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## CHAPTER 23

# *Muslim Families in the United States*

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Recent social and political events have triggered a growing curiosity in the United States about the lives and beliefs of Muslim American families. This interest can be attributed to several factors: world events that have brought issues occurring in the Islamic world to the foreground, the rapid growth of Islam among African Americans, and a recent large influx of Muslim immigrants from the Middle East, North Africa, Sub-Saharan Africa, Pakistan, India, and Southeast Asia. Despite this interest and concern about the global role of Islam, there is relatively little research or public knowledge about Muslims and their families in the United States. In the Western context, Islam and Muslims are often viewed from a monolithic perspective. In fact, although Islam is characterized by a common underlying belief system, there is a great deal of variation in its actualization. This diversity is also reflected in the beliefs and traditions of adherents to Islam in the United States. This chapter seeks to elucidate some of the basic tenets of Islam with respect to family life and to highlight aspects of contemporary research that illustrate the diversity that is characteristic of Muslim families in the United States.

### DEMOGRAPHICS

Although Islam is one of the youngest religions in the world (its inception dates to 622 A.D), it is, globally, the fastest growing religion, with currently approximately 1.3 billion adherents worldwide. Estimating an exact figure for the number of Muslims in the United States is complicated by the fact that the census does not require religious information as part of its surveys. Thus, estimates for the number of Muslims in the United States range from approximately 3 million (Smith, 2002) to 4 to 6 million (Stone, 1991; *World Almanac*, 1998). The question about ancestry in the 2000 census shows that 0.7 percent of the population claimed to have origins in countries with a majority Muslim population (Smith, 2002, p. 413). Crude estimates from census and Immigration and Naturalization Service figures indicate that the Muslim population ranges between 1,456,000 to 3,397,000, or 0.5% to 1.2% of the total population when the American-born Muslim population is included (Smith, 2002, p. 414). Most of these statistics rely on percentages derived from data on national origin, language use, and mosque

association and how these are linked to religious affiliation. These are, however, such tenuous linkages that it is uncertain which estimates of the Muslim population are reliable (Smith, 2002).

American Muslims can be roughly divided into several groups: immigrants who came from Asia, Africa, Iran and the Middle East; African Americans; and converts from other groups found in the United States (Cooper, 1993). From 1924 to 1975, Muslim immigrants from the Middle East and North Africa outnumbered all those from other parts of the world. More recently, Muslim immigrants have come primarily from western Asia, specifically Iran, Pakistan, and India (Walbridge, 1999). In the last several years, there has also been a very small increase in the number of immigrant Muslims from eastern Europe (Smith, 2002). Recent immigrants tend to be highly educated professionals, independent business people, or factory workers.

According to estimates, nearly half of all Muslim Americans are African Americans who have converted to Islam. The other half are almost entirely immigrants, except for a few converts to Islam from various other cultural groups (Cooper, 1993; Stone, 1991). Immigrant Muslims live primarily in major metropolitan areas that have historically drawn new arrivals. These include some of the largest cities in the United States (e.g., New York, Los Angeles, Chicago). The largest numbers of mosques and prayer halls are found in California, New York, Michigan, Illinois, and Pennsylvania (Nimer, 2002). The fewest Muslim immigrants are located in the Southeast and Northwest regions of the country, with the exceptions of southern Florida and the Seattle area. The largest concentration of African American Muslims is in Illinois (Stone, 1991).

The majority of immigrant Arab, African, and Asian Muslims subscribe primarily to Sunni (or orthodox) Islam, while

those from Iran, Bahrain, and Oman tend to be Shi'ites. Some immigrant Muslims are also adherents of less familiar sects such as the Alawis or Zaidis. African American Muslims include Sunnis, members of the Nation of Islam, and members of other smaller denominations.

Historically, interaction between immigrant Muslims and African American Muslims has been limited. Language skills, historical factors, racial issues, and vastly different cultural traditions form major barriers between these groups. Furthermore, unlike immigrants, many African Americans are converts. To observe their new religion, they tend to alter every aspect of their lives. They usually adopt Muslim names, styles of dress (particularly, among women, veiling), and a consciously projected Islamic image. For many converts, their new religious identity may take precedence over their former ethnic/racial identity. In contrast, many Muslim immigrants work harder to maintain their ethnic than their religious identities, while trying to assimilate into American culture (Kolars, 1994).

