea of a "Muslim first" mentality just may be a myth. Islam is not always the most salient aspect of society, nor is it possible for Muslims to let go of all cultural ideas outside of Islam. Looking at the history of Islam, we can see that every nation that accepted Islam added it on top of what was already there. If they practiced black magic before Islam, they practiced black magic after Islam. If they were people who liked to hunt game, Islam did not change the way they fed their families. If
the women dressed in colorful garments, they did not suddenly adopt black and gray as their preferred style of dress. Yes, those things that were clearly un-Islamic were transformed but typically, Islam was simply an addition to their lives, less something that removed their cultures.

The same goes for American Muslims. As we see, some things were common to the men and women of this study just because they were born and raised in an American landscape. Outside of these similarities, it was most often their race/ethnicity that determined the other aspects of their lives. For example, the South Asians were more apt to adopt an arranged marriage, and someone like Ali, a Blackamerican was more apt to discuss the effects of colonialization on spousal selection. So while these individuals are indeed Muslim, they are American Muslim + their cultural ethnicity.

And that is a beautiful thing - that the rain of Islam can reveal a rainbow of interpretations, and peoples. So instead of looking for some way to blend into one solid mass of color, let us begin to acknowledge that the source is One and that it is ok for green to be green and purple to be purple. They are all equal in the sight of the Lord.

**Limitations & Next Steps**

Every study has limitations and this one is no different. While Exploring Muslim singlehood has been useful to highlight some of these larger issues and reveal some of the cultural changes that occur as a result. I admit that the situation is very complex and as a result, my study may have merely skimmed the surface. A further study could focus on just one or two aspects of singlehood, perhaps courtship and loneliness, or becoming Muslim, to produce a more thorough exploration. Also, this study aimed to give voice to young Muslims and as a result is very rich in empirical data from interviewees. However, in the essence of space, I did not include much data from other community
members (parents, elders, those over 40 year of age). A further study could include more of their views (in their own words rather than the interpretation of their words).

While my study was ethnically diverse, there were key groups of people who were not represented including second-generation African immigrant, Malaysians, Indonesians and Arab Men. Also, the experiences of divorcees, and those who have lost their spouses would also help to increase our understanding. These who are experiencing singlehood for the second time may have different experiences.

So to close again with my main point: Muslim singlehood is a kind of silent battleground found within the hearts, souls and minds of Muslim young adults. A complex, ambiguous and hybrid place which involves a daily spiritual and emotional jihad (struggle), yet is off the radar of much of the greater world. To support single Muslim young adults, we must first assess the situation on the ground. We must discover what the issues are at hand and the only way we can accomplish that task is to ask single Muslims themselves. I hope this study sparks new ideas and conversations around singlehood and other issues of interest to youth, young adults and by extension to the public as a whole.
**Ahadith**: The plural of Hadith (see Hadith)

**Adhan (Arabic)**: The call to prayer.

**Al-Akhirah**: After-Life, Hereafter, Next World. The term embraces the following ideas:

That man is answerable to God; That the present order of existence will some day come to an end; That when that happens, God will bring another order into being in which He will resurrect all human beings, gather them together and examine their conduct, and reward them with justice and mercy; That those who are reckoned good will be sent to Paradise whereas the evil-doers will be consigned to Hell; That the real measure of success or failure of a person is not the extent of his prosperity in the present life, but his success in the Next.

**Alhamdulillah**: English transliteration for the Arabic; meaning: All praise be to God.

**Allah**: English transliteration for the Arabic; meaning: The One God.

**Blackamerican**: Term coined by Dr. Sherman Jackson in *Islam and the Blackamerican.*

It refers to the group of people commonly known as African-Americans.

**Desi**: Colloquial term used to refer to peoples of South Asian descent (namely Pakistanis and Indians)

**Deen (Arabic)**: Religion

**Dua**: English transliteration for the Arabic; meaning: Non-obligatory free form prayer or supplication that can be done by anyone at any time without rules and regulation pertaining.

