‘Our Faith Was Also Hijacked by Those People’: Reclaiming Muslim Identity in Canada in a Post-9/11 Era

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Although it has been acknowledged in academic literature that many Muslims asserted their Muslim identity after 9/11, this social process has yet to be theorised. Utilising a case study of 30 young well-educated Muslims in Canada, this study theorises Muslim identity formation in the 9/11 era. To do so, I coin the term ‘reactive identity formation’ and extend work done on ‘reactive ethnicity’. I do this by illustrating that the formation of reactive identities is not limited to strengthening ethnic identity and that religious minority groups can experience a similar phenomenon. I then demonstrate that ‘reactive identity formation’ is a complex process which involves both social forces and individual agency.

Keywords: Religion; Identity; Muslims; Reactive Ethnicity; 9/11; Canada

Introduction

In winter 2005, I began running focus-group interviews with Canadian Muslim university students in a bid to determine whether young Muslims had stepped away from their religion following the terrorist attacks in New York of 11 September 2001 (henceforth 9/11). Mohammed, a 19-year-old who had spent time in England, responded:

I have seen the opposite effect in England. Girls in England were being extra religious and wearing proper traditional clothes after 9/11. They were being more religious than before. You would think they would do the opposite because they did not want to be discriminated against, but they became more religious. But I don’t know why.

Like Mohammed, I had expected that young Muslims would distance themselves from their religious background to avoid discrimination post-9/11. I was intrigued to
learn that the opposite might be occurring in England. Studies in the United States and the United Kingdom concur with Mohammed’s observations (El-Halawany 2003; Gupta 2004; Kundnani 2002; Peek 2003), but they do not provide a theoretical explanation for why this is happening. The encounter with Mohammed and the gap in the literature led me to ask the following question: How can we theorise why young Muslims are asserting their Muslim identity in the post-9/11 era?

To address the issue, I draw upon and extend Portes and Rumbaut’s (2001) theory of reactive ethnicity which posits that, when people experience racism, they increase their identification with their ethnic group. Portes and Rumbaut focus primarily on ethnic identity; I extend their work by demonstrating that the formation of reactive identities is not limited to ethnic groups, but that religious minorities can experience a similar phenomenon. I coin the term ‘reactive identity formation’ to make sense of Muslim experiences post-9/11 and illustrate the complexity involved in the formation of reactive identities.

Muslims in the Canadian Context

This study uses a sample of well-educated young Canadians as a case study to understand Muslim identity formation. Canada has a growing and diverse Muslim population. The major influx of immigrants came to Canada during the 1960s; since then, the Muslim population has been increasing (Nimer 2002). In 2001, Canada’s Muslim population numbered 579,640—of whom 70 per cent resided in the three cities of Toronto (254,110), Montreal (100,185) and Vancouver (52,590)—and now constitutes the largest non-Christian religious group in Canada (Statistics Canada 2001). Demographers claim that Islam is the fastest-growing religion in North America (Nimer 2002). Though they share a common religious affiliation, the Muslim population in Canada is diverse. While many were born in Canada, others immigrated from various countries, including parts of the Arab World (Lebanon, Egypt, Palestine, Syria, Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria), Iran, Pakistan, India, Africa, Eastern Europe, the Caribbean, and South and Central America. The Muslim population is also diverse in that it represents many different languages and religious traditions (Nimer 2002). It is well-educated, having the second-highest level of educational attainment out of all religious groups in Canada. However, the higher educational level does not correspond to higher income; there are more Muslims in the lower income bracket (earning $30,000 or less) than any other religious group (Beyer 2005). This suggests that Muslims may be facing some form of economic marginalisation in Canada.

Since the September 11 attacks in the US, Muslims in Western nations are vulnerable to discrimination, scrutiny and surveillance (Fekete 2004; Helly 2004; Stein 2003). As in the US and the UK, the political environment has changed in Canada, where Muslims face increased scrutiny and surveillance through the security measures and anti-terrorist legislation introduced post-9/11 (Choudhry 2001; Macklin 2001). Bill C36, adopted on 7 December 2001, modifies 22 existing laws,
including the criminal code, the protection of personal information, access to information, and the request for evidence (Helly 2004).

