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Somali Adolescents’ Negotiation of Religious and Racial Bias In and Out of School

This article explores the issues of race and religion as they pertain to adolescent Somali immigrants and their lives at school, among their families, and in their communities. Research from a number of contexts offers a range of perceptions, held by Somali youth and adults, not commonly available in the media. Multiple suggestions are offered to educators for engaging youth in conversations about race and religion in ways that will make Muslim students feel more welcome at school and help all students understand racial and religious identity, as well as the harm that racial and religious bias can cause.

Somalis have immigrated to many places around the world since the civil war in the 1990s, and immigration continues as Somalia struggles to reestablish itself as a nation state. As these events have unfolded, large Somali communities have formed in European countries such as the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Norway, Denmark, and Sweden. In Canada, the largest communities are in Toronto and Ottawa; in the United States they are in Ohio; Minneapolis, MN; Seattle, WA; Atlanta, GA; San Diego, CA; and Washington, DC. This massive immigration has created numerous cultural contact zones that are often marked by fear, stereotypes, and discrimination, largely in connection to race and religion. Somalis and other Muslims in Western societies often endure Islamophobia, which is cultivated by much ignorance and fueled by a powerful public discourse that depicts all Muslims as extremists and fundamentalists. Children and adolescents are not immune to this discourse, nor do they passively accept it.

In this article, I make available a wider range of images of Muslims by sharing some of the
common perspectives of Somali adolescent immigrants and their parents or community elders. The research I looked at came mainly from the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, and Australia. Although these countries are very different from each other, they share the fact that their dominant culture is White and Judeo-Christian. As a reader of multiple accounts of African Muslim immigration stories, I am continually struck by how the issues faced by Somali or Muslim youth seem to appear and reappear over time and across multiple settings. Using this research and my own, I offer some ways in which educators and community members may be able to foster more productive interactions and learning environments with and for Somali youth.

Somali Immigrant Adolescents Experiencing Racialization

Racialization is a socially constructed process where race becomes the predominant way of defining oneself or being defined by others. It is also a powerful mechanism for excluding, lumping, or stereotyping based on race, for the purpose of denying equality (Schmidt, 2002). Racialization masks the complexity of racial identities, but as Pollock (2004) pointed out, even though racial identities are infinitely complex, racial identifications are shockingly simple. In other words, a racial identity can involve stories and histories in a person’s background that have contributed to a complex, and perhaps very private, racial identity (Thandeka, 1999), although there are simple identifications of a person’s race, made in a split second, by others, every day.

Racialization occurs in many societies, and immigrants are not immune to this phenomenon. The racialization of immigrants attempts to maintain the status quo—keep everything the same with us and them in our or their respective places (West, 2002). The process of racialization has a powerful impact on immigrants of color, like Somalis, who may not have come from such racialized societies or were considered among the dominant race in their own country (Ajrouch & Kusow, 2007). The power of race in many White societies is surprising to some immigrants. Lee (2005) pointed out that immigrants may envision an open and free America, but upon arrival find a society where “race and racism structure identities, experience and opportunities” (p. 3). This process, Lee argued, is how immigrants become racial minorities. Bryce-Laporte (1972) argued that as African immigrants have come to the United States, their “identity, loyalty, accent and traditions have melted rapidly into the black pots and white pots of America, leaving only slight residues” (p. 51). Even though the melting pot metaphor seems old-fashioned, Bryce-Laporte’s words are still wise and timely.

Researchers such as Lee (2005) have continued to think about the dichotomous Black–White discourse about race in the United States in terms of immigrants of color. Lee argued, using Ong (2003), that immigrants are Blackened or Whitened according to their economic standing and behavior. There are good ways to Americanize (read White ways) and bad ways to Americanize (read Black ways). “Becoming Black,” a term I borrow from Ibrahim (1999), may involve adopting, on a surface level, the fashion, music, language, and gestures of African American peers. It may also involve adopting a perceived mind-set. In Bashir-Ali’s (2006) study of a Mexican-American female adolescent, this played out in a fairly extreme way. Maria, as she was referred to, became very good at speaking African American Vernacular English, but also adopted oppositional behavior at school, distanced herself from her ESL class, and denied her ethnicity and native language. Somali adolescents may also make this choice; however, society may try to make this choice for them. The following research suggests that Somali youth may be racialized by (a) Somali elders, (b) the police, and (c) teachers.

