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Takudzwa Kennedy Bozhiwa
University of Vermont

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Post-9/11 Racism and Xenophobia's Effects on Muslim Students' Persistence and Belonging in U.S. Higher Education

Takudzwa Kennedy Bozhiwa

The occurrence of Islamophobia targeting Muslim students in the United States escalated after the 9/11 tragedy, leading to instances of microaggressions perpetrated against them within college campuses. The phenomenon of Islamophobia has resulted in a multitude of challenges, hence adversely affecting the academic performance of Muslim students. This study centers on the microaggressions of Muslim students leading to racialization experiences within the context of United States higher education. Consistent exposure to such discriminatory acts has had a profound effect on their sense of belonging, affecting their academic persistence and mental well-being. Although some students have risen above the challenges through community service and religious discussion, the overall feeling of stress continually harms their educational experience.

Keywords: 9/11 attacks, racism, xenophobia, islamophobia, muslim students, higher Education in the US, educational experience, microaggressions

Takudzwa Kennedy Bozhiwa is a first-year in the Masters of Higher Education and Student Affairs Administration program at the University of Vermont. He is originally from Harare, the capital city of Zimbabwe, and graduated with an Honours Degree in Accountancy from the University of Zimbabwe. Currently, he serves as the Graduate Assistant at the Interfaith Center under the Division of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion. He is also currently doing a practicum with Career Center, assisting in providing equity in internships for underrepresented students. Through his works, he aims to inspire all the students to believe in themselves and believe any dream is achievable. In his free time, Taku enjoys going to the gym, boxing, and making music.

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Introduction

The events that transpired on September 11, 2001, left an enduring imprint in the United States. Apart from the immediate devastation and loss of life, the aftermath of the assaults caused a fundamental shift in the nation's socio-political environment (Sandling & Chandler, 2021). The preceding change was notably evident in marginalized communities' experiences, particularly those regarded as "foreign" or "other." Muslim students in higher education institutions in the United States have been identified as a distinct demographic group that faces increased levels of racism, xenophobia, and Islamophobia because of these unfortunate events (Mir & Sarroub, 2019).

Throughout history, the higher education system in the United States has been widely regarded as a symbol of opportunity and a platform for the development of intellectual and human capacities (Muedini, 2009). However, the ideal was confronted with unusual obstacles in the post-9/11 era, specifically affecting Muslim students. The existing body of research has thoroughly examined the broader societal consequences of prejudice following the events of 9/11 (Abu-Raiya et al., 2011; Awad & Amayreh, 2015; Cainkar, 2009; Cainkar, 2002; Disha et al., 2011; Mir & Sarroub, 2019). Despite this, there is still a lack of comprehensive information on the precise implications of this prejudice on the experiences of Muslim students enrolled in American higher education institutions.

The primary objective of this study is to investigate the diverse obstacles encountered by Muslim students in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks. By employing qualitative methodologies, this article sheds light on the complex dynamics among identity, discrimination, and the academic setting. By examining the consequences of a diminished sense of belonging, I aim to emphasize the significance of cultivating inclusive environments in tertiary education, not solely as an ethical duty but as a pivotal factor influencing the achievements and welfare of students.

Literature Review

The experiences of Muslim students in U.S. higher education post-9/11 have been widely examined within the scholarly literature. This literature review provides an overview of key themes and findings related to the persistent challenges and impact of microaggressions on the sense of belonging among Muslim students. Over the past two decades, extensive research has been carried out in an attempt to shed light on the complex and multifaceted nature of these challenges, offering valuable insights into the experiences of Muslim students navigating higher education institutions in the United States. This review synthesizes the knowledge gained from these studies, providing a comprehensive understanding of the obstacles faced by Muslim students and the strategies employed to mitigate the adverse effects of discrimination and microaggressions in their academic journey.

