People Without Voice: Perceptions of Social Bias Against Muslims in the United States

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A PEOPLE WITHOUT VOICE: PERCEPTIONS OF SOCIAL BIAS AGAINST MUSLIMS IN THE UNITED STATES

by

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This paper is an ethnographic investigation of Muslim American perceptions of social marginalization in the United States as a by-product of various governmental and media forces, with the Kalamazoo, MI community being the regional focus. The existence of the violence-crazed zealot Muslim stereotype has had social repercussions for Muslims living in America. The first part of this research looks at the development of Muslim stereotypes before 9/11. The second half of this paper discusses the results from interviews with local Muslims Americans who have given me their perspective on prejudice against Islam in the United States.

The oral accounts provided will be used to highlight a personal perspective of how different aspects of American society contribute to bias against Islam. We each see the great narrative of our times from one vantage point and must endeavor to understand the viewpoints of others in order to benefit from “what they see”. This effort will give a voice to a generation of Muslims in America that have up to this point lain far too silent during the most crucial of social periods in addition to highlighting some of the subjective aspects of racial prejudice.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE: LITERATURE REVIEW ....................................................... 1

Why is this important? ............................................................................ 1

Historical Overview ................................................................................... 3

  Setting the stage for Islamophobia .................................................. 3

  Major political events ....................................................................... 6

  Political/military policy marginalization of Muslims .................... 10

  The media and the perpetuation of stereotypes ............................ 13

  Social effects of institutionalized marginalization ......................... 15

  Moving forward: Islam and America and the trials ahead .......... 16

CHAPTER TWO: METHODOLOGY, ASSUMPTIONS, AND MOTIVATIONS .................................................. 21

CHAPTER THREE: MUSLIM AMERICAN PERCEPTIONS ................................................................. 26

  Things to consider about Muslim Americans ............................... 26

  9/11 ................................................................................................. 29

  Social fear amongst Muslim Americans ........................................ 32

  Are civil rights an objective for all? .............................................. 37

  The mass media ............................................................................. 38

  Education in America ..................................................................... 46

  Government policy ......................................................................... 50

CHAPTER FOUR: REFLECTIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS ...................................................... 56
# Table of Contents—Continued

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>REFERENCES</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPENDIX</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Human Subjects Institutional Review Board protocol clearance</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER ONE

LITERATURE REVIEW

Why is this important?

Whenever it suits a large organized majority, they are apt to write history in the fashion that best suits the needs of their particular group. It has been demonstrated time and again that subordinated groups are routinely ignored historically for the benefit of the greater powers. In this subjugated form, the history of a people can only be told when juxtaposed to the greater “historically relevant” story of the group in power. This situation has played out more times than we are certainly aware of over the thousands of years of human history, the most successful examples of such oppression being completely invisible to the academic eye today. For arguably the greater portion of the last century we, as American citizens, have all played a role, conscious or not in the dehumanizing of different groups or people. Muslim Americans constitute a group in which many of our marginalization efforts have been targeted towards for many decades now. This condition requires alleviation through an increased awareness of the various social factors at work in our own society that contribute to this bias. In our own eyes the causes may seem obvious and tangible enough to address, but therein lies the problem for we cannot rely upon our own perspective exclusively to deconstruct an issue as complex as institutionalized racial, religious bigotry. In order to begin to address the problem we must consider the personal perspective of those that are the victims of such bias- Muslim Americans. It is my belief that multi-faceted problems, such as the antagonism towards
Muslims in this country, needs to be addressed in a multi-faceted manner that considers all possible viewpoints in order to elucidate causal factors that may otherwise remain hidden to the eyes of the empowered majority.

It is hoped that this approach will create a viable starting point from which to illustrate how political and media related factors have contributed to the dehumanizing of Muslims in general, a condition that must be alleviated. Their story has been muffled by these institutions and then replaced with a political fiction designed to mislead the American public. American Muslims have been reduced to nothing more than hateful stereotypes by various social institutions and this population must be engaged directly in order to highlight the many large and minute factors of life in American society that have contributed to the creation of a minority considered subhuman by many. Relying almost exclusively upon the viewpoints of external researchers can hide the true scope of such problems.

In order to address this issue as completely as possible it is necessary to look back at the development of Islamaphobia in the United States. The first portion of this paper will focus upon the various political, economic, and social factors that have contributed to the creation of an environment hostile towards Muslims abroad and in the United States. One major goal of this section will be to illustrate how marginalization of Muslims in America is not a by-product of recent hostilities following the events of 9/11. Instead, what we see today is the continuation of a long tradition of prejudice in this country against Muslims that has been sanctioned in the past and present by government policy and perpetuated by our media.
In order to engage the social conditions Muslim Americans in the present it is necessary to first a review how historical situations in Southwest Asia and the United States have influenced the attitudes of the American populace towards practitioners of Islam. In this overview, the roles of the media and government will be highlighted as they relate to growth of anti-Islamic sentiment in the United States. This will of course be a cursory examination since a wholehearted attempt to discuss the historical politics of the region would easily fill several tomes of knowledge and still leave many readers unsatisfied. What shall follow beyond that point will be a description and analysis of the research undertaken in order to get a particular understanding of the current social environment that American Muslims find themselves struggling within today. Being a Master’s project, this research has been undertaken with the assumption that it shall serve as a stepping-stone for the development of a larger and more involved project focusing on these issues and many others. As such, the final position of this paper shall reflect upon the various procedural and methodological issues and problems that I have encountered during the preparation of this thesis. In addition, future directions and questions for further research will be raised in this final portion.

Historical Overview

Setting the stage for Islamaphobia

Muslims in American have always had their stories muffled and or erased or stamped out by those that control the larger narrative of the nation. Michael A. Gomez (1994) counters the popular belief that American Islamic relations began primarily in the Twentieth century. According to Gomez, Islam has been a part of American heritage
from the very formulation of this nation. He refers specifically to Islamic slaves that were captured in Africa and then brought over to the American colonies. According to his research, and the work of others, the number of slaves who were active practitioners of the Islamic faith may have numbered into the thousands, yet why are the abundant majority of Americans ignorant of this historical presence? Gomez's work serves as a prime example of how a population written out of history has been given a voice by the modern researcher.

For the greater part of the Twentieth century, the average American had very little knowledge of the world of Islam and its many varied parts. Instead, the obvious detractors of national attention, the Germans, the Japanese, and the Russians occupied the bulk of American thought. American exposure to the cultures of Southwest Asia may have been limited to the stereotypical portrayal of Arabic peoples in movies and from a superficial familiarity with Arabic literature such as *Arabian Nights* until the later half of the Twentieth century (Little, 1998).

For hundreds of years Europe and the Arabian Peninsula have had an intrinsically connected history punctuated with great periods of sharing and peace and great periods of rampant hatred and violence. Consider for a moment a statement made by Sir Oliver of Paderborn, a 13th Century Crusader, about the Muslim faith, "Islam began by the sword, was maintained by the sword, and by the sword would be ended" (Gerges, 1997). This quote illustrates the antagonism felt by Europeans towards Islam and the general feeling that Islam was a faith of violence that needed to be ended by Christian righteousness. Unfortunately, some segments of the American populace echo these sentiments centuries later.
It needs to be stressed here that the antagonism between the two “larger cultures” referred to as the West and the Middle East (as inaccurate as those titles may be) is a feuding relationship that has existed for centuries. The beginning of which could most likely be traced to some point after the rise of the religion of Islam in the sixth and seventh centuries. At this point, it may not be wholly inaccurate to describe such a relationship as almost traditional. I do not want to legitimize this situation but I must note that current military aggressions cannot be assumed to be the result of colonial aspirations during recent centuries on the part Christian nations such as Britain and France alone. In many ways, current hostilities are the inevitable result of two religious traditions who believe themselves to be the only true religion and who also have mandated themselves to convert others and spread the word of their religious faiths. Since American society is conceptualized as a natural progression of several European cultural traditions it naturally follows that along with the adoption of various aspects of European identity, American culture has been unable to avoid internalizing the prejudices of Europe as well.

After the fall of the German and Japanese military, the position of the “other” fell into vacancy in America. A new enemy was needed to focus the attention of the American public and it was found amongst the communists of the U.S.S.R. Before 1970 it was not Islam that concerned the American government but rather revolutionary nationalism of the type that ousted the Czar in Russia that had them worried (Gerges, 1997). This attitude did shift in the coming decades as the Cold War spilled over into Islamic nations (Halliday, 2002). Eventually the Democracy/Communism dichotomy would be replaced by a general hysteria of “Islamaphobia” in the west.
Major political events

There are of course many different political events that have had a hand in shaping American perceptions of those who practice Islam. The following events and their effects will be addressed below: the development of Islam based civil rights parties in the U.S., the creation and role of Israel, the oil embargo of 1973, the Iranian hostage crisis, and the World Trade Center bombings of 1993. Each of these carried a particular message of association that would be central to the formulation of American stereotypes of what Islam is and what motivates those who follow it.

The Nation of Islam founded by Elijah Muhammad was one such organization formulated to lift African Americans out of their oppression by attempting to empower and unite the African American community through the adoption of Islam (al-Shingiety, 1991). The message preached tended to be separatist, favoring the supremacy of the black population and the unity of blacks against whites (al-Shingiety, 1991). The organization also approved to a limited extent, delinquent acts as long as they were directed against the agents or symbols of white oppression and the police (Elder, 1970).

For many Americans the arrival of the Nation of Islam was the first time that they had been exposed to the Islamic faith. The challenges to white authority, the suggested racial superiority of blacks, and the suggestion of sanctioned violence against whites caused an uproar amongst white Americans who began to associate violence with the civil rights movement and Islam. For a brief time African Americans and Islam became the missing “other” here at home that upon which the white majority could focus their aggressions (al-Shingiety, 1991).
Founded as a state in 1948, Israel has had the honor of being a hotbed for religious-political maneuverings for centuries. Israel has always been considered something of the underdog in the region despite backing by the greatest military power on Earth (Akins, 1980; Haddad and Lummis, 1987; and Haddad, 1991). Israel enjoys a special connection to the United States and on many matters of political importance has the ear of the American government available to voice its concerns.