The Racialization of Somali Youth

Somali parents and community leaders worry that the youth are forgetting their culture, their language, and, most important, their religion. Most worrisome is when they see adolescents
that seem to be acting Black, or appropriating what they think typifies or expresses African American culture. In a study that I conducted involving Somali youth, as well as adults who interact with them, Ali, an adult Somali male, said,

I know a lot of high school students who work and send their money back to their relatives. So a lot of them are just doing very nicely. They know what they can take from American culture and what not. That is the positive part. A lot of Somali students also take the other side. Like you know, from African American youth. Always listen to music, wear loose pants, sometimes even like making their hair like a woman [braiding]. That's totally not in our culture. Not focusing more about their education. Not coming to mosques. (Bigelow, 2007)

This quote illustrates Lee's (2005) point that there are certain ways to integrate into the new country that are acceptable, and others that are not. As Bashir-Ali (2006) pointed out, immigrant and refugee youth are attending urban schools where there are a large number of African American students. Regardless of race, immigrants are often expected to learn both a standard variety of English, as well as African American vernacular English, the language spoken among their peers. Immigrant youth must "master the social, linguistic, and cultural codes of the dominant group—which exist in a tacit social hierarchy within a school" (Bashir-Ali, 2006, p. 628) if they hope to enter into the social fabric of the school. The quote also illustrates how an adult member of the Somali community does not consider it possible to be Muslim and dress in hip-hop clothing, as if a racialized identity is an unquestioned threat to ethnic, national, and religious identities. What is more likely is that Somali youth are reconstructing national and religious identities that challenge traditional versions of what it means to be a Somali Muslim teen.

Despite how adults perceive Somali youth, research shows that the youth are holding fast to a national and ethnic identity, regardless of the clothes they wear. They are quickly becoming citizens of their new countries and strongly identifying themselves as Somali and Muslim, despite the fact that their religious practices may have changed (Berns McGown, 1999; Shah, 2006). Teachers in the United States see the push and pull between a self-proclaimed national identity and an other-implanted racial identity in the simple act of asking students to indicate a racial category on school forms. Invariably, if given the option of writing something under “Other,” Somali youth will write “Somali.” This is a small but significant act of resisting being racialized.

There are much more serious and hurtful ways that Somali youth are racialized. When asked if they have ever been mistaken for someone they are not (Bigelow, 2007), many Somali male participants discussed being unfairly profiled by police and lumped together with other Black people. One male participant said, “You know . . . the cops see us color-wise. ’Cause old Somali people try to separate themselves from Black people, but the cop, he sees you as a Black person and he’s gonna do whatever he will do to another Black person.” Another male adolescent, also in reference to the police, said, “You walk by and you are a Black man, because African, Somali, Kenyan, Congoan, we all the same, we Black men. Have the skin of Black.”

Harmful racialization occurs at school, too. In Bigelow (2007) an adolescent female told about her perceptions of one of her teachers.

I’m not gonna lie—um, our school, some teachers are racists, even the teachers say that some teachers are racist. They’re racist, like they, they don’t help you. I have this class, and then, she was the, she was, I think she was a racist people I ever met in my life. The comments she makes about Muslims. I didn’t like that. I used to hate that class and then, and then, it was required, so I had to take it, and I couldn’t like— “Oh, man” and I couldn’t wait that class. They won’t help you with nothing. They, they be like, “Oh,” you, if you miss a class or something, and you be like, “Can I make it up? Can I make up the work?” They be like, “No.”