American Muslims are distinguished by different levels of education, types of occupations, arrival time in the United States, adherence to religious beliefs, and desire to assimilate in society. The diversity among Muslim Americans has contributed to a lack of feeling of solidarity or group identity. This also makes it difficult to generalize about American Muslim families, for this is equivalent to trying to find commonalities among all Christian families in the United States. It is possible, however, to explicate some of the basic beliefs in Islam with respect to family issues and to examine the current state of scholarship on Muslim Americans in the United States. Religious principles constitute only *one* arena from which individuals actively and selectively draw their beliefs. These beliefs are negotiated within sociohistorical contexts and may vary over time, not

just among specific groups, but also among individuals themselves.

### ISLAMIC PRINCIPLES

Islam provides a foundation for understanding the religious beliefs and practices of Muslim families (Al-Hali & Khan, 1993). Islam is a monotheistic religion based on the belief that there is one God and that this is the same God that Christians and Jews believe in. *Islam* is an Arabic word meaning "submission to the will of God." A Muslim is anyone who follows the religion of Islam.

Muslims regard the Old and New Testaments as revelations that came from God (Allah). With respect to morals and human behavior, Islam, Judaism, and Christianity are virtually identical. A primary difference is that Islam does not accept the Christian concept of the Trinity or Jesus Christ as the Son of God. Instead, Jesus is regarded as a prophet who was then followed by Muhammad, the last prophet. Furthermore, there are two major strands of Islam, Sunni Islam and Shi'a Islam, their distinction resulting from a crisis of succession after the death of Muhammad.

Islam has a somewhat less formal structure than the other monotheistic religions (Cooper, 1993). The imam of a mosque is perceived as a teacher rather than a leader or mediator, and every individual is thought to have a direct relationship to God. Another distinctive feature of Islam is the five pillars of faith. In addition to worshipping Allah, a practicing Muslim must pray five times a day, practice the yearly fast from sunrise to sunset during the month of Ramadan, contribute to the poor, and make a pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in his or her lifetime. Furthermore, every Muslim is expected to be moderate, and he or she may not drink alcohol, eat pork, or gamble. Due to the visible, daily nature of these practices, Islam is

often perceived as more ritualized than other religions (El-Amin, 1991).

### ISLAMIC TEACHINGS ON FAMILY

Both the Qur'an and the *hadiths* (the collection of sayings and teaching of the Prophet Mohammad) deal with issues relating to the regulation of mate selection, marriage, children, divorce, authority, inheritance, and family rights and responsibilities. Of the legal injunctions in the Qur'an, about a third relate to marriage and the family (Nasir, 1990). To understand some of the principles underlying Islamic beliefs with respect to family, it is instructive to look at some Islamic teachings on gender, marriage, parent-child relationships, and divorce.

#### *Gender Roles*

Many Islamic religious injunctions deal specifically with the relationship between men and women in families. These are often regarded by Muslims as the basis for *legitimizing* gender roles. Islamic teachings stress the equality of all people before God. Nonetheless, interpretations vary considerably, particularly with respect to women's roles.

A fundamental Islamic belief is the distinct difference between male and female in terms of their personalities, social roles, and functions. References to women and their appropriate behavior are scattered throughout the Qur'an and the *hadiths*, and their meanings and interpretation have been a source of controversy since the earliest days of Islam. Various Qur'anic passages focus specifically on women's unique nature, place in society, and role within the general congregation of believers. Innate differences between the sexes are not perceived in terms of a dichotomy of superior and inferior but as complementary (Macleod, 1991). However,

underlying Islamic ideological formulations with respect to gender is the belief that women must remain in their place for political and social harmony to prevail. Practices such as veiling and distinct male and female activities, both in and outside the family, often reinforce this gender dichotomy. If women do not adhere to this moral order, then society runs the risk of degenerating into *fitna* (temptation or, more importantly, rebellion, social dissension, or disorder). A saying of the Prophet Muhammad is that there is no *fitna* more harmful to men than women. Women are potentially so powerful that they are required to submit to their husbands, segregate themselves from men to whom they are not immediately related, and restrain themselves lest the pattern of gender relations at the core of a properly ordered society be overturned.