**Eid**: English transliteration for the Arabic; meaning: holiday or celebration. The main festivals of the Muslim year are Eid al-Fitr (commemorates the completion of *Ramadan* and Eid al-Adha (commemorates the Hajj and the Prophet Abraham's devotion and willingness to sacrifice his son for God).

**Hadith**: English transliteration for the Arabic; meaning: The written collection of the teachings and sayings of the Prophet Muhammad (s.a.w.), which are verified by
authentic sources and compiled in reputable books of the collections of Hadith, such as in the books of Sahih Muslim or Sahih Bukhari, etc.

**Hajji:** The Muslim pilgrimage to Makkah.

**Halal:** Permissible.

**Haram:** Forbidden.

**Hijab (He-jab):** The literal meaning is a curtain or barrier. Colloquially it is used to refer to the headscarf many Muslim women wear.

**Hijabi:** the colloquial term to define a woman who wears hijab (headscarf)

**Imam:** Typically a leader of Salat (formal prayer). Popularly, can also refer to scholar or leaders of a community.

**Insha Allah:** “If Allah Wills”

**ISNA:** Islamic Society of North America (founded in 1982), is probably the largest Muslim organization in North America.

**Jazaku Allahu Khair:** (or Jazakallah khyrun) English transliteration for the Arabic; meaning: May God reward you for [the] good.

**Jum'ah (Arabic):** Literally “Friday”. Jumah refers to the Muslim Friday prayers

**LOL:** Internet Chat abbreviation for “Laughing Out Loud”

**LMAO:** Internet Chat abbreviation for “Laughing My Ass Off”. Even people like me who do not curse sometimes write this abbreviation.

**Mahr:** Bridal gift that which the husband is required to make to his bride. It is settled between the two spouses at the time of marriage and symbolizes the financial responsibility that a husband assumes towards his wife by virtue of entering into the contract of marriage.

**Mahram:** A man whom a woman can never marry because of closeness of relationship (e.g. father, brother, uncle, son, etc.). Her husband is also her Mahram.

**Mashallah:** English transliteration for the Arabic; meaning: God has willed it.
**Masjid:** Masjid

**MSA:** Muslim Student’s Association

**Musalla:** Prayer room or space designated for prayer. It is usually carpeted

**Muslim:** English transliteration of the Arabic; meaning: believer (i.e. believer in God).

   Also, the name of a book of the collections of Hadith, "Sahih Muslim."

**Muslima:** Muslim Woman

**Nikah:** The Nikah is the Islamic marriage contract which binds the couple as a union in the sight of God.

**Niqab:** Face veil that some Muslim women wear covering the face except the eyes

**Niqabi:** The colloquial term used to refer to women who wear the niqab

**Niyah:** Intentions

**OMG:** Internet abbreviation for “Oh My God”

**PBUH:** Peace be upon him. Used interchangeably with (saw) to invoke blessings after the name of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) is mentioned.

**Quran:** Also spelled Koran. The compilation of the revelations Muslims believe were revealed to the Prophet Muhammad (Peace be upon him)

**Ramadan:** Ramadan is the Islamic month of fasting.

**(SAW):** English abbreviation of the transliteration of the Arabic phrase, "Sallallahu alayhi wa sallam"; meaning: The peace and blessing of God be upon him. This is said whenever the name of prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.) is mentioned or read. In English it is written (pbuh).

**Shahaddah:** First pillar of Islam. Ashaddu an la illaha ilallah wa ashaddu anna Muhammadar Rasulullah - English transliteration for the Arabic; meaning: I bear witness that there is no god except God, and I bear witness that Muhammad is the [last] Messenger of God.

**Sheikh:** Literally “an old man”, but religiously a male scholar
Shi'a: Shi'a Muslims comprise the second-largest denomination of Muslims.

Sunnah: English transliteration for the Arabic; meaning: The traditions and practices of the Prophet Muhammad (s.a.w.) that are not only recorded in the books of Sahih Muslim and Sahih Bukhari but have been in practice since the day of the Prophet (s.a.w.) until the present.

Sunnii: The largest overall denomination of Muslims, Sunnis are the majority in most Muslim countries.

Surah: English transliteration for the Arabic; meaning: chapter; as in, "chapter" and verse.

