Acculturation of the Muslims Settled in the West

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Abstract

Muslims from all over the World have settled in Western countries. They bring with themselves a rich cultural heritage and numerous skills. However, adjusting to a culture, different from their original culture, can be a challenge. They have to undergo an acculturation process to get adjusted to a new country and a new way of life. Although acculturation has been considered an important phase in the resettlement process, it has not been studied extensively with the Muslim population in the West. The present commentary examines briefly the studies conducted in the last decade. Findings are discussed and the gaps are highlighted. Future directions that researchers and academics could take are discussed.

Keywords: Acculturation, Future Directions, Muslims, Research.

Acculturation of the Muslims Settled in the West

Approximately 30 million Muslims, with different languages and cultural backgrounds, live beyond their countries of origin. They migrated to western nations for either better educational or occupational opportunities, or took refuge

in fleeing from atrocities in their war-torn countries. Though some forefathers of a small proportion migrated many decades or centuries ago, substantial numbers have moved during the last half-century. Theories of migration indicate that these populations undergo an acculturation and adaptation process. The present article examines the acculturation trends of Muslims in western countries (the present paper refers to those who are settled in the West only). A special emphasis was on the research emerging in the last 10 years. Future directions that research could pursue are discussed.

General Trends in the Acculturation Literature

Despite references to changes resulting from intergroup contact dating back millennia, the term “acculturation” was coined by geologist and explorer John Wesley Powell in 1880. The process refers to psychological changes produced by cross-cultural engagement. Initially, it was described as an ongoing, multistaged process (Gudykunst & Kim, 2005). According to some theorists, the newly arrived, often distressed and culturally shocked, undergo continuous movement leading to personal growth, stability, and assimilation. This unidimensional explanation of acculturation was rejected for a bidimensional model. According to this revised model, newly arrived incorporate the belief systems, behaviors, culture, and norms of the new society, while retaining their own original ideas, values, and traditions (Sam & Berry, 2010). Further, theorists emphasised psychological adaptation at an individual level and social adaptation at group level (Ward, 2008). Berry and Sam (2014) postulated that migrants use different strategies to acculturate. They can assimilate either by immersing into the new culture and shedding their own culture, or integrate by amalgamating the original and the new culture. Nevertheless, some individuals separate and stay with their own cultural and ethnic group, while others marginalize and associate with neither their ethnic group or the larger society. While assimilation and integration have been regarded as indicators of positive acculturation, separation and marginalization have been considered as obstacles to the adaptation process. Marginalization, in particular has been pathologized. These four strategies of acculturation have been criticized as being too simplistic (Chirkov, 2009). The emerging data indicates that a migrant can apply multiple strategies. For example, one can assimilate at work, but can use separation in personal life. Further, separation can lead to migrants living in ethnic enclaves, which contain their own merits as they provides social and emotional support (Khawaja, Yang, & Cockshaw, 2016). Finally, not all marginalized individuals encounter psychological problems. Safdar and colleagues (2012), in their multidimensional individual difference acculturation (MIDA) model, have emphasized some characteristics associated with immigrants. Ac-

According to them, migrants' perceptions of their resilience, cultural competence, and social support play an important role in their acculturation process. Subsequently, there are individual, situational, and cultural factors related to the adaptation of migrants. Recent studies have indicated acculturation as a complex multidimensional process influenced by the characteristics of the migrants, their ethnic community, and those of the larger society. There is now extensive evidence that it is not only the members of the minority who have to adapt, but the members of the host society also have to demonstrate flexibility by accepting and engaging with those who have arrived from other countries. The attitudes and the behaviors of the larger society are crucial in facilitating the adaptation of the minorities and building relations between groups. Bourhis and colleagues (1997) expanded the acculturation model by incorporating the host society in their interactive acculturation model. According to them, successful adaptation is influenced by the acculturation orientation of the migrants, the host society's views about specific ethnic groups and the resulting interpersonal relations between the two groups. Schwartz, Unger, Zamboanga, and Szapocznik (2010) present the multidimensional nature of acculturation, and emphasize a combination of values and practices from the original and the new culture. Further, they point out that contrary to earlier conceptualization, migrants settlement is not always a smooth upward adjustment. Sometimes an increased exposure to the host society's culture can cause stress and confusion among migrants (Schwartz et al., 2010). Taking into account the intricacies associated with acculturation, Arends-Tóth and van de Vijver (2006) incorporate all previous explanations in their comprehensive model to understand the adaptation process of migrants. Findings now highlight individualized trajectories, where the process of acculturation may be inconsistent and intermittent with periods of positive adaptation and negative stress. Taking into account the challenges of cross-cultural adaptations, the positive and negative experiences may occur sequentially or simultaneously (Ali, 2008; Al Wekhian, 2016).