Even though the Qur'an is the central source of Islamic beliefs with respect to gender roles, there is considerable controversy about the meaning of passages and their implications for the status of women (Fernea & Bezirgan, 1977). Contemporary scholarship illustrates that, rather than determining attitudes about women, parts of the Qur'an are used at certain times to legitimate particular acts or sets of conditions with respect to women (Marcus, 1992; Mernissi, 1987). This selective use is part of the way in which gender hierarchies and sexuality are negotiated and enforced. It does not explain gender roles; instead, it is part of a constant process of gender role negotiation. Muslim feminist writers have gone to great lengths to illustrate that gender asymmetry and the status of women cannot be attributed to Islam. Instead, beliefs and practices with respect to women and men's roles are part of a complicated interwoven set of social traditions, religions, and ever-changing political and economic conditions (Chatty & Rabo, 1997). Recent research has highlighted that the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad

specified protections and rights for women that were radical departures from the existing culture. These included limitations on polygyny, inheritance and property rights for women, and marriage contracts and maintenance in cases of divorce and child custody (Baron, 1994). These studies highlight that gender constructions are always embedded in sociohistorical contexts. What it means to be a Muslim male or female is shaped not only by Islamic traditions and beliefs but also by the social environment in which these concepts are negotiated and the personal characteristics of the individual.

### *Significance of Marriage*

Marriage is a central aspect of the lives of all Muslim men and women. Every Muslim is expected to marry, and marriage is governed by a complex set of legal rules. A Muslim family is established on the concept of a contractual exchange that legally commences with a marriage contract and its consummation. Every school of Islamic law perceives marriage as a contract, the main function of which is to make sexual relations between a man and a woman licit (Nasir, 1990). Several conditions make a Muslim marriage valid: consent of the bride and her legal guardian, two witnesses, and payment of a dower, or *mahr*. The *mahr*, depending on custom, can range from gifts of a coin to large sums of money or valuables. The signing of the contract entitles the bride to the *mahr*, a suitable home, maintenance (i.e., food, clothes, gifts), and a partial inheritance from the husband. According to Islamic law, women are not required to share in the costs and expenditures of their spouses or their male relatives. They are not expected or required to work outside the home. In return for financial investment, husbands acquire authority as the head of the family and access to the sexual and reproductive abilities of their wives (Mir-Hosseini, 1993).

Once an Islamic marriage becomes valid through the signing of the marital contract, it is the duty of the husband to provide for his wife under three conditions: She also signs the contract; she puts herself under her husband's authority and allows him free access to her; and she obeys him for the duration of the marriage. This division of gender roles in the family is often legitimated by the following quote from the Qur'an:

Men are in charge of women, because Allah hath made the one of them to excel the other, and because they spend of their property [for support of women]. So good women are the obedient, guarding in secret that which Allah hath guarded. As for those from whom ye fear rebellion, admonish them and banish them to beds apart, and scourge them. Lo! Allah is ever High Exalted, Great. (4:34; Pickthall, 1994, p. 80)

Beyond its legal components, marriage also has a religious dimension and is invested with many ethical injunctions. Any sexual contact outside marriage is considered adultery and is subject to punishment. Islam also condemns and discourages celibacy. Muslim jurists have gone so far as to elevate marriage to the level of a religious duty. The Qur'an supports this notion with the phrase "And marry such of you as are solitary and the pious of your slaves and maid servants" (24:32), which is commonly interpreted as advocating marriage to fulfill religious requirements. An often-quoted hadith states that the prayer of a married man is equal to 70 prayers of a single man.

The significance of the Islamic ideals of marriage inherent in the Qur'an and the *shari'a* (legal interpretations) is that they provide a primary frame of reference for legitimizing the actions of individuals and validating certain power relations within the family. Ideologies are, however, not static. They are forged, negotiated, and re-expressed

in connection with other social, economic, and historical factors. These ideals provide one *potential* area from which individuals draw their beliefs, which they negotiate within their social and cultural environment.

### *Parent-Child Relationships*

The Qur'an and the *sunna* (practices) are extremely concerned with motherhood, fatherhood, and the protection of children from the moment of conception until the age of maturity. Besides the Qur'an, many significant Islamic texts indicate the primary importance of children and their well-being in the family unit. This emphasis can be attributed to several factors. Children are believed to strengthen the marital tie, they continue the family line by carrying their father's name, they provide for their parents in old age, and they are partial inheritors of their parents' estate.

The legal aspects of Islam deal with the socioeconomic conditions of children, both within the family and in the event of divorce or death of the parents (Schacht, 1964). Islamic law states that every Muslim infant is entitled to *hadana*, which loosely translates into the fulfillment of physical and emotional needs. This includes, besides care and protection, socialization and education. The child is entitled to love, attention, and devotion to all its needs.