The creation of Israel had the profound effect of dichotomizing the West and Southwest Asia along cold war lines creating a debilitating association for all Muslims in Southwest Asia with communists in the United States. The creation of a Palestinian state has long been opposed by Israel who fears that the creation of such a political entity would be the creation of a dagger pointed at the heart of Israel. This is despite the fact that such a state would be largely inert militarily and surrounded on three sides by Israel (Akins, 1980). Behind closed curtains, Americans and Israelis feared that a Palestinian state would become a base of operations for Soviet interests. Arabs and Muslims were associated with communists vis-à-vis government policy during the heart of the cold war and the media in the United States only served to further validate these connections (Akins, 1980; Haddad, 1991). The media played the crucial role of reinforcing the idea of the Arab aggressor in the dealings between Israel and its neighbors (Danowski and Lind, 1998). The story of the Palestinian fight for freedom was, and still is, related only within the larger context of Israel’s fight against oppression here in the United States (Akins, 1980). American policy relating to Israel and Palestine (and the rest of Southwest Asia) as portrayed by the media further cemented the bond between Islam, violence, and communism in the minds of Americans (Danowski and Lind, 1998). For
many, this period marks the beginning of the Judeo-Christian American struggle against
the "Muslim" world and national reinforcement of such a dichotomous ideal (Haddad, 1991). Of course, "commie-Muslims" could never be Americans by definition and this stigma would most definitely follow later Muslim immigrants to the United States.

The OPEC oil embargo of 1973 has the misfortune of being the first universal exposure of Southwest Asian Islam to the public of the United States, since conflicts with Muslims up to that point were carried out over seas between Israel and Southwest Asia. None of it ever truly touched Americans at home until King Faisal of Saudi Arabia threatened to cut oil exports to the United States unless concessions were made against Israel following the Arab-Israeli War (Akins, 1980; Gerges, 1997). America called OPEC’s bluff and suffered the consequences.

Fuel prices skyrocketed and Americans waited in lines for hours to get the gas needed to go to work and provide for their families. To many Americans, insidious Arabs hungry for wealth and revenge against the United States perpetuated the gas drought. The oil embargo was long lived and served as a daily reminder of the evil and selfish nature of Islam (Gerges, 1997). During this prolonged oil drought, political motivations for Arab actions in Southwest Asia where supplanted for religious ones. Islam became the scapegoat for many Westerners for all conflicts in Southwest Asia.

The Iran hostage crisis of 1978-1979 concreted any association of evil with Islam that may have been developing in America. Iranian students held 52 American hostages for 444 days (Gerges, 1997). The daily realities of the situation weighed heavily upon the American people and carved deep-rooted feelings of animosity towards Iran and Islam everywhere. Day in and day out the media did their job of reporting the situation in
the most dramatic fashion possible doing their best to reinforce all of the negative stereotypes associated with Islam the entire while. The United States, unable to rescue its citizens, was emasculated by the politics of the situation. The feelings of helplessness were unnerving to the mighty United States and further fueled the seeds of hatred already germinating (Gerges, 1997). It was during this crisis that the Ayatollah Khomeini labeled the United States “The Great Satan” (Gerges, 1997). Could the American media have asked for a better anti-Islamic poster boy and slogan? As misconstrued as this association may be it nevertheless remains with Americans to this day and unfortunately seasons all politics in the region with a flavor of holy war (from all sides involved). Of course political aggressions abroad came to be directed against Muslims in the United States as American society added yet another grievous complaint to the litany of charges against Islam and Muslims everywhere (Gerges, 1997).

The final major political event of relevance (prior to the attacks on the World Trade Center 2001) is the bombing of the World trade Center in 1993. This would not remain so forever for in 1993 10 Muslims were arrested in association with the World trade Center bombing and Americans realized for the first time the conflicts of Southwest Asia, of which they have remained relatively insulted from, was going to be brought home to them. A fear developed that subversive Islamic “Fundamentalist” groups were operating right here in their own backyards to harm Americans at home (Hasan 2002). The media filled their traditional role of fanning the flames of paranoia and a new fervor of “Islamaphobia” gripped the nation that would manifest itself violently against the Islamic and Arabic population of the United States in the years to come.
The period of 1973-1993 was a time of social setbacks for Islam in the United States. What had been a relatively unknown religion to Americans during the first half of the century had developed into an icon for evil whose followers are little more than fanatic, Arab, communists hell bent on destroying Jews and Christians everywhere. Aggression and blame was directed towards every single Arab (or Arab looking) or Islamic person in the United States. Islamic Americans had to deal with these realities either in the form of personal racist outbursts from other civilians or through a greater public shame as their religion and culture was lambasted daily on the news for all to see.

**Political/military policy marginalization of Muslims**

Historically, the United States government has endeavored to associate Southwest Asian nations that did not support American interests with Communism (Akins, 1980; Haddad, 1991). As casualties mounted in the fight against fanatical Islam and Communism, the American government actively worked to marginalize the value of Arab/Muslim life.

During the Persian Gulf War (1990-1991) the government fed the American public daily reports of casualties as they occurred while pushing back the Iraqi advance. According to Marouf Hasian Jr. (1998) these reports glorified American soldiers as defenders of justice, honor and the American way. If the American way is defined as the Judeo-Christian way then these accounts coalesce to little more than the edification of soldiers in a holy war against the evil Islamic empire.

Hasian continues to say that while this may be true in terms of American lives lost it is not true in regards to the people of Iraq and Kuwait that lost their lives. Thousands
died as result of this war but are never mentioned. Hasian suggests that the military intentionally downplayed the deaths of Arabic people dehumanizing their existence and suggesting that Arab life was worthless, especially in comparison to a single American soldier. Thousands of dead Iraqis were no more than “Collateral Damage” while each American life lost was a tragedy, a cursory glance at news reports detailing the military violence in Iraq today shows that this sort of dehumanization is still utilized.

Most often politicians will skirt issues with grace and care and endeavor to not offend any potential voters. In the past, when Arabs and Muslims are the populations being discussed this practice is routinely abandoned. For instance, while still serving as a member of Congress Gerald Ford blatantly accused Arab-Americans as being agents of Communist China (Haddad, 1991). No attempt was made by the soon to be American President to candy coat the allegations behind the political jargon of misdirection. Arab-American life was valued so little that such measures were deemed unnecessary.

Presidents even while in office displayed contempt for the Arab/Islamic population of the United States. Ronald Reagan regularly referred to Islam in a negative light and bothered little to cater to the concerns of Muslims and Arabs living in the United States. Reagan’s tenure in office began on the heels of several of the political events that are outlined above, the most pertinent of which being the Iranian Hostage Crisis. American attitudes were already slanted against everything associated with Islam and the President catered to these fears in order to support his own agendas (Haddad, 1991). Reagan was even so bold as to say in a Time magazine interview from November 1980, “that Muslims believe the way to heaven is to lose their lives fighting Christians and Jews” (Haddad, 1991).
He then proceeded to ignore protests from the Islamic community in America and in the process made a grandiose statement through inaction about the value and position of Muslim Americans in the United States. Reagan’s statement was open ended enough that Americans could interpret it to mean that all Muslims want to kill Christians and Jews, including those living in our own neighborhoods! No attempt was made to isolate certain regimes or militant groups as ascribing to this doctrine. This statement is of course utter nonsense but did its damage since it promoted the idea that the Islamic world is homogenous and evil. This notion was further supported by Congressional representative Ileana Ros-Lehtinen who:

...accused the State Department of underestimating the uniform nature of “Islamic extremism” and of stressing instead its eclectic character; in her view, Islamic groups represent a monolithic movement “sworn to fight the Great Satan America for the global supremacy of Islam (Gerges, 1997).

Ros-Lehtinen blatantly disregarded any attempt to integrate the regional and national differences found in the world of Islam in favor of a homogenized image of evil Islam intent on destroying America. With elected officials like these who needs enemies? These are the spokespeople of the United States of America who are in essence preaching stereotypes and mongering fear among the population toward Arabs and Islam. Many people are not critical enough of politics to separate fact from fiction and to realize hidden political motivations and therefore they absorb these lessons of hatred and internalize them.
The media and the perpetuation of stereotypes

A major problem with the American media has always been its thirst for the juiciest story possible coupled with a complete lack of personal accountability. Since the environment of Southwest Asia is so volatile, it provides a perfect source of sensational nightly news for the American public to devour. They report what will get people to watch and never consider the effects that such indiscriminate journalism can have on a population of people here in America (not to mention the world over). The government, especially in regards to military issues, supplies much of the information that the press reports. More often than not, questions as to the motivations of certain pieces of information or whether the information may be blatant attempts at deception are never raised (Hasian, 1998). The voices of Muslims in America themselves go unheard creating an environment where stereotypes can fester (Danowski and Lind and Hasian, 1998).

The media reports events in Southwest Asia with a general disregard for the people on whom they are reporting. The American media rarely separates the “Islamic World” into its constituent parts and as such, media coverage therefore fails to capture the particular and regional politics of an event. The media’s depiction of Islam as a homogenous unit removes the humanity of the people referred to in favor of politically functional stereotypes. In many ways, the media is the worst contributor to Orientalist thinking in the West (Said, 1978). For instance, all Islamic people are often referred to as being Arabic. The largest Muslim country in the world is Indonesia, which is not an Arabic country. The same is true of Pakistan as well. In fact, Arabs only constitute
roughly 12% of the Islamic population on Earth yet the word Arab is often used as a synonym for Islam (Danowski and Lind, 1998). Another homogenized stereotype is that all Arabs are Muslims. Many Arabs are Christians and Jews as well as other religions (Halliday, 2002). Could the average American make that distinction?

Homogenization of Islam suggests to the average American that all practitioners of Islam subscribe to the ideals of various organizations referred to as fundamental extremists (Hasan, 2002). The media also supports the notion that these Muslim terrorists are "good Muslims" and that that the way these groups manifest their ideas is in line with Islamic doctrine, again supporting the notion of a religion of violence (Haddad and Lummis, 1987). If the average American is led to believe that good Muslims want to kill them and their families then why shouldn’t they embrace “Islamaphobia” here in the United States (Halliday, 2002)?