This quote speaks to the student’s recognition of racism in her schools which, in this case, is seen through the teacher’s lack of willingness
to help the Somali student. It also shows how Islamophobia is a form of racism. In addition to struggles with teachers, Somali Muslim youth experience tensions with other ethnic groups. In the following quote from Bigelow (2007), a female high school student tells how the Somali students are pitted against the African-American students by a teacher:

There was a teacher there—and we used to be in her class, and there was a whole bunch of Somali people, there—it was true that the Somalian kids is more trouble makers than the African Americans, but like, when she’d get mad, she’d like, “This is not Somalia. You guys cannot act this way,” and everybody would look at her and she would be like, “Well.” and we used to go up to her and be like, “Well, you can’t say that kind of stuff,” and she’d be like, “Well, you guys act right, and I won’t make fun of you guys,” and then when she’d leave the class, she’ll ask one of the African Americans, “Can you watch these Somalians? Make sure they don’t do anything wrong?” She’d say stuff like that.

It is harmful for classmates to learn that certain groups are more privileged, trusted, or respected than others, in the eyes of the teachers. Rich and Troudi (2006) have argued how culture, ethnicity, gender, and religion can be linked to race to create “new racisms, which use different metaphors to marginalize and exclude certain social groups based on more than just biological traits” (p. 617, emphasis in original). Research about the role of religion in Somali adolescents’ lives is showing how Islamophobia, as a new racism, is easily formed when discrimination based on ethnicity or race intersects with “an irrational fear, distrust or rejection of the Muslim religion and those who are (perceived as) Muslim” (van Driel, 2004a, p. x).

Somali Immigrant Adolescents Experiencing Islamophobia

Islamophobia originates mainly through political rhetoric. In today’s world, Islamic movements are seen as intrinsically dangerous; Muslims are often portrayed as uneducated barbarians, and the axis of evil has solidified Muslim nations as a collective enemy to the United States (Haque, 2004). Gordon Conway, Chairman of the Runnymede Commission, asserts: “If you doubt whether Islamophobia exists, I suggest you spend a week reading… a range of national and local papers. You will find prejudiced and antagonistic comments, mostly subtle but sometimes blatant and crude. Where the media lead, many will follow” (Haque, 2004, p. 3). It is commonplace now to hear of vandalism against Mosques or Islamic schools, as well as random violence against Muslim individuals (Murphy, 2006). Given this, it is no surprise that Muslim youth feel tension in their communities and schools. The tensions that Somali adolescents frequently feel at school often crosscut with being Muslim and the identity markers that signify Islam.

Fitting in at school is promoted implicitly or explicitly by educators, peers, and school policies, and often comes at a great expense to Muslim youth. It is, without doubt, very difficult to be Muslim in a public school in a Judeo-Christian society (van Driel, 2004b; Zine, 2000, 2001). Iman, a 22-year old participant in Zine’s (2001) study, recalled a vast difference in values between herself and her non-Muslim friends: “In one of my classes, these two girls they were discussing sex and they said like, ‘Iman, you wouldn’t know what that is,’ and I would say, ‘That’s what you think,’ and I didn’t know what it was! But I’d still act like I knew what was going on just to fit in” (p. 405). Berns McGown (1999) documented this feeling in an interview with Farah, a 17-year-old Somali basketball player at a Toronto high school. He said, “It’s hard to be a Muslim in Canada, big-time hard. It’s hard to remember to pray. Also it’s big-time hard to fast during Ramadan when you see your friends are eating; you want to eat with them too” (p. 130). Although praying, fasting, and trying to follow an Islamic moral code are difficult to do at school in the West, perhaps the most contentious Muslim practice at school is veiling, or wearing hijab.
What's Up With the Hijab?

Clothing is a “silent symbol of self and community” (De Voe, 2002, p. 238) and the way that some Muslim women dress is often at the center of discussions of an entire community’s integration into a Western country. Consequently, Islam can be an extremely gendered issue when it comes to talking about immigration and schooling. As such, the negative and positive consequences of wearing the hijab to work or school vary greatly across national and local contexts and the sociocultural setting matters enormously in terms of how Muslim students feel at school. Veiling, as a sociocultural construct, differs across Muslim cultures, and even across time in any given culture (De Voe, 2002). Many urban Somali women can recall times in Somalia when veiling was not required (Bigelow, 2007).