While studies have documented Muslims’ experiences of living in the United States and the United Kingdom after 9/11 (El-Halawany 2003; Gupta 2004; Kundnani 2002; Peek 2003), the same cannot be said for Canada. Muslims’ experiences of living in Canada post-9/11 have not been studied extensively. Although Canada shares similarities with the US and the UK, there are important differences in the way it has integrated its ethnic and religious groups. Canada is often seen as the world leader in multiculturalism, and was the first nation to adopt a multicultural policy (Wood and Gilbert 2005). By contrast, the US has a long-standing assimilationist or ‘melting pot’ culture which promotes the Americanisation of cultures (Alba and Nee 2003). Although the UK does not follow the American pattern, it has not definitively legalised multiculturalism (Bannerji 2000). Since Canada has taken a different approach in the way it has incorporated its ethnic and religious groups, it is possible that Canadian Muslims’ experiences after 9/11 will differ from those in the US or the UK.

**Muslim Identity Formation**

American and British studies suggest that Muslims in the US and the UK reacted to discrimination after 9/11 by asserting their Muslim identity, becoming more knowledgeable about Islam, building closer ties with the Muslim community, and pursuing advocacy work in an attempt to make the public more educated about their religion (El-Halawany 2003; Gupta 2004; Kundnani 2002; Peek 2003). These studies highlight Muslims’ orientation to strengthen their identity, but they do not provide a theoretical explanation for why this is occurring. Hence, this study makes an important contribution to existing literature by theorising the formation of Muslim identity in the post-9/11 era.

The formation of Muslim identity particularly since 9/11 is complex, and I draw on a number of identity theories. Scholars such as Jenkins (1996), Nagel (1994) and Waters (1990) highlight the importance of external conditions on the construction of identities and the fluid nature of identity. I conceptualise identity as an ongoing social process shaped through self-attribution and societal ascription. Like all other identities, Muslim identities can be produced, reproduced and transformed in different social settings.

In recent years, academics have conceptualised ‘Muslim’ identity in various ways (see eg. Kibria 2007; Roy 2004). I understand it as a religious minority identity vulnerable to the same social processes of systematic inequality, external labelling, and otherness as other ethnic and racial groups. Like race, class and ethnicity, religion is a mechanism of social stratification in modern states (Viswanthan 1998). In her work on Muslim Americans, Byng (2008) emphasises that, since 9/11, Muslim religious identities have been subjected to external social construction and used to organise social inequalities normally associated with racial minorities. Because this approach to understanding Muslim identity allows for the recognition of both the
religious component and the external ascriptive nature of identity, I use it in my study. While this approach advances our understanding of religious identity formation, it does not give guidance on how to study the impact of discrimination on identity formation among marginalised groups.

**Reactive Ethnicity**

Research in ethnic studies provides insightful frameworks for studying how marginalised groups respond to discrimination. A central theme that emerges from this literature is that, when ethnic groups experience discrimination, they are likely to intensify their ethnic identification and their ties to their ethnic group, a phenomenon called ‘reactive ethnicity’. According to Michael Hechter (1975), when economic and cultural inequalities exist among groups, a hierarchical cultural division of labour is formed. This leads to members of peripheral ethnic groups being marginalised culturally and economically by the core dominant group, resulting in ethnic mobilisation. The strengthening of ethnic bonds due to discrimination can be found among early European immigrants to the United States. Portes and Bach (1985) found that immigrants from peripheral European countries such as Italy and Poland created their own ethnic communities in major US cities to defend themselves against discrimination and to gain economic mobility.

More recently, Portes and Rumbaut (1990, 2001, 2006) have used the theory of ‘reactive ethnicity’ to understand the experiences of second-generation immigrants in the US. The term is used to explain how youth from marginalised ethnic groups can intensify their ethnic identification when they experience or perceive racism. The authors suggest that ‘reactive ethnicity’ occurs among second-generation immigrants because it enables youth from ethnic groups to cope with discrimination. Youths use their social similarity or dissimilarity with reference groups close to them—often in terms of gender, language, nationality and ethnicity—to define their social identity. This type of self-definition carries an ‘affective meaning implying a psychological bond with others that tends to serve psychologically protective functions’ (Portes and Rumbaut 2001: 151).