Now we turn our attention to the media of entertainment that fills the homes of Americans nightly and often times reduces minorities to the level of comic relief or graciously elevates them to the level of international threats to American Security. Asma Gull Hasan (2002) has pointed out how many of the movies that Americans (and many other parts of the world) enjoy are saturated with stereotypes of the kind listed above. Many movies depict Arabs and followers of Islam as fundamentalist extremists bent on destroying America. The themes are seen over and over again as a group of terrorists bombs this building or that building or attempts to highjack a plane for passage to an apparently random location in South America. Movies are a form of storytelling and it is obvious with rare exception that the Muslim world is ridiculed in this medium and various stereotypes are fostered through them and presented to the American public in an
almost informative manner. If all of these movies depict Arabs as terrorists then it must be true, right? *The Siege* is a particular movie where racism in film is evident. In this film the entire Arabic male population of New York City is placed under arrest and interned in a sports arena in response to terrorist activity in the city (Halliday, 2002). Hasan points out several other examples in films where racist Arab/Muslim stereotypes are perpetuated including *Executive Decision, True Lies, Not Without my daughter,* and *Aladdin* (this list is hardly comprehensive). Many other mediums of expression in this country belittle Muslims as well including advertisements, political cartoons, books, stand up comedy routines, etc.

**Social effects of institutionalized marginalization**

From these descriptions, it is evident that Arab Americans and those that practice Islam in America are bombarded with hostile racist portrayals in the media and elsewhere. Not only does this destroy the morale of the Muslim population but also such careless representations create a dangerous portrayal of these groups in the minds of other Americans who have come to characterize Muslims as a sort of boogeyman operating here in the United States. It may seem that this opinion may be overstated and a bit exaggerated, but we can see these negative effects in action historically.

For instance in 1995 the Oklahoma City bombing occurred. Before the deceased could be identified news organizations were already beginning to sensationalize the story. Many stations had terrorism experts and government officials appearing providing testament to the fact that this was an act perpetrated by Islamic fundamentalists. The news media succeeded in creating a fervor blaming Arabs, Muslims and all other
Southwest Asians as being responsible. In the three days following the bombing an estimate ranging from 229 to over 300 hate crimes were committed against Arab Americans and any one else associated with Islam (Gerges, 1997; Hasan, 2002). Of course in the end it was discovered that two Caucasian Americans, not associated with Islam in any fashion, were responsible. No apologies on behalf of news institutions were ever issued.

Another example occurred on July 17, 1996 when TWA flight 800 crashed and all on board were killed. Again the mysterious circumstances surrounding the crash created reason enough in the minds of the media to stir the pot of “Islamaphobia” once again. The pattern of speculative political analysis ensued and the people of America found another reason to hate Arabs and Islam. In the end the crash was attributed to engine failure (Hasan, 2002). In fact it is estimated by the FBI that between the years of 1980-1996 only 2 out of 170 terrorists acts were committed by radical Muslims, yet the American public and the media would prefer to assume otherwise (Hasan, 2002).

**Moving forward: Islam and America and the trials ahead**

Ethnographic work with Muslim Americans has been fairly scarce and before moving on to discuss my own findings I would like to take the opportunity here to describe a bit of the general conditions of current Muslim life here in the United States. Currently many Islamic families are moving into their third and fourth generations of life in America. There is of course a never-ending influx of new immigrants waiting to reap the benefits of life in America. Do the brochures that these immigrants are offered relate the world of intense negativity that accompanies one’s Islamic heritage here into the
States? Most definitely not, but perhaps these immigrants hold a vague sense of what awaits them anyway.

The American Muslim world numbers approximately 6 million and is expected to overtake the Jewish population by 2000 (Mazrui, 1996). American Muslim society is varied and complex despite representations to the contrary. In America, African Americans make up roughly 42% of the Islamic population (Mazrui, 1996). Just like any other racial or ethnic group the terms in which they identify themselves are complex. American Muslims identify themselves in four major fashions: by national origin, racial identity, religion, and as Americans citizens (Mazrui, 1996). The same can be said of all ethnic groups in the United States. In most cases Muslim Americans identify with their national origins first and their identities as Muslims second (Mazrui, 1996).

Islamic societies are deep rooted within American culture and a number of organizations have been developed to service their interests. Some include (a) The American Muslim Council, (b) The Association of Muslim Social Scientists, (c) The Association of Muslim Engineers, (d) The International Institute of Muslim Thought, and (e) The International Society of North America. Many Arab/Muslim populations exist in several localized areas around the United States. Yvonne Haddad and Adair Lummis (1987) conducted a sociological survey of Muslims living in America to find out information about their social integration into American society. Their results reflect a varied level of comfort among the different populations with a relatively highly level of integration in the Midwest.

It was found in their research that many Muslims find that they are discriminated against more and as their level of integration into American society increases. As
exposure to the general populous increases so does one's exposure to discrimination. Unfortunately reasons such as these causes many Muslim Americans to reside in communities that are relatively homogenously Islamic in order to find peace and freedom from worry. Each case is of course historically specific and many times Muslim Americans are not faced with discrimination of any sort. Sometimes Muslim Americans will Anglicize their names in order to feel more at home in American society (Haddad and Lummis, 1987).

Large populations of Muslims reside in the Midwest for various reasons. Firstly, many find themselves drawn to the Midwest because of the already developed Islamic infrastructure. Social clubs, neighborhoods, and mosques are already in place and awaiting new immigrants to join. Secondly, many Muslims immigrants are blue-collar workers who find employment in plants, especially within the automobile industry in Detroit (Haddad and Lummis, 1987). These situations create a comfortable living environment for new immigrants and also allow them the opportunity to maintain their Islamic heritage. For the recent immigrant finding work is of importance and these communities can often times set up immigrants with work before they are able to learn English. Of course some members of the communities see these tightly knit Islamic communities as a threat to integration and acceptance among the American public. Withdrawn social practices sometimes reinforce some stereotypes and allow the creation of new ones. Some suggest that the best way in which to fight these stereotypes is to go out and let the world know you, unfortunately according to their survey there are others who support complete isolationism within the boundaries of the United States (Haddad and Lummis, 1987).
Haddad and Lumis cite one case in particular of a school system constituted of roughly 80% Arabs. In this case the school system has made concessions to the Arabic population and allows the children to have excused absences for Islamic religious holidays. The school system went even as far as to provide alternative lunch sources for Arab children when pork was being served on the menu. In the end pork was removed from the lunch menu entirely. In addition some bilingual teachers were added to the teaching staff.

Currently American Muslims and Arabs find themselves trapped within something of a social crucible. They are assaulted daily by constant jabs generated by the media. Progress is being made and in no sense does this literature review mean to homogenize American culture into a uniform group of Arab/Islam haters. Populations are always inherently varied and that is part of the purpose of breaking down the stereotypes of Southwest Asia and Islam in general. It has been demonstrated how the American government and Media have fostered and developed a tale of horror on the part of all Arabic and Islamic peoples in order to benefit political ends in Southwest Asia.

This is not to suggest that real atrocities are not being committed and that everything presented on the news is a fabrication. Anyone with a TV on that fateful Tuesday in 2001 knows that atrocities are far too real. The 9/11 attacks coupled with recent military actions in Afghanistan and Iraq will undoubtedly have dire consequences for the social world of Islam in the United States. These are challenges that these communities must engage and deal with as they integrate themselves further into American life.
In America, the history of the Muslim people both in Southwest Asia and in the United States has been ignored from their perspective. The story related to us is not theirs but rather the media’s interpretation of it mixed with an ignorance of their own reporting practices that undermines the social status of Muslims throughout the world. The research I have undertaken attempts to remove these stigmas by giving a voice to a people that have been marginalized and hated because of the media and U.S. political interests overseas. It is only by aiding them in writing their own stories of life in America as members of an outcast group can these discrepancies be reconciled and America finally learn that Islam is a religion of peace just as Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism and Taoism are. This is not to suggest however, that this is some new form of the “white man’s burden” since I myself am not a white man nor do I consider this task a burden. The following sections shall detail the research methods employed in this project as well as an analysis of the perspectives offered by Muslims in the Kalamazoo, MI community regarding the changing social world around them.
CHAPTER TWO

METHODOLOGY, ASSUMPTIONS, AND MOTIVATIONS

The theoretical framework that guides this research takes a very fluid form. The research, as evidenced by the literature review, is by no means delineated by the traditional boundaries of anthropology and instead relies upon varied sources of input. The twentieth century is uncharacteristic in its extremely high level of historical documentation. An issue as grandiose as the social effects/causes of the Southwest Asian political situation has been documented in thousands of ways, many of which are readily accessible for research purposes.

The research began with an archival or library investigation in order to get a feel for many of the past socio-historical factors that have shaped the interaction between the United States and Southwest Asia by examining various sources such as political as well as writings on the subject of American racism. In order to address the inherent failings of library based research, the latter portion of this research shall rely almost exclusively upon direct interactions and conversations with members of the Kalamazoo Islamic community. I say that this shall be ‘almost’ exclusively so, for if I am correct in my assumption that social groups targeted for prejudice see certain oppressive machinations at work invisible to the accepted majority, then I will most undoubtedly be exposed to different ideas and examples of perceived marginalization that I myself could not have considered. As such whenever the opportunity presents itself, I will elaborate upon these
examples through further research in an effort to synthesize these points into the larger argument as a whole.

In our social environment in the States, it is a great wonder that we can be such continuous passive receivers of information through various media. It is unfortunate however, that so many do not stop to think about this information critically. Where does it come from? Who is saying this? Why are they saying this? Could there be another side to this story? Failure to raise questions of this nature allows stereotypes and hatred to fester in this corporate, bipartisan, democracy of ours where information is used for little more than to increase profits or garner votes. In many ways, the ultimate goal of this research is to take a methodological step towards addressing some of those critical questions in a manner that seriously considers what the silent voice has to say rather than treating them as passive and unfortunate by-products of a larger problem. That is not say that this will be an easy matter however.

