Young American Muslims

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In this study 379 young American Muslims from Massachusetts, New York, Virginia, Maryland, Florida and Michigan defined their identities variously, ranging from single to dual or multiple identities. The interviewees were mostly second-generation 15–30-year-old Muslims. In the process of investigating their identity/identities, I came to realise that the participants framed their identities according to several contexts, such as culture, media and politics. In my research, I was also keen to find out if they were involved in leisure activities, such as music and sport, and the extent to which they had retained their parents’ culture and adopted American cultures. I begin with a brief summary of all the chapters, then I discuss the areas that needs to be discussed in both the Muslim community and the wider society. These areas also need the attention of policy makers so they can take necessary action to develop a cohesive society. Finally I discuss the topic of harmony or social cohesion, which is important for American society.

Brief summary of chapters

In Chapter 1, I noted that Muslim contact with the United States began in the eighteenth century when slaves were brought from Africa. Later, in the late nineteenth century, Muslims began to migrate to the United States in small numbers from Arab countries. Muslim numbers expanded in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, to the point when they reached almost 1 per cent of the population in 2011. I also outlined how different developments in the Islamic world (for example, the Iranian hostage crisis) have impacted on America, culminating tragically with the 9/11 Twin Towers attacks, and the ‘othering’ of Muslims generally. In Chapter 1, I also introduced social identity theory and how different categories (emotions, stereotypes and so
on) impact on one’s identity. I also described the research method of this study.

In Chapter 2, I examined the cultural influences and expectations on young Muslims and how they shaped their identity. I also analysed the economic situation of the participants in this study. In Chapter 3, I focused on the various identities of the respondents, such as single, dual/hyphenated and multiple identities, including how identities are formed, and the reasons behind their formation. In Chapter 3, I also examined the respondents’ interest in sport, and found that sport can impact on identity, and lead to social inclusion and healing. It can also help in the development of self-esteem of young Muslims. In this chapter, I introduced the concept of biculturalism and argued that it should be considered an aspect of cultural capital rather than a deficit.

Chapter 4 brought up the media debate. Most respondents (all but twenty-five) had raised this topic in their interview. I retrieved some print media data to check the validity of the participants’ views. In Chapter 5, I discussed President Barack Hussein Obama. It was interesting to see how the respondents in this study regarded the president. Only about 8 per cent (about thirty-one) of the respondents were critical of him. I believe that the respondents’ unsolicited views on the media and politics were important in examining the identity of young people. Finally in Chapter 6, I analysed the perceptions of the participants of Palestinian background about their country of origin. Their views on the ‘Palestinian question’ were unsolicited. The respondents raised the issue when they spoke about the media or President Obama’s foreign policy.

Throughout this book, I have reflected on the various factors that seemed to impact on the participants’ identity: upbringing, education, heritage, length of residence in the host country, emotions, acceptance and recognition, and distribution of power and resources. I now discuss some of the issues that need to be raised in both the Muslim community and the wider society to improve the condition of some Muslims. The relevant US state departments and policy makers should also pay attention to the following areas to develop a cohesive society.

Areas that need attention

Muslim women

The United States was appreciated by most participants both for its diversity and for the promotion of a ‘melting pot’ society, yet it appears from the interviews that there is pressure on immigrants to ‘fit in’ with this wider society. For example, in this study I found that several young women who wear the hijab had pierced their lips to become part of the youth subculture. Yet they said that the US media still targeted them as the ‘other’. Perhaps their Islamic visibility (their hijab) contributed to them being marked as the ‘other’.
Some university-educated women who wore the hijab speculated that they had been discriminated against in the labour market because of their Islamic visibility. Other research has found that Muslim women are frequently either ridiculed or discriminated against because of their ethnicity and religion. An employee can bring a lawsuit against her employer for infringement of her First Amendment rights. There have indeed been cases in the US where Muslim women have sued their employers for religious discrimination but failed to win their cases.

In the absence of US official census data on the basis of religion, it was not possible to evaluate American Muslims’ labour market status, but through my research data I found that 70 per cent of the mothers of young participants (aged fifteen to thirty) were ‘stay-at-home mums’. It appears some of the mothers chose to stay at home for home duties, but there is also a possibility that their educational levels were low, or their English language skills were insufficient, so they were unable to work. In this study, Aysegül, of Turkish background (female, 15, US born, national identity: ‘Turkish 100 per cent’), said that she wanted to pursue a career but pointed out that in her family women’s higher education was not a priority (interview, New York, February 2010).