Understanding the experiences of Muslim students post-9/11 is significant considering the historical context of Muslim presence in the United States (Cole and Ahmadi, 2010). Muslims have been part of the American fabric for centuries. The contributions of Muslim Americans to the nation's cultural, economic, and intellectual landscape were acknowledged and accepted, but the events of 9/11 marked a turning point in their experiences (Cainkar, 2009). Muslim students did not always face the same level of scrutiny, discrimination, and exclusion that they do today. Therefore, the post-9/11 period represents an ordeal for Muslim students as they grapple with heightened prejudices and the need to challenge stereotypes that were less prevalent in previous decades.

The defining moment for Muslim students' experiences in U.S. higher education is undoubtedly the 9/11 attacks (Callaway, 2010). The ensuing surge in Islamophobia has significantly impacted their lives. Studies highlight how post-9/11 Islamophobia has led to negative stereotypes, discrimination, and hostile campus environments, affecting Muslim students' sense of belonging (Bonet, 2011; Cole & Ahmadi, 2010; Mir & Sarroub, 2019; Neider, 2010).

A sense of belonging is fundamental to student success and well-being in higher education (Muedini, 2009). Research has consistently shown that students who feel a sense of belonging are more likely to excel academically. This provides a psychological safety net that encourages engagement, participation, and a willingness to take academic risks among students (Hummel et al., 2020). However, the sense of belonging is fragile for many Muslim students post-9/11 due to the challenges they face. The persistent discrimination, microaggressions, and racialization experiences not only hinder their academic progress but also erode their confidence, making it difficult for them to establish strong connections with peers, faculty, and the institution, which are all essential for a robust sense of belonging (Neider, 2010). Consequently, understanding and addressing the factors that impede this sense of belonging is crucial for both the individual well-being of Muslim students and the overall diversity and inclusivity of higher education institutions.

Microaggressions are a recurring theme in the literature on Muslim students' experiences (Callaway, 2010; Tummala-Narra & Claudius, 2013). These subtle acts of discrimination take various forms, including offensive comments, stereotyping, and exclusionary behavior. Research highlights how microaggressions create a hostile environment, leading to isolation and alienation within the academic community.

Identity Profiling

Identity profiling has been prominent in implementing conditional citizenship (Ghaffar-Kucher et al., 2022). Following the events of September 11th, immigrant Muslim adolescents saw increased levels of scrutiny, resulting in many aspects of their identification, such as their name, dress, and linguistic peculiarities, being used as indicators for discriminatory treatment (Ghaffar-Kucher et al., 2022). The profiling these individuals experienced extended beyond just

subjective perception, manifesting in concrete expectations that placed a persistent burden on them to demonstrate their sense of "Americanness." Frequently, they were assigned the responsibility of showing allegiance by disassociating themselves from Muslim events or narratives that could potentially be interpreted unfavorably.

Muslim students, particularly those with Middle Eastern or South Asian backgrounds, were subjected to increased levels of monitoring (Nagra, 2011). The identification of these students was predicated upon the presence of stereotyped indicators, such as clothing, facial hair, or nomenclature. Individuals who had physical attributes often associated with Middle Eastern or South Asian ancestry sometimes experienced incidents of racial and religious profiling (Neider, 2010). The practice of profiling extended beyond public spaces. It included educational institutions, leading to students feeling scrutinized based on many characteristics such as their physical attributes, name, or religious practices (Cainkar, 2002).

Amid an atmosphere characterized by increased scrutiny, students encountered the challenge of reconciling their identities as individuals who identify as American citizens and followers of the Islamic faith. Continuous practice of profiling heightened their perception of being marginalized, leading them to reevaluate their place within American society often (Hummel et al., 2020). In response to identity profiling, students employed a range of techniques. Some students confronted prejudices directly by participating in discussions or engaging in activities emphasizing the multifaceted nature and cultural abundance of Muslim identities. Some students sought comfort in communal environments to escape the persistent scrutiny associated with profiling (Muedini, 2009). Shaheen (2019) wrote that he frequently felt picked out at his university's campus—not because of his personal interests or academic accomplishments but rather because of a pervasive culture of identity profiling. His name, his clothes, or even small nuances in the way he spoke were unintentional spotlights, bringing unnecessary attention to his Muslim origins. While other students quickly merged into the academic background, he felt as though every action he took was accentuated by stereotypes related to his race and religion. Not only did other students exhibit this increased knowledge, but several faculty members appeared biased and had misconceptions about him.