According to religious law, responsibilities of parents to children and of children to parents parallel rights and obligations established through marriage, notwithstanding specific social contexts. An examination of the Islamic religious and legal ideals of the relationship between children and parents reveals a strong emphasis on the guardianship of the individual throughout the various stages of his or her life. The *shari'a* reflects the highly protective attitude of the Qur'an toward minors and aged parents. Specifically, the primary legal relationship centers

on adequate maintenance of dependent children and parents. Islamic tenets stress parents' responsibility, which begins at conception, for the economic and social welfare of children. This parental responsibility is enforceable under Islamic law (Fluehr-Lobban, 1987). Reciprocally, it is the responsibility of children to take care of their aged parents, both financially and socially: "And that ye show kindness to parents. If one of them or both of them attain old age with thee, say not 'fie' unto them nor repulse them, but speak unto them a gracious word" (Qur'an, 17:23). It is important to note the reciprocal rights and obligations of *both* parents and children.

### **Divorce**

Divorce is treated as a serious matter both in the Qur'an and hadiths and in Islamic law. Several *suras* (passages) (2:225–232; 65:1–7) deal in detail with divorce, and an often recited hadith states that "[n]o permissible thing is more detested by Allah than divorce." Divorce implicates men and women differently in the legal domain. According to Islamic law, a Muslim husband has the unilateral right to divorce his wife without having to justify his actions before any legal body or any witnesses. A wife, however, to initiate a divorce, must place her claim before a shari'a court and argue her case on the basis of certain legal precepts. Legally, the most concrete factor that prevents divorce is the portion of the mahr that becomes owed to the wife upon the dissolution of the marriage (Nasir, 1990). Women who stipulate a mahr in their marriage contracts will use it primarily as a bargaining tool, should their husband threaten to divorce them. Thus, the mahr acts as a deterrent to divorce and may give a woman some financial security and bargaining power.

Besides the mahr, the *'idda* also acts as a restraint to divorce. The *'idda* is the period

between separation of the couple and the final termination of marriage, and it carries with it certain obligations and rights for both spouses. These include a temporary legal restraint from remarrying, sexual abstinence for a woman, the mutual entitlement to inheritance, and the maintenance and lodging of the wife, who must wait three menstrual cycles before the divorce is final (Qur'an, 2:228). According to Islamic law, a divorce cannot be finalized until the *'idda* requirement is completed. In the case of a pregnant woman, the *'idda* continues until her child is born (Qur'an, 65:6). The reasons for observing the *'idda* are threefold: (a) to ascertain the possibility of a pregnancy and, if necessary, to establish the paternity of the child; (b) to provide the husband with an opportunity to return to his wife if the divorce is revocable; and (c) to enable a widow to mourn her deceased husband (Nasir, 1990). The stress in the Qur'an and Islamic law on the *'idda* illustrates the Islamic emphasis on ensuring the well-being of the unborn child. Again, this points to the religious emphasis on creating a family and ensuring that the woman and her children have a form of social protection.

### **Islamic Family Structure**

An examination of the specific Islamic rulings that deal with marriage and the maintenance of the wife, the child, and elderly parents reveals a concern with a social group that can be characterized as a nuclear family. Throughout the Qur'an, even though the Arabic terminology is inconsistent, the relations within the nuclear family are primary, and the concept of the extended family (three generations or more within the same household) is only secondary (Lecerf, 1956). This is further emphasized by the Qur'anic conception that believers should enjoy the pleasures of paradise as a family: that is, as the conjugal couple together with their

children and parents (Qur'an, 13:23; 40:8; 52:21). Furthermore, all of the religious provisions concerning wifely maintenance, divorce, and the economic and social well-being of children and parents indicate the supreme importance in Islam of the sustenance and stabilization of the family unit. These provisions also point to the importance attributed to the protection of the individual and the necessity of ensuring this protection through the stability of the family.

## RESEARCH ON MUSLIM AMERICAN FAMILIES

### *Trends in Contemporary Research*

Researchers have focused on several distinct areas with respect to Muslim American families, but many aspects of these families have not been explored. Muslim American families, therefore, provide a venue for the further development of theories, frameworks, and empirical studies that can assist family scholars in developing a greater understanding of culturally diverse families.