The Muslim Mental Health Acculturation Literature

Overall, there is limited research on Muslims immigrants settled in the West. Further, there is a dearth of knowledge about the acculturation of these individuals. The tragic 9/11 terrorist attacks were a trigger to galvanize more research on this understudied population, however, the emphasis has been more on factors associated with terrorism, radicalization, Islamophobia, or discrimination experienced by this minority (Amer & Bagasra, 2013). Though a bulk of this research was conducted in United States and Europe, some interesting research has emerged from Australia and New Zealand over the last decade. There are some investigations on acculturation of Muslims. Though these stud-

ies are significant, they are not free from limitations. Most of the studies have recruited samples from one or several ethnic groups. Therefore, they cannot not represent all Muslims in the West and a comprehensive picture is not available. In many cases the scales used to collect data were restricted and not validated with this population. Further, most of the studies were cross-sectional, and there was no information about the development of acculturation over time. Though some have used qualitative methods, they have not providing in-depth information; a combination of qualitative and quantitative methodologies is limited.

Subsequently, the preliminary research findings of the acculturation studies are mixed and not conclusive. There is some evidence that Muslims tend to use a separation strategy by developing stronger ties with their own ethnic group, heritage, culture, and religion. This strategy emerged as a protective factor as it provided them with social, emotional and instrumental support, which promoted their wellbeing and acted as a buffer against mental disorders. On the other hand, this delayed their engagement with the host society. It seemed that assimilation and integration was difficult due to the religious, cultural, and linguistic differences between some Muslims and the host society (al Wekhiam, 2015). These who assimilated and integrated tend to encounter less discrimination and more occupational success (Foroutan, 2008). However, in some cases, interaction with the members of the dominant culture increased Muslims' awareness of biases and prejudices that exist in the host society (Awad, 2010). The choice of an acculturation strategy does not exist in isolation. It appeared to be impacted by the expectations of an individual, the ethnic community, and the larger society (Kunst & Sam, 2013). Subsequently, an individual has to negotiate the expectations from different sources to develop a multilevel identity and an acculturated self.

It seems that acculturation might be mediated and moderated by a range of demographic variables. Being a male, adult, educated, and with a stable employment and income assisted acculturation. Being a female and married to a member of the original community increased the likelihood of immersion in the issues of the original country and less with the host country (Amer & Hovey, 2007). Life stage and development can have an effect on acculturation. Younger people and elderly may face more adjustment issues (Stuart, Ward, & Adam, 2010). The longer duration of stay in the West and acquisition of the host country's language increased the social interaction with the host society (Fassaert et al., 2011). In some cases, the immigrants seemed to be keener to build relations with the host society, while in other studies their children born in the westwere more assimilated and integrated (Foroutan, 2008) and thus involved with the dominant group. Individual factor such as self-efficacy, a sense of coherence, optimism, openness to experience, and problem solving also contributed to the acculturation process (Jabeen & Khalid, 2010; Oppedal &

Røysamb, 2007). At the group level, religion and mosques played a very strong role in the lives of many Muslims (Goforth, Oka, Leong, & Denis, 2014; Ozyurt, 2010) by being a source of coping, resilience, and support. High religiousness was associated with a strong connection to original identity and culture. However, these religious people had a strong civic sense, and were interested in making changes at a global level (Saroglou & Mathijssen, 2007). Religious leaders and mosques that emphasised an integrated approach were instrumental in promoting integration (Bagby, 2009).