The structure of the fieldwork portion of this research is simple in design. Find volunteers and ask them questions, this however was more difficult than it appeared at first. The first hurdle that needed clearing initially was my own trepidation about busting into the personal lives of a group of people that I have observed to be rather insulated, and in our current shared social world, I understand why. Once I mustered the gumption to tackle the issue I ran into a series of individuals that seemed to see the benefit of my research and expressed a wish to cooperate with me in my efforts with a genuine vigor. Many times when I would later contact such people again I would find that either through a loss of zeal of perhaps a second thinking on the matter, that their cooperation waned. This problem manifested itself mainly through e-mails that were never returned or
endless promises to meet in the future to allow me to engage them in this project. It is for
this reason that the pool of potential volunteers for this research seemed to shrink weekly,
and why to my disappointment that I could not work with the local Islamic Center either.
I believe that complications such as these derive more from the limitations of short-term
fieldwork. In this case Muslim Americans in Kalamazoo, MI are already a guarded
community making it all the more difficult to make the social connections necessary to
enact research of this nature within the short time span of Master’s level research.

As stressful as this may have been for me at the time, I cannot attribute this
difficulty to any person in particular, since I realized that my research might cause some
to be cautious of me. I had been warned beforehand that work with Muslims in the
United States at this time may be difficult since they currently feel assaulted by American
society in general and could perhaps be wary of outsiders in an environment that seeks to
condemn them and their religion. Whatever the reasons may be I did run into resistance
among some Muslims that I approached. I did however, have the good fortune to be
introduced to a group of Muslims students on campus that saw the value of what I was
doing and who agreed to meet with me to discuss these issues along with a few other
scattered members of the community. For the sake of anonymity, I shall of course allow
them and all others involved to remain nameless.

Casual interviews comprised the bulk of the fieldwork. I did not utilize surveys at
all. I had constructed a series of questions that addressed some of the factors that in the
past have contributed towards the marginalization of Muslims in the United States. Most
of the questions focus upon the role of various governmental and media bodies in the
construction and maintenance of Islamaphobia in the United States. It needs to be
elaborated that governmental and media bodies are a wide and varied thing, and I shall
treat them as such, and can include many different organizations or forms as education,
government policy, military activity, public education, newspapers, news programs on
TV and radio, websites, etc. Volunteers once obtained, were asked how these different
factors have contributed to their own feelings of marginalization, if at all. In theory, I
figured that I could then control the scope and direction of the conversations by returning
back to my own basic open ended questions, but in practice the conversations were
turbulent and unpredictable, and many times only the first question remained
premeditative while the following were primarily ad hoc. Roughly, a third of the ten total
interviews were done one on one while the remainders were conducted in groups.

I believe it is an intrinsic characteristic of human nature that we presuppose many
ideas without an empirical reference. Postmodernists forgive my naivety for utilizing
such a grandiose nomothetic statement, but I feel that there is a definite truth to this
especially in regards to issues of prejudice and racism. 9/11, as painful as it was and is
for most Americans, it was doubly so for Muslim Americans who had to simultaneously
suffer through the attacks on the symbols of American economic and military might
while doing their best to stand strong in an environment that blamed them and their
religion for the attacks. I assume that this work is necessary and that the social
environment of America today still warrants research of this nature today- that we have
somehow become forgiving and free of this form of stereotype-motivated hatred seems a
distant hope in my mind.

In fact, some of my assumptions in this realm are not formulated by introspection
but rather by my own real world experiences. I myself am not a Muslim. In general I
consider myself completely integrated into American society, yet despite this I have also been targeted by anti-Arab and anti-Islam racism due to my ethnic heritage and complexion. After 9/11, I found myself repeatedly ridiculed in different public situations by strangers wishing to antagonize me into a physical conflict. They would mistakenly assume that I was Islamic or Arabic and launch the usually volley of slurs at me. Being called a “camel jockey” and a “sand-nigger” not only hurts but makes one painfully aware of the hurt being felt by others who these barbs are designed to emasculate. Telling the story of the Islamic American experience in a way assuages my own desires for resolution as well.
CHAPTER THREE

MUSLIM AMERICAN PERCEPTIONS

Things to consider about Muslim Americans

As stated previously, the foci of this project is to illicit and examine the various forces that contribute to social marginalization as perceived by Muslim Americans. This section shall detail the results of the interviews conducted towards these ends. It is important to keep in mind that the ways in which racism and others forms of prejudice operate are not completely visible to one person surveying their social landscape alone. Each of us in oriented in unique ways towards the culture in which we find ourselves immersed within, with none of us sharing precisely the same vision or understanding of what is exactly going on around us. I myself have a large knowledge of the various socio-political aspects of the antagonistic relationship between the “West” and various Islamic political entities, but I would never be so bold as to state that I hold a complete understanding of these issues. This research has exposed me to other facets of social marginalization that I never otherwise would have been able to see. As I expected I did indeed learn a great deal more about Islam in the United States, but I was also regularly surprised by the different ideas, concerns, and orientations towards the problem that I found amongst the Muslim population of Kalamazoo, MI. Even as I write these words, I find myself considering issues that even a few months ago would have remained elusive to me.

Perhaps the single most pertinent lesson learned through my investigation is that
Muslim Americans are a diverse group of people. While this may sound a bit obvious, I mean to stress that as a trained anthropologist I am of course aware of and appreciate diversity, but textbook understandings do not equate to real world understandings. When I began this project, I discussed the project with some local Muslim Americans and right away, they opened my eyes to some analytical possibilities that I had not considered until that point. They felt that in order to understand prejudice against Muslims in the United States that I would first need to understand Muslims in the United States. If nothing else, this project is an investigation into social relativity of sorts and by its own mandate, I as the researcher must be cognizant of the spectrum of different social orientations that Muslims and all people have to their social world. The issue of racism is not the same for all people mainly because of who they are. A full-blooded male of English descent may sympathize with the struggles of blacks in this country but could never truly understand that struggle in the same fashion as black Americans do. As a caveat I do not mean to suggest that an inability to share in oppression should somehow serve as a reason to allow, perpetuate or ignore that said oppression as I myself have hopefully demonstrated.

With that said I would like to stress that American Muslims have carried with them to the states the unfortunate curse of homogenization. With so much concern for Islam in the American media, little is done to sort out the differences amongst Muslim populations in favor of treating Islam as a monolithic whole. American Muslims are as varied as any other population and when analyzing racism from their perspective it is important to consider the heterogeneous aspects of their population, for these differences may cause varied experiences and perceptions of prejudice. Here are few examples of some potential differences to keep in mind when discussing Muslim Americans:
1. Muslim Americans immigrate to the United States from different regions of the world. They are not all from the same generic “Middle Eastern” mold that the media has fashioned. While that may seem obvious, different national, racial, ethnic, political, and historical backgrounds which are often ignored can have profound effects for how one relates to American culture at large.

2. Islam is not a monolithic religion that is practiced the same by every Muslim in every part of the World. Islam is as varied as Christianity in some respects and Sunnis, Shiites, Sufis, and others provide for as much variation in thought as Baptists, Presbyterians, Methodists, and Mormons do.

3. There may also be fundamental differences in understanding based upon whether or not the person in question is a recent immigrant to the country or native born. Visitors may disagree with other Muslims that have called the United States home all of their life. Different levels of Assimilation can be cause for different perceptions of social issues.

4. The perspectives of international students can vary greatly when different factors such as how long they shall stay in this country, whether they shall be staying or leaving once their education has been completed, and what they are studying are considered.

5. Finally, Muslim Americans are representative of the socio-economic conditions of their lives in the United States just as non-Muslims are. Occupation, income, region of residence, political party affiliation and many other factors influence their daily perceptions of life in the United States in addition to the other bullets listed above.
Now it is time to consider the different ways in which racism has manifested itself against Muslims in the United States, as perceived by the volunteers in this project. I think that Americans probably conceive of racism as a force that is also monolithic in character. What racism is to many may be as simple as preventing groups full access to society based upon their skin color, ethnicity, or religion. In addition, different social regulators (the actions, institutions, and ideologies of society that create and maintain various cultural ideals) maintain the status quo of social inequality. While there is some truth to this simplistic description of institutionalized racism, I want to stress that various social factions perceive the social forces that create animosity between groups differently. When I began this research, I wanted to focus primarily upon the role that the American Media and the Government have played as social regulators of prejudice against Muslims. I of course knew that it would ultimately be impossible to keep the interviews focused upon these topics alone. In retrospect, it appears that my own perceptions where a bit simplified on the matter. I have learned that while many of the social regulators identified by the Muslims involved in this project did relate to the American Media and Government, that they were far more varied and wide ranging than I had conceptualized.

In the interviews, 9/11 repeatedly arose as a major factor in the development of hostility towards Islam in the United States. As illustrated in the historical survey earlier, for decades there has existed an institutional acceptance of marginalizing Islam in the United States. When this is considered, it is difficult to see 9/11 as the cause of these circumstances and neither would the participants in this project, who view 9/11 as central
for its iconic place in recent American history. The sentiment shared by many members of this sample is that 9/11 was something of a public call to arms rekindling American fear of Islam. Far more importantly however, 9/11 as marketed (yes I do mean marketed by various media outlets to gather ratings) served to prove that there is a danger in Islam and its followers. Many interpreted 9/11 as proof that we as a nation were not wrong to feel antagonism towards Islamic people for much of the Twentieth Century and that in some ways our prejudicial ideas are right and honorable. As one local Muslim man put it, “the collective blame was placed on all Muslims” or at least that is how he felt and for many he was not far from the truth. The grandiose nature of the 9/11 tragedies did of course have consequences for Muslims living in Kalamazoo.

Violent backlashes against Muslims and many perceived to be Muslims were commonplace following 9/11 and have subsided largely in recent months. With this in mind, one would expect to find evidence of such out lases here in Kalamazoo, MI but according to the participants in this study, this was not the case. In general, area Muslims describe the period following 9/11 as a time when some members of the community rallied to the aid of local Muslims and others, while perhaps internally hostile, remained relatively passive towards them. One professor noted how the local police force guarded the local Islamic Center in the days following the World Trade Center attacks. In addition, he remembers at the time how local groups such as area churches, Kiwanis, Lions, and Rotary clubs approached him, a member of the local Islamic Center, on a regular basis in order to solicit him to speak about Islam. According to the professor, there definitely seemed a desire within the community to learn more about Islam. Even
local health care officials desired to lean more about Islam in order to develop culturally sensitive treatments for Muslim patients.

I must also note that the entire community did not react so peaceably towards area Muslims. One student relayed a story to me of how area residents stoned the apartment of a few local Muslim students. The professor mentioned above involved in the speaking arrangements, attempted to contact a local Baptist church to see if they would be interested in having him give a talk about Islam. The Minister responded by telling him that Islam was an evil religion and that his congregation had no desire to hear from him.