Portes and Rumbaut (2006) say that, like ethnicity, religion can become reactive among first- and second-generation immigrants. But they conceptualise reactive religion differently to the way in which they conceptualise reactive ethnicity, arguing that most immigrants maintain or affirm their native religious beliefs as they try to integrate into American society. Portes and Rumbaut believe that religion only becomes ‘reactive’ when immigrants begin disassociating themselves from their native religious traditions to fit into their host country. This happens when immigrants feel that their religion is not fulfilling their needs and they are exposed to alternative outcomes, as for example Japanese and Korean immigrants in the US who have embraced Protestant Christianity (Chen 2008).

Through this study, I illustrate that, in response to discrimination, religious identity may become reactive in the same manner as ethnic identity. Religious
minority identities are prone to the same social processes of discrimination, inequality and external labelling as ethnic and racial groups. Portes and Rumbaut’s theory of ‘reactive ethnicity’ can help to explain the experiences of religious minority groups but, since the formation of reactive identities may not be limited to ethnic groups, I suggest a better term to describe the social process in which marginalised individuals assert their identities is ‘reactive identity formation’. I also illustrate the complexity involved in ‘reactive identity formation’. By examining the multifaceted discrimination that young well-educated Muslims face in Canada, I first discuss how trying to cope with discrimination plays a role in ‘reactive identity formation’, which is what reactive ethnicity theory suggests. However, I then demonstrate how resistance to mainstream ideologies, coupled with an increased societal interest in Islam—which led to more self-learning about Islam—also contributed to ‘reactive identity formation’ among the Muslims in this study.

Methodology

The data for this study derive from 30 in-depth interviews with 14 Muslim men and 16 Muslim women between the ages of 18 and 30. In-depth interviews are useful for studying the perspectives and opinions of marginalised groups, as they allow the dissemination of their stories (Esterberg 2002). The interviews took place in 2005 and 2006, thereby allowing me to learn about the experiences of Muslims in the four years following 9/11. Although a general outline of questions was used to conduct the interviews, my respondents were encouraged to elaborate where they saw fit and to discuss any topic that they felt was important. The interviews were tape-recorded, transcribed and coded thematically. They were analysed with the N-VIVO qualitative analysis software programme, which allows ideas and themes to be linked.

I recruited interviewees using a variety of strategies. I first relied on the use of personal networks to identify them, directly approaching young Muslims who were known to me or to my friends. Secondly, I contacted Muslim student organisations at the University of Toronto and at Simon Fraser University and developed key contacts with important executive members of these organisations, who helped me to find potential interviewees. In order to avoid over-sampling Muslim student organisations, I also contacted other University organisations. At the end of each interview, I relied on snowball sampling, asking the interviewees if they knew of anyone else who I could interview. However, I restricted the number of referrals from each interviewee in order to avoid over-sampling from a specific group. Potential interviewees were informed that this study was exploring young Muslims’ experiences of living in Canada post-9/11. The interviewees chosen had to identify themselves as Muslim. With the exception of one informant who had converted to Islam, all were born into Muslim families. Both foreign-born and Canadian-born Muslims were included. Interviews were conducted in Vancouver and Toronto, chosen because 70 per cent of the Muslim population in Canada lives in metropolitan areas (Statistics
Canada 2001). Further, by including interviews in these two cities, the study documents the experiences of Muslims in both Eastern and Western Canada.

During young adulthood, people go through important processes of identity formation; they explore a range of choices and begin to make commitments to interpersonal relationships, work, career and ideology (Mannheim 1952). It makes theoretical sense to focus on Muslims in their young adulthood because they are in an important stage of identity formation. The young Muslims in this study had all completed a post-secondary degree or were in the pursuit of one. I focus on well-educated Muslims because the vast majority of young Muslims in Canada are thus qualified (Beyer 2005), and from middle-class backgrounds. This study does not speak to the experiences of young Muslims from less-privileged backgrounds and hence is not able to address how social class could impact on ‘reactive identity formation’ among them. This is an important topic that future research needs to address. This study also cannot speak to the issue of how experiences of ‘reactive identity formation’ may differ between younger and older Muslims; a cross-generational study is instead required.

The sample reflects the diversity of Islam. The interviewees come from different national origins such as India, Pakistan, Fiji, the West Indies, Libya, Bangladesh, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and East Africa. They belong to a variety of Muslim traditions such as Ismaili and Sunni, and they speak various languages. Even though many do not wear religious symbols, six women wore the hijab. With the exception of one interviewee who was half-German and half-Pakistani, all were visibly non-white. Diversity in the sample is important; findings are less likely to focus on experiences specific to a certain Muslim religious tradition or particular ethnic or linguistic groups. This study looks at how young Muslims have come to understand their experiences and what these experiences mean to them. The study does not claim to represent all young Muslims in Canada, nor do I wish to generalise to the larger population. Rather, I aim to identify patterns and trends that can help us to understand why some young well-educated Muslims assert their Muslim identity to deal with a post-9/11 era.

