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**Project (Social Science): Beyond the 9/11 Question: Factors Influencing Religious and Social Conservatism among Muslim-American Girls**

## **Personal Section**

As a Muslim-American female teenager, I have always found it difficult to balance the religious, traditional world with the modern, secular world. The extent of my conservatism on certain issues has been influenced by both these worlds. My desire to investigate my Muslim peers' attitudes and reactions toward these differences gave me the idea for my research. However, it was my mother who gave me the strength and determination to actually go through with this experiment.

Unlike other parents, my mother did not simply teach me the “right” way to be a good Muslim. She emphasized that practically every practice encouraged by the Islamic community was an *interpretation* of the Qur’an, not direct law. Her open mindedness broadened *my* horizons, and I started to question many common religious customs. My study has allowed me to explore the extent to which my peers think in the same manner I do.

I wanted to ask other Muslim-American girls about their opinions on issues that force their two cultures to clash directly. The series of surveys I created were distributed at my local mosque in Long Island, New York and at the Muslim Student Organization at CUNY Queens College. I also handed out surveys at my high school. All research was supervised by Mr. Stephen Sullivan, my social studies projects advisor.

After I gathered my data, I learned the basics of statistical analysis in order to properly obtain and comprehend the results of my study. Although my project concerned a social science issue, the surveys I created were scored quantitatively and subjects' responses were interpreted using t-tests, ANOVA, correlations, and regression.

It was essential to incorporate mathematics into my study, as statistical analysis validated my results. My project enabled me to understand that science and mathematics can be used on so many different levels in society today. Mathematics is hardly limited to applications such as determining the velocity of a ball after it is thrown 10 feet in the air, it can be used to defy expectations about the factors that influence religious and social conservatism among Muslim-American girls. In this study, mathematical analysis proved that parents' education levels had a more significant impact on subjects' conservatism than did subjects' religiosity.

Of course, if I had had more time, I would have learned statistics more thoroughly. The crash course my advisor gave me was just enough for me to interpret my results, but if I had to do my project again, I would do it differently. Between reading several articles on studies done on Muslims in different countries, constructing new surveys, finding organizations that allowed me to use their members as subjects, distributing surveys, developing a scale to score them on, actually scoring them, learning basic statistics, determining results, interpreting the (rather shocking) results, writing the paper, I barely had enough time to breathe in the two years I worked on my project. To those who wish to undertake a project combining science and mathematics, I offer the following advice: make sure you have plenty of time and more importantly, **USE YOUR TIME WISELY**. Work on your project at a constant pace, do not do a lot at one time and

then do nothing at all for a couple of months. You never know when an obstacle will arise and you need to devote additional time to deal with it. Be flexible, be practical, and of course, be patient. It is okay to get frustrated, but do not allow yourself to reach a point of discouragement. If you do, lean on your advisor or a parent for support. I certainly did. Remember, if *you* think your research is worth the effort, the final product will certainly justify all your hard work.

## Research Section

As the Muslim-American population exponentially increases in the twenty-first century, it faces issues that often bring traditional, religious society into conflict with secular, western society. Over the last two decades, Muslim immigration into modern, more developed countries such as the United Kingdom has prompted numerous studies of controversial topics that directly affect this minority group. Such studies have been less common in the United States of America. After September 11<sup>th</sup>, research focusing on Muslim-Americans has increased, but it has been primarily concerned with Muslims' experiences before and after the tragic attacks. In fact, September 11<sup>th</sup> has diverted attention from basic controversies that affect Muslim-Americans every day; instead, researchers have centered on the discrimination they experienced. The issues they deal with on a daily basis do not typically involve actual clashes between non-Muslim Americans and Muslim Americans; instead, they more commonly concern the many differences between non-Muslim and Muslim ideals. More research in this area is essential.

Presently, Muslims living in America have adopted a variety of opinions on attire, education, gender relations, and their ability to adapt to western society. Their viewpoints range from extremely secular and western to extremely religious and traditional. Like many immigrant groups who have preceded them, Muslims have experienced numerous problems associated with this religious-modern clash. In particular, *women* of this faith have been especially affected by these matters.

Participants in this experiment completed a rather lengthy series of surveys. They answered questions about how often they attend the mosque. No names were provided in

order to ensure confidentiality of the participants' responses. The main part of the survey was divided into ten sections: self-esteem, attire, veiling, education, arranged marriage, gender relations, polygamy, divorce, assimilation, discrimination, and survey reaction. Also, the following potential demographic influences were included as variables to test their impact on social and religious conservatism and self-esteem among Muslim-American girls: age/grade, parents' education, religiosity, ethnicity, and discrimination.

It was predicted that participants' religiosity would be directly proportional to their conservatism at the 95% confidence level. Subjects who were more religious, such as those who veiled and/or those who attended the mosque often, would be more conservative in their opinions. As demonstrated by Read and Bartkowski's study, subjects who were more religious were expected to more closely follow common interpretations of the Qur'an, while those who were not were predicted to express more liberal views (2000). Religiosity was thus predicted to have the greatest effect on the overall conservatism of subjects. These relationships were expected to be linear with a positive slope.