Acculturation, which is a constant negotiation between one's own belief system and culture and the new adopted norms, can lead to emotional reaction referred to as "acculturative stress". This stress is often manifested by mental health concerns such as depression, anxiety, somatization, and other conditions (Aprahamian, Kaplan, Windham, Sutter, & Visser, 2011). Studies reveal some Muslims experienced a sense of isolation (Khawaja, 2007), adjustment difficulties, and family conflicts (Goforth, Oka, Leong, & Denis, 2014). Depression and anxiety have been higher among those who use a separation strategy and maintained their heritage culture (Fassaert et al., 2011; Ünlü Ince et al., 2014). These mental health issues were lower among those who used integrative strategy by mastering the dominant culture and also maintaining their own original culture (Gonidakis et al., 2001; Fassaert et al., 2011). Depression has been higher among older Muslim immigrants (Abu-Bader, Tirmazi, & Ross-Sheriff, 2011). It is interesting to note that, consistent with Schwartz and colleagues' (2010) ideas, too much immersion in the mainstream culture also led to an increase in problems like substance abuse (Arfken, Kubiak, & Farrag, 2009). The links between an individual's acculturation, family acculturation, and mental health may vary depending on his/her cultural group and mainstream environment (Asvat & Malcarne, 2008).

It is important to note that the media portrayal of Muslims has been destructive in the western world (Al Wekhian, 2016). People in the West tends to perceive Muslims with fear and suspicion. Subsequently, they tend to restrict their interactions with them. Similarly, Muslims affected by the discrimination and hate refrain from engaging with the host society. Due to the threat of terrorism, western governments have been very forceful with counterterrorism strategies, such as raids, surveillance, and legal actions. As a result, the larger Muslim community perceives the creation of an antagonistic, "us versus them" situation (Blackwood, Hopkins, & Reicher, 2015). Many Muslims, who have been living in the West for years (or generations) feel persecuted (Bux, 2007). This deadlock is detrimental to the acculturation process and harmony of the larger societies in the West (Amer & Bagasra, 2013). An examination of the literature indicates that Muslim youth in the United States have reported encountering discrimination and appear to be the most vulnerable (Sirin & Fine, 2007). On the contrary, published research finds Muslim youth in New

Zealand to be successfully adapting to their new country (Stuart et al., 2010). It is possible that cultural diversity may be more successful in some parts of the world compared to the others, and relations between Muslims and host societies can be more strained in some parts of the world than others.

Another blow to the relationship between Muslims and the West has been the punitive border control policies. Australia was one of the lead countries to build detention centers and offshore facilities to deter refugees, who happen to be primarily Muslims (van Berlo, 2015). Similarly, due to the recent influx of Syrian refugees, Europe is considering tougher migration policies. Such harsh policies can promote negative attitudes of Muslims toward host societies and governments. Similarly, the negative depiction of refugees by the media and politicians can intensify Islamophobia among Western populations (Kunst & Sam, 2013). Consequently, negative attitudes in both camps impede social interaction and the building of relationships, which are vital for a functional acculturation (Bourhis et al., 1997; Schwartz et al., 2010).

Recommendations for the Next 10 Years

The multidimensional aspect of acculturation (Arends-Tóth & van de Vijer, 2006; Schwartz et al., 2010) warrants further investigation. The key variables that mediate and moderate the adjustment of Muslims require attention. Considering the number of factors that may play a role in acculturation, it is important to explore how factors related to individuals, ethnic groups, and society can interact with each other and lead to negotiations in the form of an adaptive acculturation. The strategies people use to acculturate (Chirkov, 2009) need further explorations. It is essential to redefine what is meant by assimilation, integration, marginalization, and separation in the current global environment. Consistent with Safdar and colleagues (2012), the individual characteristics of Muslims require further attention. As Muslims are from a range of countries, large samples, which are cross-national and cross-ethnic, should be selected to explore if acculturation varies across these groups. It is important to study people across all demographic variables to systematically study the impact of these factors on acculturation. Western Muslims span generations, therefore, it is of interest to examine acculturation similarities and differences among these groups. Muslims may also have multiple identities. The link between their identities and acculturation should be examined. The relationship between acculturation and mental health needs to be explored. The role mosques and religious leaders can play on Muslims integration can be studied. Similarly, keeping in view interpersonal and family conflicts reported by some Muslims, gender roles, family dynamics, and parent-child dyads require examination. Further, the impact of discrimination and the relations between

immigrant Muslims and host societies needs consideration. It is important that measures used to collect data capture the experience of Muslim immigrants effectively and have sound psychometric properties. Qualitative and quantitative approaches with nested mixed-method designs should be continued in future. Longitudinal studies can be used to trace Muslims over a period of time. Finally, as many large metropolitan cities in the West are moving toward super diversity, with multiple ethnic groups and no clear-cut minority and majority groups, it would be interesting to study how Muslims deal with this changing landscape.

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