Academics have come to understand that researchers hold multiple positions as both insiders and outsiders when conducting research (Naples 2003). This also was the case for this study. In some respects, I was like an outsider since I am not Muslim. However, as a visible minority of South Asian background, and as a young adult, I also felt similar to my interviewees. This positionality was beneficial. Because I was not Muslim and hence not a part of that community, it may have given interviewees a greater freedom to talk about their religion without a sense of reprisal. On the other hand, the fact that we shared some common reference points allowed me to build a rapport with them, in turn enabling them to share personal information with me.

**Impact on Muslim Identity**

There was some speculation by my interviewees that one way in which individuals deal with the negative perceptions of the Muslim community in Canada is by
stepping away from the faith. However, only one participant had chosen such a path: Falak, a 22-year-old female, stopped telling people that she is Muslim for a while after 9/11 because she feared for her personal safety. On the other hand, many of the interviewees did not recall following such a path. Ten indicated that being Muslim was a focal part of their identity before 9/11 and has remained so in the years following. Moreover, 19 said they have come to identify themselves more strongly as Muslims and feel a deeper connection to their faith in the post-9/11 era.

Overall, 29 out of 30 interviewees maintained or affirmed a strong Muslim identity after 9/11. Saud, a 22-year-old male, and Zora, a 22-year-old female, said respectively that:

I think that largely 9/11 did change how I saw myself as a Muslim... It has made me more aware of the nature of Islam. It has made me more aware of myself as a Muslim. My general awareness has increased. My involvement with Islam increased.

I am sure there are Muslims who have decided to abandon their own faith [after 9/11]. However, I believe many Muslims have decided to become more educated about their own faith because they realise this is a time where they have to protect their faith. So in some ways I believe that many Muslims have become more religious.

As the above quotes illustrate, many young Muslims asserted their Muslim identity by becoming more educated and aware of Islam after 9/11, echoing similar findings in the US and the UK (El-Halawany 2003; Gupta 2004; Kundnani 2002; Peek 2003). This indicates that some young Canadian Muslims have experienced similar changes in their identity as American and British Muslims in the post-9/11 era. Although there is a similarity in the findings, it is not clear why this is occurring, hence my attempt to find out through my research.

Reactive Identity Formation as a Way of Coping with Discrimination

Fourteen out of the 30 Muslims interviewed indicated that they had directly experienced discrimination post-9/11; 26 (87 per cent) told stories of family members or close friends being victims of discrimination. This high percentage is important; having people close to you face discrimination because of their religious identity can be just as troubling as facing discrimination personally.

The discrimination is multifaceted. Interviewees experienced problems with their interactions with both total strangers and people they knew. For instance, Amineh, a 23-year-old who wears the hijab and is consequently easily identifiable as Muslim, related the following experience:

After 9/11 in Canada, I stopped taking public transport because I started getting harassed a lot. I had these girls—teenage girls—blow condoms and, like, start hitting me with them and since that day I just stopped taking public transport so, yeah. Um, I was just, like, ‘Excuse me, don’t touch me,’ but there was such a huge group of them that I was worried about my safety. So I got off at the next stop and switched trains.
Amineh’s experience attests to the increased harassment faced by young Muslims post-9/11 (see also Helly 2004). It also suggests that simple daily practices such as taking public transport became difficult for young Muslims, resulting in them making changes in their regular routines due to safety reasons. Other interviewees such as Asima, a 31-year-old woman, had to end some of their friendships because their friends began making comments ‘about Muslims being terrorists’. Hence, the discrimination the interviewees faced involved Muslims being associated with terrorism.

My interviewees noted that this was a clear departure from how they were treated before 9/11. Neela, a 20-year-old woman, said that:

Before 9/11 the discrimination we faced was just racial because we weren’t white. Nobody was really very educated at all about our religion. They had no idea what a Muslim was or whatever. They just knew that we didn’t go to Church. They’d never be like, ‘Oh, you’re Muslim, you’re a terrorist’. That would never happen before 9/11.