Xenophobia

Xenophobia—fear and mistrust of the 'other'— was seen to be present in several areas, with a notable prevalence within educational environments, resulting in significant impacts on Muslim-American college students (Salinas Jr et al., 2022). Students encounter a range of complex obstacles, stemming not just from their religious affiliation but also from their ethnic heritage and country of origin. The academic setting, envisioned as an ideal venue for intellectual development, transformed into an environment where individuals' identities were constantly examined after 9/11 (Chandio, 2017).

Xenophobia can take many forms, especially in varied communities. This terror post-9/11 shadowed Muslim Americans' daily lives. Besides prejudice and distrust, xenophobia often influences policies, institutional behaviors, and public opinion. An environment like this harms the targeted community and divides society (Callaway, 2010). Xenophobia causes self-doubt, identity crises, and a continual effort to integrate beyond immediate prejudice. Xenophobia directed towards college students causes such students to have a diminished sense of their ability to achieve their academic goals. As shown in various studies, Muslim-American college students have navigated an academic atmosphere where their devotion, allegiance, and academic talents are questioned based on their identity.

Challenges to Sense of Belonging

One of the most prominent challenges that Muslim students face in U.S. higher education post-9/11 is the persistence of discrimination and microaggressions (Satiani & Singh, 2021). These subtle yet insidious forms of prejudice manifest in various ways, from derogatory comments and stereotypes to exclusionary behavior. The constant exposure to such discrimination erodes their sense of belonging within the academic community, making them feel like outsiders despite their pursuit of education.

Moreover, these discriminatory experiences can have long-lasting psychological and emotional effects (Abu-Raiya et al., 2011). The study showed that navigating an environment fraught with prejudice and bias takes a toll on mental well-being. It leads to feelings of anxiety, stress, and isolation, which, in turn, can hinder the ability to engage in academic pursuits fully. The burden of constantly confronting and coping with discrimination in higher education distracts students from the primary goal of obtaining a quality education, amplifying the challenges the affected group faces (Mir & Sarroub, 2019).

A noteworthy consequence of post-9/11 Islamophobia is the racialization of Muslim students (Cainkar, 2009). Regardless of their diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds, Muslim students are often homogenized into a monolithic identity based solely on their religious affiliation. This racialization further compounds the students' feelings of 'otherness' within the broader campus community, a significant barrier to developing a strong sense of belonging (Disha et al., 2011).

Impact on Academic Persistence

The challenges encountered by Muslim students in higher education post-9/11 extend beyond their sense of belonging; they also have a tangible impact on their academic persistence (Awad & Amayreh, 2015). The stress and emotional toll of discrimination and microaggressions can lead to decreased motivation, heightened anxiety, and other mental health struggles. These factors can, in turn, impede their academic performance and persistence, affecting the students' overall educational experience (Disha et al., 2011).

Strategies for Fostering Belonging

Despite their numerous hurdles, many Muslim students employ strategies to actively foster a sense of belonging within the higher education context. Some seek refuge and support within campus-based religious groups and cultural organizations, providing a close-knit community of peers who understand and share their experiences (Bonet, 2011). Others actively engage in community service initiatives and interfaith dialogues to promote understanding and bridge gaps with fellow students (Callaway, 2010). These strategies help them cope with the challenges and contribute to cultivating a sense of belonging in an otherwise challenging environment.