A poignant example provided by an older Muslim man shows how some Muslim Americans have internalized the guilt of 9/11. This gentleman related an account of the days following 9/11 and how he felt that no matter where he went that the people around him were looking at him with suspicion and contempt. He acknowledged that most of those feelings had no empirical basis and were the product of his imagination, but he in some way bore the burden of guilt for the actions of others and perceived of himself and other Muslims as social pariahs. He also informed me of how this guilt recurs each year around 9/11 during times of remembrance. One story showed how perhaps this was not all in his mind when he entered an elevator and the others inside distanced themselves away from him as if he had a bomb strapped to his torso.

As an aside, I myself have had these feelings as well because of the color of my skin even though I am not a Muslim. I remember the morning of 9/11 when my mother called me and begged me not to go out in public for a few days for fear that someone might do something terrible to my brother and me. I hope that these examples illustrate that even though some post 9/11 experiences for Kalamazoo Muslims have been positive,
that there nonetheless exist many examples of negative experiences as well. The social stigma alone is debilitating for the individual who may feel that members of American society might reduce them to little more than a disgusting stereotype who desires to murder children and innocents.

Social fear amongst Muslim Americans

The social fear of Islam in the United States manifests itself in many different forms and is currently enjoying a period of revitalization. Even the relationship between parent and child can become a battleground between the forces of prejudice and tolerance. One student and convert to Islam told me of the various difficulties that she has had with her parents since she has converted to Islam. Raised in a Lutheran home, she must utilize subterfuge in order to engage her newfound religion. She says that her family is openly prejudiced against Islam and actively berates the religion and its followers in front of her and others. Her desire to wear a Hijab forces her to wear a hooded sweatshirt when praying at home in order to satisfy her own desire for modesty. Her parents have caught her kneeling while wearing the sweatshirt and have finally come to suspect that their daughter may have converted to the religion that they hate so much. As result, her parents forced her to talk with their church’s Pastor who stressed that Allah is not God, that Muslims are terrorists that will brainwash you, and that she being raised a Christian, should know better. In this instance, members of her family and community utilize negative socialization relying upon hateful stereotypes in an attempt to eradicate her faith in Islam.
For several of the Muslims involved with this research, this social fear has developed to the point where they question their own public displays of their religious beliefs. In particular, the practice of hijab has become something of a target for Muslim women. Several Muslim women expressed to me that they feel that their choice to wear hijab makes them a target for contempt in public. One professor told me a story of how a man in a parking lot sped up his car in an attempt to run over his wife, who wears a hijab, and would have succeeded if another customer had not quickly pulled her out of the way.

In addition, they note that many Muslim American parents do not want their daughters to wear the Hijab any longer for fear of harm befalling them. One young woman, who resides in a residence hall on campus, says that each room has a picture of the residents on the door. In her picture she is wearing a Hijab, and she is the only person on the floor to have their picture torn down repeatedly and each time she valiantly replaces it.

What all of these factors amount to is a fear of engaging the American public by the Muslim students and others in this study. A recurring theme among those interviewed is that the voice of Muslim Americans is silent in America. Some Muslim Americans have suggested to me that while many aspects of American society actively work to silence Muslims that sometimes the fault lies with American Muslims themselves who may be hesitant to draw public attention to themselves. Several volunteers expressed a concern that speaking up publicly may turn the general population against them to a greater degree. They figure that if they were to engage in activities such as peace demonstrations on campus that they may turn a larger number of George W. Bush supporters against them, especially if such supporters believe the absolutist tripe that anyone who disagrees with the Republican agenda is an enemy of the state, even...
American citizens. This is a dangerous catch 22 for Muslims who actively keep a low profile, whose inaction could add to the fear and suspicion of Islam by not openly advocating in defense of it.

While cautious to engage the public on political issues, Kalamazoo Muslims do believe that education about Islam will provide the most effective solution to the problem and have engaged the community in a variety of ways to promote a greater understanding of Islam. While many of the programs have proved to be quite successful in terms of turnout, there is always a looming cloud of bigotry that shadows them. Recently Pat Buchanan, a man renown for his intolerance of minorities, was invited to speak at Western Michigan University on Cesar Chavez day (of all days) by a college Republican group. The same week the local Islamic center and Muslim Students groups had arranged to have a speaker talk about the commonalities between Islam and other religions. While promoting the event, the Muslims students noticed that many of their flyers were being torn down. They would replace them only to find them torn down again later in the week. In many cases, other flyers were placed directly over theirs to cover them. The flyers that most often covered theirs were promotions for the upcoming visit by Pat Buchanan deliberately placed upon promotions for the speaker on Islam as a statement of intolerance.

In addition to the outrageous defilement of the advertisements for speakers on Islam and issues of tolerance, there have been other occurrences of antagonism towards those organizing these events. In most cases, occurrences have taken the shape of hate mail sent to the organizing group before the events that lambaste the speakers and make all sorts of claims about the speaker having connections to groups such as Nazis and
terrorists. This example in particular refers to William Baker, a CAIR sponsored speaker that gives talks on religious tolerance and cross-cultural understanding (these selections are presented in the original form as written by the authors any misspellings are their own):

Your upcoming event features a speaker who investigation has shown is a Neo-Nazi. In the past he has asked his student audience to rally for Palestine. This is unacceptable. CAIR has been deemed to have ties to terrorist per senators Schumer, Durbin and Kyle in an investigation Sept 2003 entitled Connecting the Dots 2yrs after 9/11. Daniel Pipes leading authority in America on Islam who is presently working with this administration has said the same thing and that nobody in this country should give them CREDENCE. Steve Emerson leading authority on terrorism in America has testified before Congress about CAIRs ties to Hamas and terrorists. WE need good relations amongst us. This is not the way to create that bond. I have no connections with Isreal or Palestine, I am just concerned for my own country...

It is interesting to note that the speaker reveals a larger problem in the United States when they suggest that somehow the political plight of the Palestinians is not valid. This is a large problem since it is a position that inherently suggests that one religious/ethnic group should be favored over another. Of course the favor goes to Israel and the mostly Islamic Palestinian people’s plight is not only invalid but somehow evil and wrong as well. My own research into the subject has shown that there are allegations about Mr. Baker’s past allegiances in regards to white supremacist groups. I only found
this information however in the context of websites that are blatantly anti-Islamic and bash anything and everything connected with Islam. Somehow, the idea of a Neo-Nazi actively campaigning for the civil rights of Muslims and the plight of the Palestinian people seems absurd and illustrates that either Mr. Baker had no connections to Neo-Nazi interests in the past or that if he did that he has completely renounced his old associations. Here is another example of hate mail sent to this Muslim student organization:

I am appauled and sickened that such an organization exists at my alma mater under the guize of peace, when you are nothing but a guize for recruiting for terrorism. Peace my foot. If you really were interested in promoting peace, you would reach out your hands to all peoples, including your cousins, us Jews.

This individual does not attempt to hide their disgust for the efforts of area Muslims to foster cross-cultural understanding. Instead, they prefer to reduce the work of Muslim Americans to little more than terrorist recruiting efforts reinforcing the classic stereotype that all Muslims are bloodthirsty monsters. In addition, these programs are inter-faith dialogues that always incorporate the viewpoints of all three Abrahamic religions making this person’s last criticism completely invalid. Both of these examples illustrate that prejudicial forces are at work in the Kalamazoo community and have not completely subsided even though they have taken a less overt form. When hatred confronts efforts to promote peace and understanding, it becomes painfully clear that we are a culture that actively denies the liberties of Muslim Americans.
Are civil rights an objective for all?

At its most basic level, the fight for acceptance of Muslim identities is an issue of civil rights. While at this time no formal laws exist restricting the rights of Muslim Americans that does not mean that there does not exist an informal infrastructure that consciously denies them their liberty. One speaker at Western Michigan University described how the plight of Muslim Americans today echoes the plight of African Americans in the past and today. Her major point was to illustrate that even amongst minorities with common interests of obtaining greater social acceptance there are prejudicial divisions. The speaker noted how civil rights organizations, around Detroit, MI and nationally, primarily concerned with African American interests choose to ignore the marginalization of Muslims. She suggests that in some manner many African Americans are happy that Muslim Americans have become targets because they have replaced the “Black Boogeyman”. In addition, groups such as the NAACP are quick to protest the profiling of Black Americans but are hypocritically quiet when such things happen to Muslims. Her work also revealed that African American groups rely primarily upon crude stereotypes of Muslims Americans to defend their own positions. When a group such as African Americans, that have struggled for so long against the forces of bigotry in America, passively condone bigotry against other minorities then someone should take issue and reevaluate just what the struggle for civil rights is really all about. I hope that I have illustrated up to this point that Muslims Americans in Kalamazoo, MI are actively engaged in efforts to ward off real prejudicial forces. I wish to stress the reality of these forces since this paper shall now turn its attention towards the larger issue
of Muslim American perceptions of the factors that propagate and made such hateful stereotypes acceptable. Stereotypes, if nothing else are types of information that inform people about a social world that they do not and perhaps will never know. In that sense, a stereotype is a sort of filter for reality that reifies our own understandings and place in the world. Stereotypes do not appear out of the great void however, and require creation, nurturing, and dissemination.

In the past local conversation could have been enough to spread harmful stereotypes locally, but blessed are we today to have so many different outlets that have sped up the process of stereotyping immensely. Government policy and the media are the two most easily recognized culprits according to many of the Muslims Americans involved in this research. Many more exist and shall be discussed below in terms of what Muslims Americans feel that these aspects of American society say about Islam and how they contribute to prejudice towards Muslims living in the United States and elsewhere. All of these factors must be understood to be fluid entities whose messages cross the organizational boundaries of one another, and it is that unconscious meshing of information, stereotypes, fear mongering, and ignorance that ultimately creates the problems of racial prejudice.

The mass media

The volunteers in this project perceive numerous facets of American society responsible for the overall marginalization of Muslims in the United States. For the sakes of this paper, I shall roughly organize these into the broader categories of the mass media, public education, and government policy. To begin with, I shall discuss some of the
ways that the mass media, as perceived, contributes to the social stigma attached to Muslim Americans. The mass media is by definition an outlet of knowledge and information that reaches a large number of people regularly and informs them of the world around them. For the purposes of this discussion, the mass media shall include newspapers, television, movies, and the Internet.