Although young Muslims may have experienced discrimination before 9/11, it is now increasingly associated with their religious identification. This indicates the need to focus on how religious affiliation can be used as a mechanism for discrimination. This quote also implies that the hostility some Canadians feel towards Muslims may stem from their fear that Muslim communities are involved with terrorist activity. The stereotyping of Muslim communities in the media and the implementation of anti-terrorist legislation have led to the construction of Muslims as ‘dangerous’. This in turn has made them more vulnerable to discrimination, a sentiment backed by a number of academics (Choudhry 2001; Macklin 2001).

In addition to facing discrimination simply for being Muslim, four recalled having difficulty finding employment. Dawoud, a 25-year-old man, said:

Another area where I personally felt discrimination, was about two months after 9/11 when I was looking for my first co-op term job. My résumé stated that I was involved with Muslim organisations and I wouldn’t get any interviews. I never really blamed it on having Muslim on my résumé. The career counsellor suggested that, instead of saying ‘Muslim Students Association’ I say ‘MSA Campus Club’ and instead of saying ‘Young Muslims Canada’ I say ‘YM Canada’. She thought it might have something to do with it. And as soon as I did that, I got offers and interviews. So after that fact it became obvious that, yes, I was probably being discriminated against.

Other interviewees also recalled similar experiences, suggesting that young Muslims are vulnerable to facing economic and professional obstacles due to employment discrimination. This may be one of the reasons why the Muslim population in Canada has more people in the lower income bracket than any other religious group, despite their high level of education (Beyer 2005).

The young Muslims in this study also recalled facing state discrimination at airports and border crossings. When I asked whether they felt Muslims were disproportionally interrogated at these places, all 30 interviewees said yes. Interviewees such as Samir (23, male) told stories of being asked ‘intrusive questions’ and having their belongings
'extensively searched', and 24-year-old Amber noted that she ‘no longer feels at home in Canada’ due to these practices.

The concept of reactive ethnicity is applicable to the young well-educated Muslims in this study as they clearly have felt a heightened sense of discrimination since 9/11. They have faced hate crimes from strangers and fielded derogatory comments from people they know. They have encountered state discrimination at airports and borders and employment discrimination. This multifaceted discrimination has had a host of consequences for young Muslims, impacting their sense of safety, their daily routines, friendships, and employment prospects, as well as their sense of belonging to Canada.

How do they deal with this? According to theories of reactive ethnicity, when people experience or perceive discrimination they are likely, in order to cope, to intensify their identification with their ethnic group and build closer ties to their ethnic community (Portes and Rumbaut 1990, 2001). The Muslims in this study are also strengthening their Muslim identity in this way. Asima and Ayesha, both 21-year-old women, respectively commented:

I have not met any Muslim who has disassociated with the religion. I have met people who became stronger in the faith. I think Muslims feel that there has been an attack on their religion and when something like that happens, you need that closeness to feel secure and to maintain your faith and your power. Your faith has to become much stronger.

I feel the Muslim community got closer after 9/11. We went to the Mosque more, just to make each other feel more confident that we should not be blamed for this and that we are not the problem.

As the women’s comments show, to cope with post-9/11 discrimination some young people are strengthening their Muslim identity through a reassertion of faith and active participation in the Muslim community, thereby illustrating that religious identity can also become reactive in a similar way that ethnic identity can.

**Reactive Identity Formation as Resistance**

The young Muslims in this study affirmed their identity not only in order to cope with discrimination, but also to resist the negative images of Islam perpetuated after 9/11. Frustration over the portrayal of Islam as a violent religion was expressed by almost all interviewees. This can be seen in 22-year-old Zora’s recollection of her first reaction to 9/11.

I think many Muslims were praying that Muslims were not responsible. It was a double fear and a double sadness for us. We were afraid that terrorists could come in and harm us. However, we were also afraid that, because they have been identified as being Muslim, we are going to suffer a backlash because of that. There was sadness that innocent people are dying and a tremendous sorrow that Muslims would do this in the name of Islam. It was really devastating and hard to deal with. It was the exact opposite of what our faith teaches us. All the efforts that our
community had been making to put forth a positive face of Islam—in one moment that just vaporised. We felt, like—just how those planes were hijacked—our faith was also hijacked by those people.