Parents' education level (i.e., socioeconomic status) was also expected to affect conservatism among Muslim-American girls. Zaidi's study of arranged marriages (2002) demonstrated that highly educated and high-income families were often more liberal than less educated and low-income families; Muslims who belonged to higher socioeconomic classes more often rejected the system of arranged marriages. Therefore, it was predicted that parents' education would be inversely proportional to subjects' conservatism at the 95% confidence level. Higher socioeconomic status levels would also correlate with lower levels of conservatism according to the hypothesis. These relationships were

predicted to be linear with a negative slope. While parents' education levels would be a significant influence, religiosity was still predicted to have the biggest impact on subjects' attitudes.

Because the study applied only to Muslim-American female teenagers, only twenty-five people ultimately met our strict qualifications and participated in this study. To facilitate its completion, the lengthy survey was separated into two parts. Subjects were required to be between the ages 13 and 19, and they must have attended at least two years of formal Muslim religious instruction. Subjects were also required to be U.S. residents for at least three years. They were recruited from a local mosque and from a Muslim Student Association (MSA) at a university. Friends, family, and acquaintances who met the qualifications also participated in the study. Surveys were handed out during the fall of 2004.

Surveys were distributed only to girls because gender separation is strongly advocated by Islamic leaders; therefore, it was difficult for the student researcher to go into mosques and other religious centers and hand out the surveys to males.

Surveys were distributed at the mosque and the MSA because the experiment required "genuine" Muslims to be studied; only those who were familiar with Islamic teachings and cultural traditions could answer the specific questions in the surveys. While current mosque attendance was not essential, membership at some point in one's life proved that subjects were qualified to participate in the study. Also, the girls had to fulfill the "residency requirement" because the study concerned Muslim girls' attitudes toward controversial religious issues in America; recent immigrants would not be

familiar with the secular-traditional clash between American ideals and religious practices.

In addition, an “unspoken” restriction inhibited the survey distribution process: the hesitancy of Muslims to speak or answer surveys in the post-September 11<sup>th</sup> era. In order to protect themselves, Muslims have withdrawn themselves from American society and public participation to a certain extent. Their suspicion is somewhat understandable, given the increased levels of discrimination toward them reported by newspapers, television, and now Columbia University’s Project ‘Muslims in New York City.’

At the mosque, surveys were distributed at a Girls’ Youth Muslim (YM) meeting. Although approximately twenty surveys were distributed, only seven completed, approved surveys were returned. Unfortunately, several apparently completed surveys were not returned because Youth Muslim did not meet at the mosque during the fasting month of Ramadaan, which fell between October and November 2004.

Twenty surveys were distributed at the MSA. Eight completed surveys and five partially completed surveys (only Part I or Part II were filled out) were returned. Five other students currently enrolled at the student researcher’s high school participated in the study as well, after their parents consented to their participation.

Contrary to our primary hypothesis, statistical analysis suggests that parents’ education (i.e., socioeconomic status) is the most significant influence on social and religious conservatism among Muslim-American girls. Although less important, religiosity is also a statistically significant influence, while ethnic group (South Asian vs. Middle Eastern) has little effect on the adolescents, as predicted. Moreover, statistical analysis shows significant correlations between the discrimination variables and

conservatism. However, it is unclear whether discrimination affects conservatism or conservatism affects discrimination. Further research in this area is required.

In addition, the surveys used in this experiment yielded information on the views of Muslim girls toward education and their reactions to the surveys. These responses were measured qualitatively, yet they are still significant. For example, all of the girls who were surveyed planned to continue their education by going to college, and common motives for their pursuit of education included personal satisfaction and family expectations. Furthermore, subjects were asked to react to the surveys by indicating how often they had thought about the individual topics mentioned prior to participating in the study. The girls' responses demonstrated that they often thought about some of the topics, such as education and arranged marriage, while they rarely considered other matters, such as divorce and polygamy. In future investigations, quantitative scores for these sections of the survey may yield more accurate information on Muslim-American girls' attitudes.

Future research should also include larger sample sizes, which would yield more information on the influence various factors have on conservatism. In order to concentrate on the effects of parents' education on subjects' conservatism, this variable could be separated into four categories, "high school," "college," "some college," and "graduate school" instead of the two categories, "college grad" and "non-college grad" used in this experiment. Additionally, although widely used as a proxy for socioeconomic status, parents' education may not have signified this in the current study. Higher levels of parents' education could have demonstrated that these parents were exposed to more modern ideas in their education; they then related these ideas to their



children, making them less conservative. It might also be helpful to find out if parents' education was obtained in the United States or overseas

Larger samples of Muslims could also be surveyed in order to determine differences in opinions between various ethnicities and age groups. Investigations could also be conducted comparing perspectives of Muslim-American men and women.

Conservatism among the Muslim-American population is based on a variety of factors; as supported by previous studies, opinions regarding veiling, education, gender relations, and assimilation into society are not clear-cut (Atasoy, 2003).

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