The first and most often mentioned factor of the mass media that contributes to racism as perceived by American Muslims is television. Televisions are a part of the American lifestyle as much as the automobile, and as a cheap and easy form of entertainment, they hold the potential to sway the opinions of millions of Americans daily. Many people choose to obtain their information about politics, religion, and economics from television alone and do not realize the inherent biases that television holds. I would guess that the average American has no idea how political agendas play out through television programming. It is because of this factor that most of the Muslim Americans interviewed feel that television is the most dangerous threat to the reputation of Islam. Consider this quote from Dan Rather on Late Night with David Letterman following the 9/11 attacks brought to my attention by one of the interviewees:

[Muslims] see themselves as the world’s losers. They would never admit that. They see us, we have everything. We win everything. They see themselves and think, we should be a great people, but we’re not. It drives them batty. They hate us for who and what we are. (www.worldpress.org/mideast/1201dailystar.htm)

It is the fact that television serves as constant source of data input from individuals that are not qualified to make the grandiose and damning statements that they
do that worries Muslim Americans. Mr. Rather's quote is an example of simplified
dogma that highlights the positives of American society and reduces the "Muslim world"
to little more than psychopathic jealous beggars. The real danger lies in the fact that
these sorts of explanations completely deny the political, economic, and historical factors
that contribute to something like 9/11 in favor of replacing causation with some fantasy
about how everyone wants to be an American so bad that they would rather destroy us
than allow us to live. The Bush administration regularly ignores these factors as well and
opts for morality based assessments of why various factions in the world wish the United
States harm.

In addition, most Muslim Americans seemed to agree that the media conflates
religion and culture when discussing events in Muslim countries preferring to explain
events as the inevitable outcome of religious thinking. This also has dangerous
implications as you can see since, if true, it suggests that the media is indoctrinating
Americans with the idea that Muslims are little more than religion driven lemmings.
There is a fear among Muslims in this study that Americans will begin to think that they
must save Muslims from Islam.

Another common criticism about the mass media lies in the realm of the so-called
expert invited to give their opinions on various talk and news shows. The volunteers in
this research have noted that many people are allowed to chime in on television programs
with opinions on matters, who appear on the surface to be legitimate experts, but actually
only present a very one sided argument that that furthers a particular governmental
agenda. One interviewee noted Dr. Fouad Ajami as one such person. His criticism of Dr.
Ajami, who regularly appears on CBS news and sometimes serves as a consultant to the
White House, is that he only analyzes American actions in Iraq and elsewhere from a Pro-Republican perspective. In essence, he and others like, him are criticized for being little more than government mouthpieces by those involved in this research and others. (Shatz, 2003).

In order not to be one-sided, perhaps Dr. Ajami (and others like him) does believe the tenets of his position but does not realize or care that other valid perspectives are being muffled in favor of the administration’s. Most Muslim Americans interviewed seem to think that there is a great danger in such lopsided representations of the complex problems facing the United States and other nations. As mentioned previously, after the Oklahoma City bombings experts quickly blamed Muslim terrorists and as a result, many hate crimes were committed against Muslim Americans. One Muslim volunteer mentioned that following the bombings a good friend in school stopped interacting with him, another volunteer said that at the time she was in middle school and her best friend stopped eating with her at lunch due to the prompting of the friend’s parents.

Other media outlets mentioned as factors contributing to prejudice against Islam in the United States are newspapers. During my research the two newspapers most prominent in the lives of Western Michigan University students, the Kalamazoo Gazette and the Western Michigan University operated Western Herald, were criticized as failing to rise above the desire to focus purely upon sales rather than content. The Western Herald in particular has been cited as especially arrogant in regards to their treatment of minorities on campus. Muslims claim that the Western Herald has consistently shown a conservative slant in its writings and in general ignores minorities and other religions all
together, instead choosing to write fluff pieces about campus Christian organizations repeatedly. This is a concern echoed by other minorities as well.

In addition, area Muslims perceive the Herald, along with the Kalamazoo Gazette, to generally present negative violent accounts of Muslims in order to sell more papers. As one person put it, the Western Herald “presents no positives, gives no voice, and makes no attempt at all”. I myself spoke with the most recent editor in chief of the Western Herald about improving coverage of minority concerns in the paper. I mentioned in particular that perhaps the paper should do a piece on area Muslims since there was a Mosque within walking distance of campus and I even offered to introduce his reporters to contacts to make writing the article easier. He answered my inquiry with an ambivalent and dismissive “maybe”. That was 8 months ago and since 9/11 the Herald has failed to even acknowledge the existence of area Muslims except through the yearly Ramadan fluff piece.

The Kalamazoo Gazette, according to one volunteer, is guilty of selling sensational stories to sell copies but is far more aware of the Muslim community in Kalamazoo than the Western Herald. According to one Muslim professor, the Gazette has made consistent efforts to consult with the local Mosque and Islamic center when writing editorial pieces since 9/11. The professor notes that the religious editor regularly contacts the Islamic center for input about American military action in Iraq and Afghanistan. In addition the Kalamazoo Gazette ran an article following 9/11 that portrayed Muslims as “good neighbors”, as the professor put it. While these actions are admirable, it may be that the overall desire to sell papers has undercut the positive accomplishments that the Gazette has achieved on behalf of the Muslim community in
Kalamazoo, MI. As a negative however, the professor notes that when asked for an opinion about violence in the Qur'an following 9/11, the paper's reporter had asked him personally what he (the professor) could do to stop terrorism, implying that somehow he and other Muslim Americans had contacts with organizations that undertake terrorist activities.

I posed the question to several interviewees about the quality of various media outlets in regards to fairness in representing Muslims. All respondents agreed that Fox news in particular is the guiltiest of presenting unfair and biased coverage of Islam. Area Muslims feel that Fox news operates as little more than a conservative political platform that presents the Muslim world in a skewed fashion in order to further their own political agendas and of course gather ratings. CNN and MSNBC were considered guilty of presenting sensational stories about Muslims but they were not perceived to approach the level of Fox news. In addition a couple of Muslims Americans mentioned that NPR and the BBC tend to be the two most fair media outlets in their coverage of issues involving Islamic peoples. One individual cited the recent efforts by Republicans to cut funding and censor the programming of NPR as a poorly veiled attempt to muffle an institution generally known for fair and balanced reporting (Labaton, 2005). Many others are also worried that these actions against NPR amount to little more than government-sponsored thought control.

Movies and non-news programming on television were regularly cited as presenting skewed visions of Islam and Muslims on a regular basis. Several people mentioned shows such as I Dream of Jeannie as grossly irresponsible in their depictions of Southwestern Asian cultures especially in regards to their ideas about female modesty.
Many movies and television shows paint a poor picture of Muslims as well portraying them most often as ruthless terrorist stereotypes with little complexity and purely evil intentions. The show 24 this season involves a storyline with Muslims terrorists causing a meltdown at a nuclear power plant and also kidnapping and trying to behead the United States Secretary of Defense on a live webcast (Parry, 2005). The show has aired a disclaimer that touts the peaceful nature of Muslim Americans before each show but such an effort is little more than farce when they spend the next hour rehashing derogatory Muslim stereotypes.

Included in the references is a link to information about this issue, if you visit this page note the user comments on the bottom that betray many of the factors I have been discussing to this point. Some comments suggests that Muslims are solely responsible for all problems associated with the war on terror, others criticize Muslims for daring to comment on negative stereotypes as this quote illustrates “I've never watched this show, but who are they to complain? In light of Sept. 11, it's not as if portraying Muslims as terrorists is inaccurate.” (Parry, 2005)

Some examples of movies that utilize Muslim stereotypes include: Aladdin, Executive Decision, The Siege, Not without My Daughter and many more. In Not Without My Daughter an American woman marries a Muslim man who then kidnaps their daughter and takes her to the “Middle East”. A friend of an interviewee, who is not a Muslim, married a Muslim man and her church tried to scare her away from him while her parents told her that he would kidnap their children just as in the movie Not Without My Daughter. This is a very poignant example of how such portrayals of Muslims can have real world consequences. One of the only American movies released in memory
that portrays Muslims in a fair fashion is the recent *Kingdom of Heaven*, but conservatives attack even that fair-handed portrayal who feel that Hollywood does not have the right to portray Muslims as anything other than monsters (Goodale, 2005).

This brings us to the Internet. Several Muslim Americans have noted to me that Islam bashing has run rampant on the Internet. They feel that a definite danger exists on the Internet where anonymous hatred can fester and is readily available to the ignorant and those wishing to validate their already existing prejudices. One individual mentioned [http://www.danielpipes.org/](http://www.danielpipes.org/) as a prime example of a biased page the purports to be an intellectual analysis of the “Muslim condition”. On this website various civil rights organizations such as CAIR and local student organizations such as the Muslim Student Association are described as terrorist fronts. If you recall back to the hate mail that I presented in this paper earlier, one letter specifically references Daniel Pipes and refers to CAIR as a terrorist organization. It takes little detective work to figure where this person received his information on Islam in the United States.

Another website cited as biased was [http://www.thequran.com/](http://www.thequran.com/). The person who brought this to my attention told me that the website is run by people hostile to Islam who present only negative information about Islam. In addition, he suggested that thequran.com goes to great lengths to belittle Islam and has even added a fake chapter to the Qur’an in order to defame the religion. I cannot verify this statement but I will comment that the web page dedicates itself to the slandering of Islam, and in that regard, it is not unique. In a larger, but hardly exhaustive search, I have found many web pages that overtly slander Muslims and Islam. I never really could have imagined that such a large amount of hate driven websites existed largely because I never really searched them
out before. The amounts are staggering and what some of them have to say about Muslims makes my soul frigid. Most are incredibly ignorant about the religion in general but talk about Islam as if they were giving an expert opinion. Most rely upon openly biased information to make their points. In addition, these web pages use singular examples to pass judgment on every single Muslim that has ever lived. In general, these web pages are extremely dangerous to the reputation of Muslims since they are unregulated and tell people exactly what they want to hear without accountability for the mistruths that they present. Here is a small sample of some Islam bashing websites that I have found (a) www.homelandsecurityus.com, (b) http://www.aboutislam.com/, (c) www.answering-islam.org, (d) www.thequran.com, (e) www.allahassurance.com, (f) www.answering-islam.org, (g) http://members.tripod.com/~Islam_Unveiled/, (h) http://www.islamreview.com/, and unfortunately there are hundreds more...