In the migration and immigration process, veiling has taken on new meaning for Somalis. The veil may be a manifestation of Somali immigrants’ wish to retain and maintain their culture in a new land, or it may be a simple expression of a desire to be close to God and follow their culture’s interpretation of Islam law. These explanations are offered by the film “What’s up with the Hijab?” (Minnesota Historical Society, 2004), produced by Somali adolescent girls for an audience that does not understand Islam and the veil. Although possibly surprising to some Westerners, the veil or hijab may serve additional or alternative purposes, including resistance. Khan (2002) told about how a woman from Egypt chose to return to veiling to show Canadians that all Muslims are not “fanatics, fundamentalists, and terrorists” (p. 107). Some Muslim youth wear it as a political sign of solidarity to a hostile world (van Driel, 2004a, p. ix). In such cases, Islamophobia among the larger population is coconstructing a female Muslim identity. In some settings, wearing a veil makes clear the fact that a young woman is Somali, not African American. For example, Bigelow (2007) reported how Sufia, a high school student, was surprised to learn that one of the girls in her class spoke Somali. She thought the girl was African American because she didn’t wear a hijab. In this case, the veil may be used to embrace or reject a Somali identity, given that, in the Midwest setting where the research took place, most veiled women are Somali.

For refugees, the experiences of fleeing, living in a camp for a long time and moving to a strange land are almost more than a person can bear. McMichael (2002) gathered 42 Somali women’s narratives about their lives in Melbourne, Australia, and made a compelling case that Islam provided a home for the women as they were struggling with resettlement. Her data showed that “Islam provides an important source of solace and emotional support” (p. 172), but also that Somali women have a diversity of Islamic ideologies and practices. One woman, aged 38, who participated in this study, discussed some of the ways in which Islamic dress codes are disputed among Somali women and a source of social conformity. She offered this explanation for why religious values have intensified:

The Somali community here in Melbourne is fresh from the civil war, they are made to succumb to Islamic faith and religious values predominate at the moment. . . . Now there is a wave of fundamentalism in Australia. Maybe it is about preservation of culture because we are a minority culture here. Our traditional values are more prescriptive than they have ever been. I never remember people wearing thick veils. All of this is new for me. (p. 181)

Religious practices change across time and place and it seems that, for many Somali communities, there has been an intensification of religious beliefs. Somali adolescent girls are often caught in the middle when they resist religious intensification at home but are characterized as terrorists or Bin Ladens (Bigelow, 2007) at school or in their communities. They are trying to adapt to a new society and fit in at school, while at the same time they are lumped together with Muslim extremists.

The misunderstandings Westerners have about why Muslim women wear a veil abound. However, the veil is not explained easily and the examples above serve to show that there are
multiple reasons for wearing one—including, but not limited to, doing it for others, for self, or to challenge assumptions.

**Implications for Educators**

Returning to the earlier discussion of racialization, it is important for educators to recall that, for now, Somali immigrant identity tends to focus much more on nationality and religion than on race. Given this conclusion, the following sections offer suggestions for educators who wish to explore race and religion in ways that may improve the educational climate for Somali immigrants.

**Race and Somali Youth**

Many Somali youth are struggling with who they will become in their new societies. Should they conform to a certain coethnic peer group or to another peer group? How do they navigate becoming someone different in the new society while they perceive the adults in their lives as making few strides toward the new society? This set of implications explores issues of race beginning from the perspective of Somali youth, continuing outward to the larger school and community settings.

1. Students could be engaged in learning about and researching their own identities and those of their classmates. Teachers could promote deep reflection on the meaning of symbols that adolescent culture in the United States adopts.
2. All students should learn about how racialization occurs at schools and in communities. Students can engage in their own inquiry about racialization practices.
3. At the school level, teachers should be required to learn how to foster productive inter- and intraethnic understanding, rather than animosity. This may require examining long-standing school practices such as tracking students racially and academically.
4. Engaging the larger community in conversations with youth about the harm of police harassment and profiling (Bigelow, 2007). Somali youth need a forum for contesting the labeling that they report experiencing in their communities.