Zora’s comments reflect the wide range of emotions Muslims felt about 9/11, a finding supported by other studies (Ahmad 2006; Gillespie 2006). What they saw as a beautiful religion was suddenly reinvented and associated with terrorism, and this was very upsetting. Zora’s feeling that her ‘faith was hijacked’ indicates the deep sense of betrayal and anger many well-educated young Muslims felt towards the Muslims behind 9/11.

This negative image of Islam as violent was perpetuated by the media. Aamir, a 23-year-old man, said: ‘Since 9/11 the media are just focusing on the negatives and the very small group and it gives the perception, indirectly at least, that the whole faith promotes violence and terrorism’. Interviewees felt the media played a substantial role in portraying Islam as a violent religion by attributing the act of 9/11 to the entire faith of Islam, an impression backed up by a number of studies (Ahmad 2006; Harb and Bessaiso 2006; Korteweg 2008). When I asked whether they felt the media had contributed to discrimination, all 30 interviewees replied ‘Yes’.

How do those who have grown up believing in the Muslim faith deal with this sudden turn of events? They resist the negative image of Islam by affirming their Muslim identity:

After 9/11, I was more proud to be recognised as a Muslim than before. When I would be with Muslim sisters who would wear the headscarf, I would want to be recognised as a Muslim compared to anything else. I was proud. I wanted people to know that I was not going to be drawn away from the faith. I wanted people to know that this is not Islam. The true Islam is not what happened with 9/11 (Radi, male, 25).

Most Muslims do want everyone to know that not all Muslims are like that and it’s just a couple of people with a warped idea in their head giving all Muslims a bad name. Especially after 9/11, I try to be the best Muslim that I could. Both at home and outside, my behaviour with Muslims or especially with non-Muslims, I try to be on my best behaviour or the best person that I can be (Aatifa, female, 24).

These two, like other young Muslims in this study, are demonstrating individual agency and attempting to ‘reclaim’ Islam by affirming their Muslim identity. This ‘reclaiming of Islam’ involves becoming more religious and giving higher precedence to Muslim identity than to other aspects of identity. It also involves trying to be a positive example of a Muslim in interactions with other Canadians, something that has not been extensively studied in the academic literature.

The ‘reclaiming’ of Islam took many forms. Some young Muslim women did so by wearing the hijab. Arbazz, a 23-year-old man, said:

Actually close family friends, they have a huge textile business in Canada and their business has gone down at least 30 per cent after 9/11. The textile company has a very Muslim name. The wife goes to all of the meetings and she wears the hijab.
Before 9/11 she didn’t—now she does. A lot of Muslims after 9/11 want to broadcast that they are Muslim. If she loses the business—she says it is fine because she knows now who is being ignorant and who is discriminating against her and she does not want to do business with them anyway.

Wearing the hijab was so important for this woman that she did so despite the potential economic consequences. Two of the female interviewees, Atiya and Zeba, also began wearing the hijab after 9/11. They both emphasised that there were many reasons behind their decision, but wanting to represent a ‘positive image of their religion’ in a post-9/11 era was the main one. The hijab was not imposed on these women, despite popular assumptions. Rather, they used it as a political tool to form an identity of resistance. By using the hijab to broadcast their support of Islam and the Muslim community, in the post-9/11 era, these women demonstrated individual agency. In contrast, I did not find any examples of Muslim men making changes to their physical appearance after 9/11, such as growing a beard or wearing traditional Muslim clothing. This difference may be due to the special meaning which the hijab holds in Western society. Since the hijab is a clear visible indicator that someone is Muslim, by simply wearing it Muslim women become ambassadors for their religion.

A few interviewees tried to ‘reclaim’ Islam by becoming more politically active. Amber, 24, says that the biggest impact of 9/11 was her increased involvement in political issues:

If anything else, it made me more passionate about my causes because of the backlash that took place ... I was always very politically active, but I did it even more you know so that it is not going to stop, we are not going to back down.

Rashid said he began to write articles about the mistreatment of Muslims after airport officials at ‘Washington airport detained and strip-searched a good friend’ of his for eight hours. Both individuals used individual agency to speak out against the policies and legislation that unfairly target Muslims. This suggests that individual agency can play a role in the formation of ‘reactive identities’, something that ‘reactive ethnicity’ theory does not consider.