Education in America

The American educational system is another aspect of American culture that many Muslims perceive as contributing to the defaming of Islam. They commented that their own experiences in the American educational system have shown that Islam is not a topic discussed regularly and when mentioned, it is usually in a negative light. One woman commented to me that the public education system concerns itself with painting a fantasy picture of the glory of white America that actively denies the rights and voice of minorities (with a few exceptions during the month of February of course). In addition many volunteers in this research noted that teachers are highly ignorant of the Islamic faith and actively spread misinformation about the faith and its followers
although not always consciously. Sometimes however, the bias teachers portray about Islam is overt as in one case related to me in which a high school teacher of one of the area Muslims gave a brief talk about Islam the day before spring break started. In this talk, he referred to Muhammad as pedophile that married a 7 year old and then released the class for break without giving the Muslim woman an opportunity to respond to his statement. The teacher failed to grasp that Muhammad married her socially and not physically, a practice that is more common around the world than Americans are willing to believe. The manner and timing of his discussion on Islam in front of a Muslim student in that fashion seemed to her to be purposeful.

In another example a Muslim man told me of an experience where two local pastors were invited to do a question and answer session about Islam in his school. According to the individual, the pastors acted as authorities on the subject and were, in his opinion, giving out incorrect information about Islam. The man took it upon himself to speak out and correct them but for the most part many believed the pastors over him, an actual Muslim. This also begs the question, why did the school feel that it was necessary to get Christians pastors to talk about Islam? While these pastors may be knowledgeable about their own religion, their knowledge about Islam, as demonstrated, was superficial at best. With at least one Muslim family in residence in the area and probably more, the school still chose to deny them a voice to speak about their own religion in favor of a potentially narrow and dogmatic view of Islam as presented through a Christian filter.

Another common comment made by interviewees is that students were obviously ignorant of Islam and it showed in their daily interactions with their Muslim classmates.
One man told me of how much hassling he would get from other students during he
month of Ramadan as they would prod him with incessant questions about what he could
and could not eat during the day including remarks such as “you can’t even eat gum?”
On the surface, this may seem like innocent questioning but to the Muslim man it felt like
an act of ridicule when students would phrase questions to undermine his belief system.
More importantly, such questioning revealed an overall lack of understanding about
Islam. I can recall in my own experience in the public education system that Muslims
and Islam were only discussed for a day or two during my 9th grade World Cultures class
and then pretty much never again (the same for the rest of the world for that matter
except for Europe of course). In the end, I graduated from high school relatively ignorant
of everything relating to Islam, especially the political aspects.

The most horrible examples related to me involved outright racism towards
Muslims by other students. The moral code and behaviors of Muslims involved in this
project made them targets for abuse from other students. Some people lost friends, as
mentioned previously, because of frightened parents. In addition, some interviewees
experienced outright hostility while in school. One young woman, who attended high
school in Mattawan, MI a town just outside of Kalamazoo, told me that bigots regularly
verbally bombarded her. In fact, during her senior year of school, a classmate told her “I
know what your senior prank will be, you’re going to bomb the school”. Even her own
classmates considered her a potential murderer, at least in words.

Another major criticism levied by this sample of Muslims is that the American
public school system is highly intolerant of dissident opinions that do not “chime” with
accepted dogma about America’s history and place in the world. In all things, the great
American narrative repeatedly strangles the perspectives of others. One young woman related to me that even at Western Michigan University it is evident how “programmed” Americans are when political discussions break out during her classes. She recalled several times that the only people that would offer significantly different opinions about politics and religion would be herself and sometimes other minorities in the class. In most cases, she felt that the entire class would turn on her and attack her whenever she revealed her position on issues.

She also feels that recent public outcry against Professor Ward Churchill, is little more than a public attempt to further delude Americans by covering up root causes in favor of moral Manichean dichotomies that tragically simplify complex problems (Political Gateway, 2005). His analysis of the role of America in creating the conditions for the 9/11 attacks through its own smug sense of superiority and its morally justified slaughter of millions of people around the world, highlights the realities that Americans do not want to admit. To her, the American educational system actively endeavors to cover up the continuing moral failings of the United States by squelching dissent. As a result, Muslims have paid the largest price in recent memory as their voice is silenced in favor of pseudo-narratives taught to our youth that place all non-American interests (especially the interest of Islamic peoples) on the side of evil. After 12+ years of socialization within the public school system to these ideas (mixed with the other factors discussed in this paper) it is no surprise that some Americans view Muslim Americans as little more than local extensions of the evil of Islam elsewhere.
Government policy

Government policy is an area that most Kalamazoo Muslims feel is highly responsible for the marginalization of Islam in the United States for several obvious reasons. Area Muslims perceive the government as the instigator and the overall puppet master of the entire ordeal in the sense that they create and manage situations that contribute to the erosion of respect for Islam in the United States. In addition, the government is the means by which the mass media and the educational system derive their information and guidance. The educational system for example sets curriculum as decided by governmental bodies. This curriculum, instilled with bias, paints the rosiest picture of the United States as possible and denounces others. The mass media, hungry for sales, knows that almost anything that a governmental body does or says equates to headlines to boost sales. When a war is raging, the media trough overflows and daily headlines become inundated with tales of terror on the part of Muslims and heroism on the part of Americans. The mass media’s reliance upon the United States government as a source of journalistic inspiration reduces them to little more than automatons whose manipulation could not be easier.

Several of the Muslim Americans interviewed for this paper feel that there is a danger in the current administration’s abuse of power. A consensus of perception is that the Bush administration is actively engage in a covert assault on Islamic people. Area Muslims find it difficult to interpret recent military actions in Iraq and Afghanistan in a fashion that does equate to some form of political crusade where the goal is not to win converts but to secure American petrol-chemical interests. One man told me that it is blatantly obvious that this is what is going on but a large portion of the American
populace instead chooses to rally behind rhetoric about WMDs and democracy rather than acknowledge the truth. He even suggested to me that despite his disdain for George W. Bush he would have been supportive of the invasion of Iraq if the administration’s motivations had ever truly been to oust a dictator in order to give the Iraqi people back their liberty.

Many Muslims interpret the administration as a bully that consciously manipulates what they perceive to be the archetypical American psyche in order to silence dissent. Interviewees cite the current use of patriotism as a weapon against any who disagree with the president’s policies as prime example of this intolerance for other’s opinions. As a result, Muslims fear that they cannot ever speak in criticism against the administration’s undertakings without being labeled a traitor and/or a terrorist. Some comments on anti-Islamic blogs even suggest that a Muslim American is a potential terrorist unless they go as far as to enlist in the American military in order to wage war on other Muslims:

Its easy to solve this bad-image problem they have. If you're an American, speak up for America. Lets see your kids lining up at the recruiters. It worked for the Japanese, their kids enlisted in droves, and earned a truckfull of medals of valor, and as a result an appreciative nation is forever sorry to have ever doubted their loyalty. Thats the way it works. When its us or them, prove you're with us by backing us. (Parry, 2005)

One man pointed to the use of rhetoric as an extension of the above. That the words utilized by the administration manipulate the emotional irrational aspect of the
American psyche. He suggests that the careful use of language can reduce intelligent Americans to blithering flag waving idiots. He and others cite constant references to flags, god, our troops, the American way, democracy and many more stimulus terms that can potentially incite many Americans to support the agenda of the president without critical assessment. Currently I think that a social psychologist would be hard pressed to argue that such tactics are unsuccessful since we are currently engaged in a war justified by pure fantasy speculation about WMDs. Several volunteers cited the use of patriotism as a type of fear tactic (you are either with them or against us) that bullies others into falling in line with a particular agenda.

During the interviews, it appeared to me that American Muslims feel that they are being systematically stripped of their humanity. They feel that recent developments such as the Patriot Act (how aptly named), racial profiling, security screening, color coded alert levels, random warnings of terrorist attacks that never materialize but neither are they stopped, Guantanamo Bay and other prison abuses, and the increase in the number of arrests of terrorist suspects on American soil constitute an ever present system that manipulates American fear, and simultaneously reinforces the terrorist stereotype of Muslim Americans for political gain. Of course, as perceived by American Muslims and others, what these changes really suggest is that Muslim terrorists are everywhere including your neighborhood. Ironically, however, one Muslim professor told me that despite his hatred for profiling and security screening, he recalls one instance where security personnel failed to screen him, an Arabic looking man, at an airport and part of him felt as though the government had not done its job. He did not know why or how but
he had unconsciously internalized some part of the above factors even though he is a Muslim himself and aware that the “Muslim terrorist” does not exist everywhere.

The final point that I shall discuss regarding government policy brought to my attention by area Muslims is the role of religion in American politics. Most people interviewed undoubtedly mentioned President Bush’s connection to Evangelical Christian groups and the overall surge of intolerant religiosity in the United States as a major contributor towards prejudice against Muslims. Many volunteers feel that the major impetus for many of the above criticisms lies in the perceived desire of hard lined Evangelicals, to quite frankly, wipe out Muslims. While area Muslims acknowledge that moderate Evangelicals are not a danger, they nevertheless feel that it is dangerous for the President to openly ally himself with the overt bigots that are found among the ranks of Evangelicals, such as Rev. Jerry Vines who referred to the Prophet Muhammad as a demon possessed pedophile.