**Islam and Somali Youth**

Religious diversity is neglected or ignored in teacher education, leaving teachers with many questions (Subedi, 2006). Teachers in the United States wonder about how to maintain the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment of the Constitution, requiring public schools to remain neutral regarding religion, while allowing their Muslim students to observe religious practices. In some European countries, wearing the hijab at school has become the focus of discussions about Muslim youth. The following is a list of key issues or questions to explore at school:

1. Teachers should work with Muslim parents and the school administrators to accommodate the obligatory religious practices that some Muslim students may wish to observe (e.g., wearing a hijab, not eating pork, prayer times, single gender physical education and health classes). Accommodating these practices does not violate any law in the United States. Educators can find experts on Islam who can engage in thoughtful conversations with adolescents and their families.
2. It would be helpful if non-Muslim classmates knew more about Islam in general. One place to begin may be an exploration of the reasons for wearing a hijab, some of which have been outlined above. Are there opportunities where teachers can facilitate a conversation about what the hijab means and why Muslim girls may wish to wear it? Could teachers help answer questions about the hijab such as: What styles of clothes are worn under the hijab? Why are some veils more stylish than others and how do veils differ across cultures?
3. Besides demystifying the hijab, teachers can work against Islamophobia through the cur-
curriculum. Local and national media that engenders fear could be analyzed (Haque, 2004). Islamic arts, history, and politics could be explored across a number of subject areas in ways that would deepen the curriculum and offer a forum for learning how dramatically different Islamic societies are.

4. Students and teachers can learn to recognize anti-Islamic (and other) bias in textbooks and other course materials. The educational community should actively seek the removal of materials that stereotype or marginalize members of the school or larger community.

Schools are often places that reproduce larger societal systems of discrimination (Bordieu & Passeron, 1977). This is clearly occurring as Somali immigrant youth are misunderstood and mistreated at school. However, while youth are negotiating multiple identities, it is the responsibility of the adults in their lives, elders, teachers, and parents, to listen to them and respect them as they define or redefine themselves in new and old ways.

Notes

1. Typical stereotypes of Muslim youth in general are the following: arranged marriages are forced marriages; Islam imposes segregation; wearing Hijab is forced; girls are married young and not allowed to be educated; boys are under-achievers and disruptive; boys will become taxi-drivers; and boys will go into family businesses (Shah, 2006).

2. Other typical stereotypes of Islam are the following: static, unresponsive to new realities; no shared values with other religions; archaic, barbaric, irrational; and inferior to Western religions (Haque, 2004).

3. Somalis, like many others in the United States, seem to essentialize African American culture. In other words, they stereotype and lump all African Americans together and their understanding of the African American culture is not at all nuanced or multifaceted. The irony is that others may lump Somali adolescents into the same group as African Americans in similarly simplistic ways.

4. The appropriation of all cultural markings of what immigrant youth perceive as Black culture is not necessarily welcomed by African Americans. In a local newspaper article that explored some of the interethic tensions between Somalis and African Americans, Maynard (May, 2002) quoted Fabian, an African American female teen, offering her perspective on Somali ability to become Black. Fabian said, “I see Somalis as Black people but some people don’t. They just see them as foreigners who came here and don’t understand our history. They don’t know the hardships of slavery. They don’t respect what we’ve been through, so they don’t get the respect of being Black.” On the other hand, De Voe (2002) found that among some African American students, veiling may be seen as a rejection of Black American identity and therefore offensive.

5. However, the fact that a Somali adolescent identifies as Somali does not mean that he or she has many memories of Somalia, possibly due to their age at resettlement or the number of years in a refugee camp. For many adolescents, being Somali means being more a part of an imagined community (Anderson, 1983) than actually having a Somali passport.

References