Many of the interviewees made conscious decisions to affirm their Muslim identity in order to counteract negative stereotypes perpetuated after 9/11. However, it is important to note that the attribution of identities by society still plays an important role in ‘reactive identity formation’. As Zeba, a 22-year-old woman, mentioned:

I think to a degree my faith has been defined by others. The way I view myself, the way others view me has been defined by others, not by myself, because of the political nature of how Islam has become. I think others have determined me Muslim, have labelled me Muslim, so I internalise that experience and I call myself Muslim. Post-9/11, I saw a dramatic change right away. As soon as I left my high school I knew right away that I was Muslim, that that’s how society defined me, and then I accepted that. Initially I was kind of put off by that because, I mean, that’s not how I identified myself, but as it became more I accepted it and now it’s my identity.
Clearly, Muslim identity was given precedence by society immediately after 9/11. Zeba also points to the role of social ascription in how people see and locate themselves in society. In her research on Asian pan-ethnicity, Espiritu (1993) shows that the attribution of identities by society can play a role in the formation of reactive identities.


Negative stereotypes of minority groups, labeling diverse ethnic groups as black, and of inferior social status, had led to racialised groups, in turn re-appropriating this attributed identity, subverting it and using it to define an identity of resistance.

Waters (1990) argues that African Americans in the US have been socially constructed to identify themselves as ‘blacks’ and, in turn, have used this identity as a way of resistance, although they know their ancestors include many non-blacks. A similar phenomenon is occurring among the young Muslims in this study. Like Zeba, many others felt they were being stereotyped as belonging to a monolithic Muslim community. In their assertion of a Muslim identity, then, the identity placed on them becomes an identity of resistance.

When the interviewees began asserting this identity of resistance, they did so at a time when they were being encouraged by community leaders and parents to keep a low profile for safety and security reasons. Salman said that, right after 9/11:

My mom was in tears. She would tell me not to go to the Mosque, to have a clean-shaven face, and to keep away from any Muslim groupings. In a way she was telling me to compromise my everyday routine or even my being a Muslim. I’m like ‘No, I’m not going to compromise my beliefs’.

Atiya’s and Zeba’s parents feared the young women’s decision to begin wearing the hijab, as they felt it could compromise their safety. Thirty-year-old Atiya describes her parents’ reaction in the following way.

I thought they were proud of me because I was practising more and becoming wiser, but they also were more fearful. They were, well, ‘Why don’t you just wear it [the hijab] when you go to the Mosque instead of wearing it all of the time?’ They did kind of want to talk me out of it. But I did not. I had made up my mind to wear it.

In addition to encountering discrimination from mainstream society, the young Muslims in this study faced parental pressure to hold back from practising their religion. This resistance of parents and community advice indicates the importance the interviewees gave to reinforcing their Muslim identity in a post-9/11 era.
Reactive Identity Formation and Learning More About Islam

Some interviewees recalled that their Muslim identity was highlighted by society through an increased interest in Islam and Muslims after 9/11. Salman, a 24-year-old male, said:

In a way, it has brought more unity and has brought about more curiosity within our religion. Like it has made me more, say, like religious. People ask me questions right, left and centre, so I feel obligated to learn more about my religion so I know what to say and what not to say, you know.

Salman’s experience is indicative of how the formation of reactive identities is not the sole result of discriminatory acts and attempts to resist the negative image of Muslims. It has links to the increased interest in Muslims and Islam after 9/11. Many interviewees mentioned that they became more educated about Islam because they were asked many innocent questions about their religion after 9/11 and were expected to know the answers. They also wanted to learn more about Islam for themselves. Significantly, some said that becoming more educated about Islam led to their becoming more religious and affirming their Muslim identity, as demonstrated by Aamir, a 23-year-old male:

I think that people would naturally want to learn more about their religion after 9/11. When you actually learn more about it, you feel closer to it and then you can start to understand it better. From then on, you naturally progress into trying to observe Islam more actively and taking an active role in Islam like wearing the hijab.

The nuances in the process of ‘reactive identity formation’ are reflected in his comments. Some of my respondents affirmed their Muslim identity not only because they had faced discrimination or were trying to counter the negative portrayal of Muslims, but because they had become more educated about their religion and were now more appreciative of it. Hence, individual choice and learning can play a role in the formation of reactive identities, something not explored by ‘reactive ethnicity’ theorists. For the young Muslims in this study, 9/11 provided an opportunity to think and learn more about Islam, which, in turn, raised their individual sense of Muslim identity. This suggests that one positive outcome arising out of 9/11 is that it created an opportunity for young Muslims to reassess what it meant to be Muslim in a North American context.