Persistence Challenges

The challenges to academic persistence for Muslim students in U.S. higher education post-9/11 extend beyond the erosion of their sense of belonging. Persistent stress stemming from heightened discrimination and Islamophobia can have a profound impact on their academic journey (Tummala-Narra and Claudius, 2013). This stress leads to decreased motivation, affecting their ability to excel academically and persist in their educational goals.

The burden of constantly defending their identity and encountering stereotypes diverts their attention and energy away from their primary educational objectives (Neider, 2010). The need to navigate a hostile environment, combined with the emotional toll of discrimination, hinders the students' ability to engage in their studies entirely. Academic persistence, a critical aspect of educational success, is thus challenged by external factors and the emotional weight of constantly navigating a hostile educational landscape.

Microaggressions: Subtle Yet Detrimental

Microaggressions are a prevalent and insidious form of prejudice that Muslim students confront regularly in U.S. higher education post-9/11 (Cole and Ahmadi, 2010). These subtle acts of discrimination manifest in various ways, including derogatory comments, stereotyping, and exclusionary behavior (Hummel et al., 2020). The cumulative impact of these microaggressions is profoundly detrimental to their sense of belonging and academic persistence.

One particularly detrimental aspect of microaggressions is the presumption of guilt or association with terrorism solely based on their religious identity (Mir & Sarroub, 2019). This unfounded assumption unjustly burdens Muslim students with the responsibility of disproving negative stereotypes and reaffirming their loyalty to the nation. These microaggressions not only create a hostile environment but also reinforce a climate where they are viewed with suspicion, leading to feelings of isolation and alienation within their academic community.

Implications on the Muslim Student's Success

Microaggressions, as experienced by Muslim students in U.S. higher education post-9/11, carry profound implications for their academic achievement and overall success (Satiani and Singh, 2021). These subtle yet pervasive forms of prejudice, as detailed in the previous section, have a far-reaching impact on multiple facets of their educational journey.

Academic Performance and Persistence

One of the most immediate consequences of microaggressions is the potential disruption of academic performance and persistence (Satiani & Singh, 2021). The constant stress and emotional toll of navigating a hostile environment can lead to decreased motivation and focus on studies. Many Muslim students are forced to divert their energy towards coping with discrimination, detracting from their primary educational objectives.

Moreover, the heightened scrutiny and suspicion associated with microaggressions create an atmosphere of surveillance which can be distracting and anxiety-inducing (Tummala-Narra & Claudius, 2013). This further hampers the students' ability to concentrate on their coursework and succeed academically. As a result, the cumulative impact of microaggressions can hinder academic persistence and slow progress toward degree completion.

Microaggressions have also been linked to adverse mental health outcomes for Muslim students. Persistent exposure to discriminatory acts can result in feelings of anxiety, stress, and alienation (Awad & Amayreh, 2015; Callaway, 2010). These emotional burdens hinder academic performance and have long-term consequences for overall mental well-being. Research indicates that Muslim students who experience microaggressions are more likely to report symptoms of depression and low self-esteem. These mental health challenges can further exacerbate the barriers to academic success, creating a cycle of adversity that is difficult to break without appropriate support and resources.

The impact of microaggressions extends to the student's sense of belonging and identity within the academic community (Tummala-Narra & Claudius, 2013). Constant exposure to discrimination erodes their confidence and makes them feel like outsiders, potentially leading to feelings of isolation and exclusion. Additionally, a weakened sense of belonging can hinder integration into the academic community, limiting access to crucial resources, networking opportunities, and mentorship. Microaggressions often force Muslim students to confront their identity daily. This additional burden of self-identity management can divert their focus from academic pursuits, adding another layer of complexity to their educational journey (Cole & Ahmadi, 2010).