Within the Muslim community, women also face cultural restrictions such as, for example, arranged marriages. In some cases, these marriages are successful, whereas in other cases they end up in a divorce. In any event it is very important that the Muslim community prioritises women’s education. This would empower women in times of crisis – for example, when it is necessary to seek employment to support the family. Also, a mother’s education is crucial for the early education and upbringing of her children. It would set a good example to her children if she pursued higher education. From my personal observations, I have found that in some parts of the world Muslim women are not encouraged by their family members to pursue higher education. The discouragement sometimes comes from women’s mothers, who are keen to have their daughters married, and sometimes from a lack of interest by married women in pursuing further education. So the barrier is not always imposed by the male members of the family.

Economy

The norm in the Muslim community is that men are the breadwinners. It is likely that Muslim men also experience high levels of unemployment in the US. For example, in 2010, the overall unemployment rate in the state of Michigan was 15 per cent, and it is likely that Muslim unemployment in that state would be much higher. In August 2011, the national unemployment rate in the US was 9 per cent. In the UK and Australia in 2006 the unemployment rate of Muslims was three times higher than the national average, so it is likely that
under the economic downturn in the US, Muslims’ unemployment rate would be much higher.

The sociologist Saskia Sassen observed that since the 1980s the crisis of inequality has become acute, especially in global cities such as New York. She wrote, ‘A growing share of households and firms have seen their incomes and profits rise sharply, and a growing share of others have seen their incomes and profits fall’. Since 2006 the US has seen rapid home foreclosures among low- and modest-income households under certain newly introduced mortgages, and Sassen predicted that foreclosures were expected to reach their highest point from 2010 to 2011. In my interviews with the participants in this study the topic of home foreclosures did not arise, yet when I visited a friend’s place in Florida, I was told that many people (mostly non-Muslims) in their neighbourhood could not manage their mortgage repayments and just abandoned their homes. In my study, however, the most affected people appeared to be recent university graduates. Some of my interviewees (both male and female new university graduates) expressed their concern about the uncertain labour market.

**Muslim youth**

In this book, I have discussed some of the cultural constraints young people face. Within the Muslim community, there is constant pressure from their peers for young people to remain within their cultural boundaries. The urge to remain within one’s culture, be it ethnic, racial or religious, was not confined only to immigrant families, as it was also prevalent among some African American Muslim families. In this study, however, I found that the practices of homeschooling and of sending children back to their ‘home’ countries for a few years were prevalent among immigrant Muslim communities.

The second-generation immigrant youths, particularly those who were newly arrived, were sometimes disadvantaged by the migratory move. For example, some parents with low-level English-language skills who were seeking employment relied on their children to help them as interpreters, while at the same time the children struggled to cope with language and social adjustment in their new school environment. I also found that sometimes young people were not happy with their parents’ decisions about their career choice as reflected in their secondary school subjects. A few boys had received scholarships in technical institutions but their parents preferred them to study more academic subjects, or if they had been accepted in an elite-level sport programme their parents did not allow them to take up the offer because they, the parents, feared that their culture would be lost.

In some cases, men had been persuaded to get married young (for example while still teenagers) for cultural reasons, and in some cases they were expected to go back to the home country and get married because their parents were ill
and required help. A few male high school students were involved in drugs and gang cultures. But most of my participants appeared to be focused on their studies and pursuing a career.

Biculturalism

Biculturalism is generally represented as ‘comfort and proficiency with both one’s heritage culture and the culture of the country or region in which one has settled’. It is applicable to immigrants who have moved to a new country and to their children who were either born or raised in the receiving host country. Young people usually acquire bicultural skills by first living within their parents’ ethnic culture, and being exposed to language, values and beliefs from their parents’ culture. Then, with their exposure to the wider society’s culture, young people grasp the receiving/mainstream culture, for example English-language skills.