The overall intensification of a Muslim identity is occurring across gender lines, although there may be slight variations in the form it takes. Nor did I see variations between Muslims born in Canada and those born elsewhere. Regardless of country of birth, many indicated that they had intensified their Muslim identity. Interviewees aged 18 to 23, and older ones of between 23 and 30, all recalled affirming their Muslim identity post-9/11, despite differences in their age and cultural backgrounds.
Conclusion

The heightened forms of Muslim identity in response to increased and multi-faceted discrimination in the post-9/11 era show the importance of theorising the formation of Muslim identity, something which has not been done to date. In an attempt to begin to fill the gap in the literature, I employ the term ‘reactive identity formation’ to describe the social process of affirming identity resulting as a response to discrimination. In so doing, I extend the work done on ‘reactive ethnicity’. Coining this new term is important because identity is not merely a feature of ethnicity. Other important social attributes such as gender, class, religion, sexuality and age all play a role in identity formation (Settles 2006). As a result, people may develop reactive identities when any one of these dimensions of their identity is highlighted and challenged. In my research, I document that religious identity can become reactive in ways similar to ethnic identity.

Many of my young respondents demonstrated ‘reactive identity formation’, affirming their Muslim identity in a variety of ways. Some reasserted their Islamic faith; others participated more in their Muslim communities, educated others about Islam, were ambassadors of Islam, made changes to their physical appearance or became more politically active. My research documents three reasons behind the ‘reactive identity formation’ of this group. Firstly, my interviewees were affirming their identities as a way of coping with the discrimination they faced; this corresponds to the arguments advanced by ‘reactive ethnicity’ theorists. Secondly, my research also shows that resistance can play an important role in ‘reactive identity formation’, something that ‘reactive ethnicity’ theory does not consider. One reason behind the ‘reactive identity formation’ found in this study was that it enabled interviewees to resist the abuse of Islam and reclaim their religion. Finally, interviewees also strengthened their Muslim identity because, due to the increased societal interest in Islam, they had learned more about the religion and in turn had become more appreciative of it.

This research shows that multiple factors can lead to the formation of reactive identities, which is different to that suggested by ‘reactive ethnicity’ theory. Furthermore, the fact that multiple factors contributed to the ‘reactive identity formation’ among the young Muslims in this study helps to explain why the majority of them experienced it and why many young Muslims in the United States and Britain have also experienced a similar phenomenon. Overall, my research extends previous work on ‘reactive ethnicity’ by documenting that ‘reactive identity formation’ involves interplay between social forces and individual agency. Many of the young Muslims in this study affirmed their Muslim identity because it was highlighted by society through acts of discrimination and increased interest in Islam post-9/11. However, I also found that personal and political motivations played a part in their decisions. Thus, ‘reactive identity formation’ is a complex social process, involving both societal and self-ascription.
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Notes

[1] For reasons of confidentiality, interviewees’ names are pseudonyms.
[2] Sixty per cent of Muslim adults in Canada have some post-secondary education—10 per cent higher than the national average (Beyer 2005).
[3] Multiculturalism is a state-initiated enterprise in Canada, consisting of legislation and official policies with appropriate administrative bodies. This is not the case in the US and in Britain.
[4] For instance, 76 per cent of Muslim men and 67 per cent of Muslim women aged 21 to 30 who had immigrated to Canada after 1970 had some post-secondary education, as did 81.5 per cent of Canadian-born Muslim men and 81 per cent of Canadian-born Muslim women (Beyer 2005).
[5] Although the goal of my study was not to evaluate the honesty and accuracy of young Muslims’ experiences, I did look to see if there were any contradictions in what the interviewees were saying, and for explanations and examples.
[6] Although I did not explicitly tell my interviewees what my religion was, I did inform them of it if they inquired, though a lot were able to tell that I was not Muslim because of my name.
[7] It is important to note here that some of the interviewees conveyed to me that they did not consider the individuals behind 9/11 to be actual Muslims because Islam prohibits the killing of innocent people.
[8] Such a political use of the hijab can also be found in the wearing of a veil. Hoodfar (1993) says that, while the veil has been used as a mechanism to control women’s lives, women have also used it as a way to free themselves from patriarchy.

References