Recommendations for Institutions and Student Affairs Professionals Cultural Competency Training

Institutions could offer cultural competency training to faculty, staff, and students to enhance their awareness and comprehension of various religious and cultural backgrounds, including Islam. Training in cultural competency gives students a greater understanding of the beliefs, experiences, and perspectives of various ethnic and religious groups (Kruse et al., 2017). Individuals can develop a more nuanced understanding of the elements that influence Muslim students' experiences after 9/11 by learning about the history, customs, and current challenges that Muslim communities face. Cultural competency training could aid in developing effective communication techniques and interpersonal interaction strategies for students from different backgrounds (Kruse & Calderone, 2020). This could result in interactions with Muslim students that are more respectful and inclusive, fostering an atmosphere where all students feel appreciated and accepted, potentially mitigating bias and fostering a more inclusive campus climate.

Diversity and Inclusion Initiatives

Promoting diversity and inclusion on campus can aid in ensuring that students feel respected. This can be done by organizing events, workshops, and forums celebrating different cultures and faiths (Hailu et al., 2018). Encouraging student organizations to host interfaith dialogues and cultural exchange programs will also be a step in the right direction. These initiatives might center on expanding the number of Muslim students in student organizations, leadership roles, and internal decision-making processes. Muslim students may be able to use this to influence the rules and regulations that affect how they are perceived on campus. In addition, intersectionality is a crucial component of effective diversity and inclusion initiatives, as it acknowledges that people have multiple identities that interact and shape their experiences (Shalabi, 2014). These initiatives can address prejudice and discrimination more thoroughly by recognizing the varied identities and experiences of Muslim students.

Supportive Spaces

To reduce prejudice and promote a more welcoming campus environment for Muslim students, it is imperative to create supportive environments. This can be done by designating prayer rooms or meditation spaces accessible to Muslim students for daily prayers and reflection, ensuring that these spaces are welcoming, quiet, and accommodating religious practices (Chen et al., 2019). The purpose of supportive spaces is to establish a secure, welcoming atmosphere where Muslim students can experience a feeling of acceptance and belonging. These areas offer a haven from possible prejudice, discrimination, or misconceptions, enabling students to express themselves without worrying about the outcome. Muslim students can also better connect and support one another in these supportive

spaces (Hailu et al., 2018). The supportive spaces allow students to interact with others who have gone through similar experiences, which promotes a feeling of camaraderie and inclusion within the student body.

Mental Health Services

There is a need to offer culturally sensitive mental health services that address the unique stressors and challenges faced by Muslim students. Counselors should be trained to provide support and resources for managing discrimination-related stress. These mental health services should be readily accessible and incorporate an understanding of the cultural nuances, religious considerations, and specific stressors that Muslim students may encounter (Chaudry, 2020). Muslim students who are struggling with issues of identity, belonging, and cultural integration can find support from mental health services. These services help create a more welcoming campus environment that celebrates and supports a variety of identities by providing a space for introspection and exploration. Additionally, counseling services should actively collaborate with campus diversity and inclusion offices to ensure that their approaches are culturally sensitive and part of a broader, institution-wide commitment to fostering an inclusive environment (Chen et al., 2019).

Anti-Discrimination Policies

Institutions should enforce and publicize clear anti-discrimination policies that explicitly prohibit discrimination based on religion or ethnicity and establish protocols for reporting and addressing incidents of discrimination or bias (Ahmadi & Cole, 2023). It is essential for institutions to establish these anti-discrimination policies and actively engage in awareness campaigns that educate the campus community about the policies and their significance in promoting a culture of respect and inclusion. In addition to reporting mechanisms, institutions should create channels for anonymous reporting, ensuring that students feel comfortable coming forward with incidents of discrimination or bias without fear of reprisal (Callaway, 2010).

Faculty and Staff Training

Faculty and staff can be equipped with the knowledge and skills to identify and confront bias, stereotyping, and microaggressions directed toward Muslim students through training (Tomalin, 2007). Recognizing the effects of hidden prejudice and putting countermeasures in place for interactions with students in the classroom are part of this. The legal and policy frameworks about harassment and discrimination, including those that safeguard individuals based on race, religion, or national origin, should be included in faculty and staff training. Staff members are better equipped to maintain a welcoming and safe environment for Muslim students when informed about their obligations under anti-discrimination laws and institutional policies (Kruse et al., 2017). Faculty and staff can also be trained on religious accommodations for Muslim students—such as prayer spaces,

special diets, and observance of religious holidays. Educational professionals can foster a culture that accepts different religious practices by being aware of and respecting these accommodations.