#### *The "Muslim Family" Defined as a Religious Institution*

Some studies on Muslim families focus specifically on the Islamic family as a religious institution. These works have become almost exclusively the focus of Muslim researchers bent on defending their faith against perceived Western imperialistic threats to their social order. These works do not acknowledge religious variation or interpretation. Instead, they deal with Islam as a unified body of dogma that is not linked with popular practice (Abd al Ati, 1977; Barakat, 1985; Disuqi, 1996). These religiously oriented works have fallen prey to the orientalist truism that Islam is about

texts rather than people (Said, 1978). Until recently, they tended to ignore the dynamic relationship between individuals, social processes, and ideologies. Even so, there is evidence in these studies that far from being uniform, Muslim families vary in size, in composition, and according to historical and social circumstances.

#### *Overviews of Muslim American Families*

Several recent compilations on family ethnicity and diversity (McAdoo, 1999; McGoldrick, Giordano, & Pearce, 1996) included overviews of the current state of understanding about Muslim families. These works, whose purpose was to provide general information, focused either on the Arab family (Abudabbeh, 1996) or on aspects of Muslim families (Carolan, 1999; Sherif, 1999). For the most part, they were not based on ethnographic or other social scientific data; instead, they outlined basic principles that can be applied to contemporary understandings of Muslim families. Although these types of works may provide insight into Muslim families, they run the risk of promoting stereotypes by not adequately addressing the diversity that belies categorical designations. The few other overview studies on Muslim American families (Aswad & Bilge, 1996; Haddad, 1991; Waugh, McIrvine, Abu-Laban, & Qureshi, 1991) are rarely used or cited in family studies research. Although these particular works focus specifically on Muslim families in the United States, their interdisciplinary orientation (anthropology and religion) has aroused only marginal interest in the field.

#### *Muslim American Families as Mental Health and Social Services Clients*

Recently, the greatest proliferation of research on and about Muslim American

families has taken place in the mental health domain. Several articles have sought to address the needs of Muslims and to provide specific recommendations for providing culturally relevant service delivery. The authors of most of these primarily qualitative studies have attempted to understand mental health issues and appropriate forms of care for American Muslims (Abudabbeh & Nydell, 1993; Carolan, Bagherinia, Juhari, Himelright, & Mouton-Sanders, 2000; Erickson & al-Timimi, 2001; Faragallah, Schumm, & Webb, 1997; Jackson, 1997; Lawrence & Rozmus, 2001; Nobles & Sciarra, 2000). These works, which focus primarily on Arab Muslims, highlight the importance of understanding family issues in providing services. They attempt to negate stereotypes that Muslim families are more patriarchal than other types of families by providing multiple examples of how women's roles can vary both before and after marriage (Carolan et al., 2000; Erickson & al-Timimi, 2001). Issues such as veiling as a symbolic statement and not as a symbol of subjugation are also highlighted (Erickson & al-Timimi, 2001). These studies indicate that, as with many other groups in the United States, the importance of extended family for providing social and emotional support remains at least a sought-after ideal, even if not actualized in practice.

#### *Gender Issues in Muslim American Families*

Several recent works have highlighted issues specifically facing Muslim women in the United States. They deal with topics such as domestic violence (Ayyub, 2000), religiosity and veiling (Bartkowski & Read, 2003), wife abuse and polygamy (Hassouneh-Phillips, 2001), gender roles and egalitarianism (Juhari, 1998), female role identity (Abu-Ali & Reisen, 1999), and discrimination against African American Muslim women (Byng, 1998). These studies indicate

that religion is only one aspect of identity formation among young Muslim women. Varying constructions of appropriate gender roles, as they are defined not only in the home but also in the wider society, play a crucial role in the lives of both unmarried and married women. These works indicate that among American Muslims the strict gender hierarchy commonly portrayed in the media and scholarly literature is often not followed. It is common for women to work outside the home and contribute to the family income. This phenomenon is congruent with changes in the Middle East and Asia, where it is increasingly common for women to secure and maintain external employment. Such economic involvement does not support the traditional Islamic model of distinct marital spheres. Instead, among many American Muslims a more egalitarian model of shared economic responsibilities and household obligations is becoming the norm. Furthermore, as Carolan et al. (2000) pointed out, for many individuals gender equity may be defined as respect rather than complete equality in the Western sense. Other issues faced by some Muslim American families are young women's rebelliousness regarding issues of modest dress and veiling. Although the return to veiling in many parts of the Islamic world has taken the form of a cultural symbolic statement for young women, some young Muslim American women fear that it will target them for harassment and discrimination. This creates unique problems for Muslim families trying to maintain their religious identity in the United States.