First-generation immigrants develop bicultural skills gradually as they settle in their receiving/host country. Research in the United States has found that if schools introduce a bilingual programme, for example Spanish for Latino children, and involve the parents in classroom interaction, then their children will do better in school. Educational psychologist Jim Cummins observed, “[Minority] students who are empowered by their school experiences develop ability, confidence, and motivation to succeed academically.”

Seth Schwartz and Jennifer Unger observed that in some places in the United States where monoculturalism is very strong, such as in the Midwest, exhibiting one’s bicultural skills may be very difficult because of the threat of perceived discrimination. Yet if immigrants decide to display their ‘ethnic pride’ it will ‘eventually help monocultural communities to adjust to the presence of immigrants’. In this context, I would argue that in a monocultural workplace there might be opposition to biculturalism. For example, firstly, a person with a minority bicultural identity (for example, a Muslim name) may not be selected into the workforce. Secondly, if they do obtain work, they may be subjected to tremendous pressure to abide by the monocultural ‘rules’. In these instances, policy makers can provide incentives or should introduce a quota for the recruitment of ethnic people. On the other hand, affirmative action on the basis of gender or ethnicity is likely to meet with political contestation, especially in the private sector. Schwartz and Unger noted that in a country where there are nationally sanctioned laws, such as in France, where Muslim headscarves are banned in public schools, then ‘such a hostile political climate may decrease the advantages of biculturalism and may increase the advantages of assimilating and blending in’.

Overall, in my previous studies on young Australian and British Muslim people, I found that most participants had acquired bicultural skills. For example, they spoke their ethnic language, some of them practised their reli-
From here to where?

From here to where?

region, they appreciated their parental culture in terms of food and ceremonies/festivals, and at the same time they had adapted to the mainstream culture, such as speaking English, enjoying mainstream sports, reading books and listening to music. Of course, this varied across populations but, paradoxically, the more receptive the host society was to multicultural difference the more inclined the immigrants were to integrate and even assimilate.

In this study too, I found that young American Muslims were bicultural to a degree. As Cummins observed (and I also found), bicultural skills empower young people of immigrant backgrounds. Throughout the interviews, the participants were very aware of the current events concerning Muslims in the United States and globally, and quite confident and articulate in expressing their opinions.

Music

It is a popular misconception that music is forbidden in Islam. Ultra-orthodox groups have widely publicised this idea through incidents such as the Taliban burning instruments and audiotapes in Afghanistan in 2000, so that music has become somewhat controversial in Islamic discourse. On the other hand, Sufis believe that through music one can enhance communion with the divine. And Muslim societies have also produced great artists such as the Pakistani singer Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan and the Egyptian singer Umm Kulthum. Indeed the recitation of the Quran can be very melodic, so it is impossible to reconcile the argument that music is banned in Islam.12

Yet the notion remains ambiguous. The British pop singer Yusuf Islam, formerly known as Cat Stevens, stopped performing publicly shortly after his conversion to Islam in 1977. He resumed his singing career some twenty-two years later, when his son bought him a guitar. Islam said, ‘A lot of my songs reflected something much more than frivolous. They contained deeper spiritual meanings.’13 There is another group of Muslim rappers, whose songs (for example, nasheeds) provide a spiritual reflection to their young audiences.14

Richard Turner’s study of African American Muslim converts showed a positive connection with hip-hop music in this group.15 Turner observed that the hip-hop culture that began in the 1970s among African American, Latino and Caribbean youth in the Bronx in New York has also become a subculture among African American Muslim converts. Hip-hop music expresses resistance to ‘post-industrial conditions’ that have resulted in high unemployment and poor housing and support systems, conditions that are predominant in working-class and African American communities. Turner notes that the marginalisation of African Americans has continued in the 1980s, 1990s and into the twenty-first century.16 With the rise of a ‘new prison-industrial complex’ about one-third of all African American men in their twenties were incarcerated. Under these circumstances, rap music was employed as a protest against
mainstream American practices aimed at the black population such as racial profiling, a new underground economy generated by widespread drug addiction, youth deaths from police brutality and torture, AIDS and new assaults on affirmative action. Therefore, the music, poetry, style, clothing, language and life experiences of hip-hop artists have also impacted on African American Muslims. Then, with the advent of racial profiling after 9/11, African American Muslims were doubly disadvantaged because they were both ‘black’ and ‘Muslim’. Some young African American Muslims found that rap music was more than just an ‘oppositional subcultural music’ of resistance and pleasure. Turner wrote, ‘Hip-hop culture also serves as a powerful medium to the ultimate spiritual and political concerns in their lives and their identities are paradigms for global Muslim youth’.17