Cultural Awareness Programs

It is imperative to organize cultural awareness programs that highlight the contributions of Muslim scholars, artists, and leaders in various fields. Programs that promote cultural awareness give faculty members and students the chance to learn about the customs, beliefs, and history of Islam and Muslim communities (Kruse & Calderone, 2020). These programs can dispel misconceptions and stereotypes by providing accurate and nuanced information, leading to a deeper understanding of the diversity within the Muslim community. Cultural awareness programs may offer cultural competency training to individuals and teach them about Muslim cultures. This involves developing skills for tolerating different perspectives, fostering polite interactions within the campus community, and effectively communicating across cultural boundaries (Hailu et al., 2018).

Accessible Resources

Academic advising, mentorship programs, tutoring, and other educational support services sensitive to Muslim students' needs are examples of accessible resources that can be offered to promote inclusivity and success. Fostering an inclusive campus climate requires ensuring Muslim students also have access to financial aid and scholarship resources (Cole & Ahmadi, 2010). This includes informing students about financial aid options, scholarships intended exclusively for Muslim students, and assistance for those who experience financial difficulties due to prejudice or discrimination. With the support of these services, Muslim students can be guaranteed equal opportunities for success, and any gaps in their academic performance can be addressed. Additionally, to promote an inclusive campus climate, it is necessary to ensure that the library and research resources include Muslim perspectives and scholarship (Chen et al., 2019). This could entail promoting inclusive curriculum content and obtaining various books, tools, and research materials about Islam and Muslim cultures.

Dialogue and Engagement

Through dialogue and engagement programs, students, teachers, and staff can have meaningful discussions about the experiences, difficulties, and contributions of Muslim people and communities (Chen et al., 2019). These exchanges can help close cultural gaps and humanize Muslim students' experiences by fostering empathy and understanding, creating a more welcoming atmosphere. Misconceptions and stereotypes about Islam and Muslim communities can be challenged through open dialogue and engagement. Universities can confront prejudices and biases, advance accurate understanding, and foster critical thinking about complex issues of identity and diversity by providing forums for open and courteous dialogue (Cross & Johnson, 2008).

Conclusion

Unique challenges, persistent discrimination, and the insidious impact of microaggressions mark the experiences of Muslim students in U.S. higher education post-9/11. This paper has examined the multifaceted nature of these challenges, highlighting their implications for academic persistence, mental well-being, and the fragile sense of belonging within the academic community.

After 9/11, the surge in Islamophobia and xenophobia has left an indelible mark on the lives of Muslim students pursuing higher education in the United States. Their academic journeys are fraught with the need to confront stereotypes, counter prejudice, and navigate a hostile educational environment. The persistent challenges they face, including the diversion of energy away from academic goals and the emotional toll of discrimination, demand attention and intervention from institutions of higher learning.

Moreover, the impact of microaggressions, those subtle yet damaging forms of prejudice, extends far beyond the classroom. They can potentially disrupt academic performance, erode mental well-being, and fracture the sense of belonging essential for student success. Considering these challenges, higher education institutions and student affairs professionals must take proactive measures. This includes implementing cultural competency training, fostering inclusive campus environments, providing mental health support, and promoting interfaith dialogue. Doing so fosters educational spaces that honor diversity, equity, and inclusion, allowing all students, regardless of their backgrounds, to thrive academically and personally.

In closing, while the road for Muslim students in U.S. higher education post-9/11 is fraught with obstacles, it is our collective responsibility to dismantle these barriers and enable educational equity and inclusion. By acknowledging the challenges faced by Muslim students and implementing the recommended strategies, we can aspire to a future where all students truly belong and excel in their pursuit of higher education.

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