President Bush reiterates that Islam is a religion of peace yet he seeks guidance from those that preach hatred and intolerance causing Muslims to seriously question if such statements are little more than ear candy designed to pacify Muslim oil producing countries. In response to the above statement from Vines and many other bigoted Evangelicals hopping on the Islam bashing bandwagon, the president said that he disagrees with the statements made by Rev. Vines, but never does he condemn such outright hatred. In addition, President Bush had the audacity to state, following these comments that evangelicals such as Vines are "among the earliest champions of religious tolerance." (Caldwell, 2005) This quote from Ultra-Conservative, openly bigoted, Evangelical Ann Coulter sums up many of the fears of several of the interviewees in
regards to Evangelical Christianity when she suggests “We should invade their countries [Muslims], kill their leaders, and convert them to Christianity.” (Caldwell, 2005, page 4)

In sum, it is evident that there exists a social bias against Islam and those that practice it in the United States of America. From these interviews I have been able to highlight for you the reader some of the different aspects of American society that are perceived to be responsible to some degree in the creation, maintenance and propagation of a racist ideology that targets Muslims. Some of the details covered in the sections above pertaining to the role of the mass media, educational systems, and government policy may seem obvious to some but even to me a large part of the information presented to me by area Muslims was eye opening. My own relative naiveté about a subject that I am far more familiar with than most Americans highlights the need for greater education about the issues that challenge the social existence of Muslim Americans.

In many cases, references to isolated factors dominate discussions of racism without consideration of the holistic integration of these various factors and the overall effects of such pairings of socially detrimental forces. In addition, the viewpoint of the subaltern in regards to their own marginalization cannot be ignored in favor of larger academic or political viewpoints that most often hide, either through callousness or ignorance, the true extent of social problems when racial issues are a factor. One would hardly attempt to discuss the rampant racism that affects African Americans in the United States without asking them their opinions about the subject. While the Muslim American community has been historically ignored in the United States it makes no sense in this
age of fear induced hysteria to casually neglect the perceptions of the community that many Americans have come to accept as the "Islamic Boogeyman".
CHAPTER FOUR

REFLECTIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

It is important to realize that this research should serve as springboard towards some future academic endeavor much larger in scope and vision than the project outlined here. I do not mean to undermine my own work up until this point, but would rather like to stress that the research that I have done here shall primarily serve as a nurturing mechanism for my own investigative, analytical, and professional endeavors. With that said, I do envision my work elaborating upon Muslim American perceptions of social marginalization in the United States as a success for many reasons.

The main reason that this research is a success is that it allowed me to see an issue directly from the perspective of the people being affected by that issue. As I mentioned in the last section, it is easy enough to sympathize with the plight of another person, and it is far easier to ignore that plight all together, but to try to see it from their eyes is a different task all together. While I did not literally step into the shoes of the Muslim community of Kalamazoo, I was able to learn a great deal about their experiences with racism in the United States. Before this research, I held a sufficient academic understanding of prejudice against Muslim Americans. I would not dare suggest that I knew everything that there is to know about the subject, but rather that I knew the highlights of the issue so to speak.

Because of interacting directly with area Muslims, I became quickly aware of the overwhelming multi-dimensionality of the problem in question. Those Muslims that I
spoke with in this research perceive social animosity in America as generating from a number of sources such as the media, public education system, and government policy. It may be that these sources are unaware of each other's contributions to creating social bias against a group of people here in the United States, or if they are, these organizations choose not to address the problem for various reasons. In some cases, prejudicial factors identified by Muslim Americans operate on a very bold and explicit agenda, such as extremist Evangelicals that seek to further marginalize Muslims in America and abroad. Either way the experience has opened my eyes to the larger scope of the problem of prejudice against Islam that seems to infect many different aspects of American social life, resulting in a society that writes off Muslim Americans as terrorists and killers as a natural conclusion of its own skewed internal cultural logic. If nothing else, this research illustrates the extent to which social structures direct and influence our thought processes. Many are unable or unwilling to break free of this dogmatic cultural logic and see for themselves what Islam and Muslims truly are like. This of course involves the seemingly impossible task of weaning oneself off preachers, presidents, and television news anchors for information about the world. When Americans can muster the courage to engage stereotyped individuals face to face then true progress shall ensue.

As I mentioned previously, this research project did encounter some difficulties along the way. The primary difficulty lay in recruiting volunteers for the project. As I have already outlined, the cooperation with the local Islamic center proved problematic for various reasons that I shall not go into again here. In addition, local Muslim students were supportive of the idea when initially presented with it. For many different reasons it took quite along time for me to successfully engage area Muslims on this topic, in part
because of my own hesitation and in part because of theirs. I shall describe the frustration that I felt at the time as unbearable, but now that I have had the honor to work with Kalamazoo Muslims, I can say that their hesitation at the time highlighted a particular facet of Islamaphobia.

When I wished to give a voice to Muslim Americans, I meant to do so only in regards to my writings on behalf of a community generally ignored by America at large. I felt that in some fashion that others would perceive my advocating on the behalf of Muslim Americans as honest since I have “nothing to gain” from the exercise. I recognize the humble parameters of a Master’s level writing and that it shall not change the world, but I must say that the most important lesson to be learned from all of this is that Muslim Americans are worried. They fear for their rights, their families, and everything else that they value about their lives in the United States. It is easy to tell from my conversations that Muslim Americans feel that America is approaching a breaking point and that the relatively peaceful acceptance of Islam in the United States may be washed away in another moment of “terrorist” violence on U.S. soil. There is a fear that if attacks were ever to occur in the United States again, that many efforts to promote a peaceful understanding of Islam in the United States will be lost.

While this point may be debated, I nevertheless feel that many American Muslims view themselves as citizens of the American margin and rather than as fully accepted members of mainstream America. In addition, it is this fear of reprisal that hampers their own efforts to engage the political-economic social factors that they view as contributing to the creation of bias against Islam in the United States. While some Islamic groups engage the American public, it appears that many are reluctant to address political and
economic causes events such as 9/11 and ensuing violence elsewhere in the globe. As a result, many of the Muslim Americans in this study shy away from addressing the root causes of animosity towards Islam by electively silencing their own public voices in regards to these matters for fear of reprisal. It is in this manner, that their voices are silenced to a greater extent then I ever possibly could have imagined two years ago.

As a result, of some of the above issues, such as the lack of involvement from the Kalamazoo Islamic Center and other factors, it is necessary to comment on how the absence of these voices has affected these writings. The most obvious effect of this circumstance is that an entire social group of Kalamazoo Muslims did not seize the opportunity to contribute to this project. This is important because the bulk of the volunteers involved in this project are in some way associated with Western Michigan University as students or professors. This association has a great potential to affect the way in which these particular people orient themselves to the larger issues of prejudice against Islam in the United States of America. In my opinion, different levels of education and involvement with academia can definitely affect one’s perceptions of their own social world. I myself have definitely changed my own ideas and assumptions about American Society ever since pursuing my higher education. While some of the members of the Kalamazoo Islamic Center may be associated with the University on some level, many were not. In fact, most members of the center were regional residents not involved with current academia on any level. As such, it is quite possible that their contributions could have shed light onto different aspects of this issue not addressed by the student and professional populations of Western Michigan University.
Issues of animosity proved to be difficult to overcome as well. Since this work has been conducted within a university setting it is imperative to adhere to codes of research conduct as laid forth by the WMU Human Subjects Institutional Review Board. As a result, all efforts to retain the animosity of subjects were undertaken. This effort proved to be difficult at times since animosity most often involves being unable to address social factors about area Muslims such as group and or religious organization affiliations. This proves problematic because it prevents me from discussing the roles of various individuals within organizations and the roles of various organizations within the community with out going into great detail. Organizations, just like academic involvement, definitely shape the way in which an individual orients him/herself to his larger social world and therefore how they perceive that world. In addition, in order to comply with HSIRB requirements for this research I am required to acknowledge consent without a written document. This proved to be difficult to achieve for a number of reasons that I will not go into here, but the need for some form of consent affected the willingness of some people to participate in this research for a fear of having their own opinions and their names somehow documented together. I took all available steps to maintain anonymity while obtaining verbal consents, but I am convinced that despite these efforts potential volunteers were scared off anyway.

This project, because of factors such as scope, time frame and budget (which was non-existent) could never begin to address the different factors that have been identified as contributing to the social marginalization of Muslim Americans. As a result, this thesis is therefore something of a cliffhanger. The crux of my approach to this subject matter lies in its ability to take into account the subaltern people’s perspective on social
issues affecting them. This is not a new method by any means but could possible serve as a major criticism of this work since it would be easy enough to make the argument that just because a group of Muslim Americans perceive these various factors to be detrimental to their social existence does not make their perceptions accurate. Logically this is true, but logic would also suggest that just because these factors are visible within the social world of Muslim Americans and invisible to another’s social world does not prove them false either. When a number of Muslim Americans relate that there is an anti-Islamic, bias in the American media should we dismiss them just because their feelings are subjective and not shared by everyone?

I wish to stress the role of perspective in all of this and that problems exist even if we cannot see them. I have gained a much deeper understanding of social perspective and its influence on how one analyzes and relates to a social problem such as racism. It is because of this that I feel that further work that follows a perspective-based philosophy shall provide greater insights into the interior workings of a uniquely American form of racism. The doctoral research level, with its accompanying increases in time and funding, might be ideal for a greater investigation into these issues.

In addition, any further work in this arena must incorporate a larger sample of people. My sample of area Muslims included about eleven people. I admit that overall, the size of such as sample is small but the interviews were deep and provided a great deal of information. I could have obtained a better sample size by using questionnaires or surveys but the overall quality of the information would have lacked severely. In order to explore the issues of social perspective outlined above, any further studies must take into account the different perspective of social groups not directly affected by Islamaphobia.
In particular, I would find it very useful and interesting to include the perspective of several different minority groups on the matter of prejudice against Muslim Americans to see how groups such as Latino, African Americans, and others view this issue as well as different religious organizations.

Undoubtedly to study this issue in detail more time is required, and hopefully at the end of that time, we may be able to develop strategies to combat racist ideologies in the United States. The question remains however, since many of the root causes of Islamaphobia, according to the American Muslims in this study, lie within some of the most cherished, wealthy, and/or powerful sectors of American society how can one address them? This is a question that must be considered in some detail in later research.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX

Human Subjects Institutional Review Board protocol clearance
Date: March 18, 2005

To: Vincent Lyon-Callo, Principal Investigator
   Dhiren Patel, Student Investigator for thesis
From: Mary Lagerwey, Ph.D., Chair

Re: HSIRB Project Number: 04-09 19

This letter will serve as confirmation that the change to your research project "Perceptions of Social Bias Against Muslims in the United States" requested in your memo dated 3/7/2005 (request for waiver of written consent) has been approved by the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board.

The conditions and the duration of this approval are specified in the Policies of Western Michigan University.

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: November 12, 2005