Many research trends with respect to Muslim American families are comparable to those regarding other culturally diverse groups in the United States. A distinguishing feature of Muslim Americans, however, is their extreme heterogeneity, which creates unique research obstacles as well as opportunities.



### *Theoretical and Methodological Issues*

In the field of family studies, research on Muslim families in the United States has been sporadic at best. This paucity of research on Muslim American families can be attributed to a myriad of issues. One contributing factor pertains to the lack of culturally sensitive frameworks for studying ethnically diverse families in general (Dilworth-Anderson, Burton, & Johnson, 1993). This problem is compounded because Muslim American families elude research categories that often classify individuals along racial or ethnic lines. Their voices are thus not represented when family diversity issues are addressed. In addition, designating individuals purely by religion can be deceptive. Labels such as *Christian*, *Muslim*, or *Jewish* do not address degree of belief, measures of religiosity, or the relationship between belief and practice (Waugh et al., 1991). Further, determining whether a family is Muslim, or for that matter Christian, Jewish, or any other religious category, can be ambiguous if family members are not part of a formal community such as a mosque, neighborhood, or association. And with respect to Muslim Americans, national origin cannot be equated with religious affiliation, beliefs, race, or ethnicity. For example, many immigrants from the Middle East, particularly before 1975, were Christians and not Muslims. More recently, a large group of Middle Eastern immigrants to the United States has been from Iran. Many of these Iranian immigrants, though designated as Muslim, are highly secular and identify themselves by their cultural and not their religious backgrounds (Walbridge, 1999).

#### *Definitional Issues With Respect to Family*

The paucity of studies on American Muslim families is part of a larger problem

that is reflected in the overall field of research on Islamic marriage and family formation. Until very recently, definitional issues hampered studies of all Muslim families, both in the United States and abroad. Although recognition of family diversity is now an integral aspect of research on more mainstream families, many studies of Muslim families assumed that the terms *Arab family*, *Islamic family*, and *Middle Eastern family* were interchangeable (Barakat, 1985; McGoldrick et al., 1996). This family was primarily described in opposition to its Western counterpart: It was purported that the institution of the Muslim family had not undergone the significant structural transformations that are associated with the rise of capitalism in the West and that it had not been the object of modernization that promoted individualism at the expense of family control (Tucker, 1993). These static conceptualizations of Islamic families abroad were applied to understandings of Muslim families in the United States. This has led to a certain degree of stereotyping, particularly with respect to gender issues in Muslim families. In one sense, Muslim families, both in the United States and abroad, are now understood to face the same globalizing challenges, constraints, and opportunities as other families with respect to issues of gender roles, marital stability, and parenting. In another sense, Muslim families must deal with the unique dilemma of being characterized and frequently stereotyped as adherents of a religion that is falsely thought to be, in the popular consciousness, particularly prescriptive with respect to women and men's roles, both in the family and in the larger society.

#### *Defining Muslim Communities*

The complexity of Muslim American communities is another barrier to studies on Muslim American families. There exists a wealth of diversity between and within

Muslim communities. For example, there are older Muslim communities in the United States that are composed of Arab immigrants, and there are Muslim neighborhoods that are composed of African Americans who have converted to Islam (Haddad & Smith, 1994). Clearly delineating specific Muslim communities is complicated by the fact that until the mid-1970s, immigrant Muslims and African American practitioners had very little contact with each other. As part of its policy, the Nation of Islam (NOI) excluded non-blacks, and for their part, immigrants perceived NOI followers as un-Islamic (Kelley, 1994). In the 1970s, as more African Americans converted to orthodox Islam, some joined largely immigrant religious communities. Nevertheless, the relationship between these groups has not improved due to widely varying experiences and concerns.

### *Demographics*

Another complicating factor with respect to researching American Muslim families is demographics. Only a relatively small number of American Muslims live in recognized Muslim communities. Most Muslims are spread out over metropolitan areas and tend to congregate more by ethnicity or national origin than by religious affiliation. Lack of common experiences also divides communities. Third- and fourth-generation Muslim families may know little of the immigrant experience and may practice a version of Islam that is dissimilar to that of their parents or their country/community of origin. These factors do not allow researchers to easily identify where and how to identify Muslim American families.