(SWT): English abbreviation of the transliteration of the Arabic phrase, "Subhannah wa t'ala"; meaning: Glory be to the Mighty God.

Ummah: English transliteration for the Arabic; meaning: All of the Muslims collectively.

Wali: Guardian. In reference to marriage, it is often used to refer to male who serves as the protector of the Muslim sister during marriage negotiations.

Walima: Marriage Banquet

Zakat: Literally "Purification". It is the obligatory charity for all Muslims which amounts to a minimum of 2.5% of an individual's wealth.

Zawaj: Literally means marriage.
APPENDIX B

APPROVAL LETTER FROM THE HUMAN SUBJECTS
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD
To: Ann Miles, Principal Investigator
   Zarinah El-Amin, Student Investigator for thesis
   Halim Naeem, Student Investigator

From: Amy Naugle, Ph.D., Chair

Re: HSIRB Project Number: 07-12-12

This letter will serve as confirmation that your research project entitled "Negotiating Singlehood – Muslim American College Students" has been approved under the expedited category of review by the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board. The conditions and duration of this approval are specified in the Policies of Western Michigan University. You may now begin to implement the research as described in the application.

Please note that you may only conduct this research exactly in the form it was approved. You must seek specific board approval for any changes in this project. You must also seek reapproval if the project extends beyond the termination date noted below. In addition if there are any unanticipated adverse reactions or unanticipated events associated with the conduct of this research, you should immediately suspend the project and contact the Chair of the HSIRB for consultation.

The Board wishes you success in the pursuit of your research goals.

Approval Termination: December 17, 2008
As-salaamu-alaykum (Peace be unto you)! You have been invited to participate in a research project entitled "Negotiating Singlehood, Muslim American College Students." This research is intended to explore how Muslim American college students feel about being single. This project is Zarinah El-Amin’s masters thesis project.

You will be asked to attend two one-hour interviews with Zarinah El-Amin. You will be asked to meet for these sessions wherever you jointly agree upon. During these sessions, questions will be asked concerning your thoughts of being single as well as the challenges you may face in your singlehood.

You will also be asked to provide general information about yourself, such as age, ethnicity, hometown and level of education. As in all research, there may be unforeseen risks to the participant. One potential risk of participation in this project is that you may disclose sensitive data you do not wish to be publicly connected to. In this case you have the opportunity to either remove that data from the record or have it included with other data under a pseudonym.

All of the information collected from you is confidential. That means that your name will not appear on any papers on which this information is recorded. This interview will be audio-taped. The data will all be coded, and Zarinah El-Amin will keep a separate master list with the names of participants and the corresponding code numbers. Once the data are collected and analyzed, the master list will be destroyed. All other forms will be retained for at least three years in a locked file in the principal investigator’s office.

One way in which you may benefit from this activity is having the chance to talk about your experiences, which research indicates is beneficial for individuals. Other students who may be dealing with similar issues, may benefit from the knowledge that is gained from this research.

You may refuse to participate or quit at any time during the study without prejudice or penalty. If you have any questions or concerns about this study, you may contact either Zarinah El-Amin at 313-377-2857 or Halim Naeem at 734-657-3183. You may also contact the chair of Human Subjects Institutional Review Board at 269-387-8293 or the vice president for research at 269-387-8298 with any concerns that you have.

This consent document has been approved for use for one year by the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board as indicated by the stamped date and signature of the board chair in
the upper right corner. Do not participate in this study if the stamped date is more than one year old.

Your signature below indicates that you have read and/or had explained to you the purpose and requirements of the study and that you agree to participate.

__________________________  __________________________
Signature  Date

Consent obtained by:

initials of researcher  __________________________

Date


Carlson, C. I., & Chang, H. H. Identity, acculturation, and adjustment of high school Muslim students in Islamic schools in the USA.


McMurthie, B. (2001). For many Muslim students, college is a balancing act. *Chronicle of Higher Education*

Mir, S. (2006). *Constructing Third Spaces: American Muslim Undergraduate Women's Hybrid Identity Construction*


*Turning Muslim in Texas. www.turntoislam.com*. [Video/DVD]