The study of Muslim families shares a problem with other culturally diverse families that are not easily accessible to researchers. Linguistic, religious, and cultural barriers make social scientific studies of Muslim Americans by non-Muslims particularly

difficult. Minority populations in the United States have long been suspicious of outside researchers, and Muslim Americans are no exception. In the contemporary context, where some Muslim Americans feel stereotyped and discriminated against, these suspicions may, in some communities, become even more heightened (Walbridge, 1999).

### *Future Theoretical Research Directions*

Currently, understandings about the dynamics of culturally diverse families, in general, are limited at best (Allen, 2000; Andersen & Collins, 1995; Bacca-Zinn, 2000; Dilworth-Anderson et al., 1993; Thompson, 1995; Thorne, 1997). This problem is exacerbated in research on amorphous groups such as Muslim Americans. A common approach is to portray culturally diverse groups by a series of descriptive characteristics. This is neither an accurate nor a fruitful approach to explaining intragroup or intergroup variability, and it can lead to stereotyping or worse. By choosing to designate families by a label, be it religious, racial, or ethnic, we run the risk of implying that this is the main determinant of identification for these individuals and their families.

### *Ecological/Systems Approaches*

Although Muslim American families are among the most diverse groups today in the United States, the study of their experiences is constrained due to the inadequacy of frameworks that are unable to capture their heterogeneity. Muslim American families, like all culturally diverse families, need to be studied as the product of complex interactions between various social subsystems operating outside the ethnic cultures. These interrelated systems include not only the individual and environment but also a myriad of situational, temporal, cultural, and

societal influences. Class, family composition, regional differences, and gender relations all affect Muslim American families. By applying an ecological/systems approach to the study of issues relevant to these families, we may be able to better determine the extent to which religious beliefs, cultural traditions, and external and internal familial factors play a role in their lives.

### *Feminist Perspectives*

Feminist perspectives also offer potential frameworks for the deconstructive analysis of Muslim American families. In-depth qualitative studies of specific issues such as marital relationships or the role of working Muslim immigrant women could provide further insight into specific group dynamics with respect to power and privilege.

Although it is now understood that gender roles and expectations differ significantly between families of varied traditions and cultures, we do not know to what extent there may be variables that bind groups together. We do not know, for example, the extent to which regional variations, class, and education play a role in the types of interpretations of appropriate gender roles among Muslim women. Developing a well-articulated analysis of gender among different groups of Muslim American women would allow for a clearer insight into family relationships, power relations, and family dynamics.

### *Symbolic Interactionism*

A symbolic interactionist framework allows researchers to understand the experiences of Muslim American families from their vantage point. By incorporating a perspective that group experiences are always the product of social constructs, researchers move away from a static perspective on the role of Islam in individuals' lives. From this perspective, it is possible to debate "when and

under what circumstances does Islamic law direct [individuals' lives], and when and under what conditions does it reflect [individuals' actions]?" (Mir-Hosseini, 1993, p. 14).

### *Life Course Analysis*

Life course analysis provides another important venue for understanding the experiences of both immigrant and African American Muslims. By focusing on the intertwined nature of individual trajectories within kinship networks in the context of time, culture, and social change, this framework offers the conceptual flexibility to address a variety of family forms in diverse environments (Dilworth-Anderson et al., 1993). Given the particularly diverse nature of Muslim Americans, this perspective has the potential for the development of culturally relevant constructs of family and family experiences.

These theoretical frameworks provide a foundation for capturing the intertwined, complex nature of Muslim American families. These families do not live in a vacuum but are instead part of the larger American and world landscape. Theoretical approaches that incorporate concepts of agency and systemic change are best used to assist in interpreting the relationship between religious values and ideals and people's actual lives in a constantly shifting environment.

### *Future Empirical Research Directions*

The study of Muslim American families provides a useful venue for theoretical and empirical contributions not only about these families but also about the study of group complexity and family experiences in general. As globalizing influences are felt in all parts of the world, taken-for-granted assumptions about families and approaches to studying them are increasingly being questioned. Thus, researchers need to employ

new paradigms in their studies and formulate new types of questions about the subject matter. As a discipline, family studies also needs to reinvestigate its multidisciplinary roots in an effort to build on what we know and what we still need to learn. This may be best accomplished by reconceptualizing the focus of study in less traditional terms and incorporating innovative collaborative approaches.

### *Interdisciplinary Collaborations*

Interdisciplinary comparative studies between religious groups could provide one potential area for exploration. *Muslim* is a religious designation, and Muslim families' experiences should thus be compared to those of other such groups, such as Christian, Jewish, or Mormon families. Comparisons between Muslim and American, white, or ethnic families are misleading because the latter designate geographic and/or racial affiliations instead of religious connections. Cross-disciplinary research, specifically in conjunction with anthropology, history, and religious studies, could lend insight into the complexity of understanding the dynamic relationship between religion and social groups.

### *The Immigration Experience*

Comparisons of aspects of the immigration experience are another crucial area of study. All immigrants share the experience of uprooting themselves from one culture and trying to establish themselves in a new one. The extent to which religious beliefs play a role in those experiences has not been widely pursued. Do strong religious beliefs and identification perhaps facilitate this transition? With respect to Muslim Americans, the literature takes a negative slant on this topic, adhering to the view that Muslims face prejudice due to their religion (Abudabbeh & Nydell, 1993;

Erickson & al-Timimi, 2001; Jackson, 1997). But given the heterogeneity of Muslims and their patterns of regional settlement, this may not always be the case. Furthermore, immigration research draws attention to the international aspect of these families. Many different ethnic groups maintain strong ties with friends, relatives, and colleagues from their country of origin. This creates a flow of movement of people, information, and ideological orientations. Studies of Muslim immigrant families' experiences could provide insight into global influences on family structures and relations by highlighting the different experiences within families associated with the adaptation to new environments.

### *Socialization of Children*

The socialization of children with respect to their religious, gender, and linguistic identities provides another venue for better understanding Muslim families. Although currently some studies are looking at the acculturation of young Muslim women (Byng, 1998; Abu-Ali & Reisen, 1999), the discussion of gender with respect to the development of boys has been completely ignored. Also, the many issues raised with respect to immigrant parent-child relations provide multiple opportunities for research.

### *Muslim Fatherhood*

The lack of research on Muslim men also extends to the issue of fatherhood and Islam. Although there is acknowledgment that parenthood is an important aspect of religious ideals, there are no empirical studies on the relationship between Islamic values of parenting and men. Particularly given the recent emphasis on fatherhood initiatives, examining the relationship between men, Islam, and fatherhood in African American Muslims may provide valuable insights.

*Interfaith Marriages*

Another long-neglected area of study is interfaith marriages with respect to Muslims. According to religious law, Muslim women must marry within the faith, whereas Muslim men may marry outside the faith. Research that examines the extent of influence of varying religious ideals in the broader context of civil marriage in the United States may give us more insight into the dynamics of religiously heterogeneous marriages.

**CONCLUSION**

Muslim American families provide a rich new area of exploration for family scholars interested in issues of diversity, gender, religion, and group identity. The heterogeneity of Muslim Americans provides an opportunity for the testing and application of new theoretical and empirical research approaches. On the one hand, this group is characterized by its adherence to Islam. On the other, Muslim Americans include devout believers and practitioners as well as secular individuals with no visible ties to the religion. This provides both a barrier and an opportunity for researchers grappling with capturing the social complexity of families. Research on Muslim American families illustrates that with respect to family life, most are dealing with issues that are in many ways similar to those faced by others in the United States. Families struggle with issues concerning gender roles and the division of labor, the raising of children, caretaking of

the elderly, immigration-related concerns, and many other topics. A specific difference is that one area of definition for many Muslim American families is their negotiation of religious concepts derived from the teachings of the Qur'an. The significance of the Islamic ideals with respect to family lies not in the extent to which they reflect actual practice but in the frame of reference they provide for legitimizing individual actions. These ideals validate certain power relations in the family but are not unchanging. They are forged, negotiated, and re-expressed in connection with other social, economic, and historical factors. This dynamic relationship between religion and families needs to be explored through the conscious application of frameworks such as ecological systems theory or symbolic interactionism and may in fact lead to new theoretical designs that more concisely capture complex phenomena. In an increasingly global world, static theoretical frameworks do not allow us to fully understand how families perceive themselves and their issues or how they are adapting to the stresses and challenges around them.

Currently, the study of culturally diverse families needs to be invigorated through the application of more explicit theoretical approaches, the development of culturally sensitive frameworks, and a wider, more imaginative range of topics to be studied. The study of Muslim American families provides family scholars with the chance to pursue truly innovative research that will further the field of family diversity as well as family studies as a whole.

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