Media

In this study, most participants were conscious and critical of the US media representation of Islam/Muslims, and many gave examples of one-sided news reporting by some media. A few also believed that the media was motivated by profit: with more sensational news headlines, more people would buy newspapers. Many participants noted that media ownership rests with a few wealthy individuals such as News International’s Rupert Murdoch. In the absence of any other competitor, the media giants know how to obtain maximum profit through their publications (through the headlines and images).

Some participants were also aware that sometimes politicians align with the media to promote their own agendas for political gain.18 Since 9/11, news of the ‘Muslim other’ has become both lucrative and persuasive, with negative Muslim news reports selling more copies and swaying voters.19 Sociologist Tahir Abbas observed that with the advent of social media such as YouTube, Facebook, Twitter and internet blogging it has become ‘more difficult for Muslims to compete for effective representation on the global stage’.20

In the American context, Jack Shaheen observed that in the electronic media (television and cinemas) Arabs and Muslim Americans have been profiled as potential security threats and portrayed as people who lose their jobs or who are detained and rounded up. Shaheen said, ‘It illustrates the power of film.’ It transforms the image into a ‘mythology’:

The mythology is still a part of our psychic stereotype [which will] take a long time to wither away. And for many of us, we’re comfortable with our prejudices. We don’t want to change. We have grown accustomed to this face [to the sight of Muslims/Arabs yelling].21

Sonia, a participant in this study and a film producer, of Egyptian origin (female, 25, US born, national identity: Muslim), commented:
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The media is not going to change until Muslims are in the media. Until the president of, like, CNN has a Muslim who is working for them and understands and empathises with what’s going on and understands what’s happening, then they will show that side. But for them, you know, it is all political . . . No media is for the Muslims. (Interview, Florida, March 2010)

Yet Razzak, of Bangladeshi background (male, 18, overseas born, national identity: ‘more Bangladeshi’) was critical of Muslims’ ‘over-sensitiveness’ on media issues. Razzak commented on the controversial *South Park* animated television show. In one of its episodes, the image of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) appeared in disguise in a bear suit. Razzak commented:

They censored it out and they wouldn’t even say his name, but I don’t really feel good about that because that’s our Prophet right there and if you can have Jesus or some other guy on there – well, I am not saying that Jesus [PBUH] is not our Prophet; he was a messenger in our religion – but if you can say his name and stuff, why can’t you say our Prophet’s name? (Interview, Michigan, May 2010)

I took Razzak’s comment to mean that it is time that Muslims accepted satire just as Christians accept satire involving Prophet Jesus (PBUH). Considering the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) cartoon controversy in Denmark, Fariha, of American-Palestinian background (female, 16, US born, national identity: ‘mostly American’) recommended silent protest. She said that in the first instance she thought that the cartoon of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) ‘putting a bomb on his head . . . looked like a stereotypical Arab guy’. Fariha quoted her father on how to deal with such a situation in a non-violent manner:

My dad told me . . . all the Danish items that we were [going to buy], stop buying now, and I think since then everyone has been treating it like it was the right thing to do. Not just as though it was freedom of speech, but it was the right thing to do . . . And I mean the newspaper that got them published in, it was a notorious right-wing newspaper. (Interview, Michigan, April 2010)

Harmony: can it be achieved?

When I asked Rehman, of Palestinian origin (male, 16, US born, national identity: Arab American), ‘What could Muslims do to establish harmony with the wider society to show that we are good people?’ he replied, ‘I think we should get more involved in stuff in communities, cities and states; I mean that’s pretty much it’ (interview, Michigan, April 2010). Daliya, of west African origin (female, 15, US born, national identity: African Muslim), said:

I think maybe they should have open houses, get people interested, show people, show them a different side to Muslims, like not all Muslims are terrorists. That’s
what people just don’t understand. If someone sees you, automatically they just think you’re a terrorist, or they just want to get away from you.

So I think they should show people that Muslims are totally different from that, opposite from terrorists, and stuff like that. And I think they should get out in the community, have events and stuff. And then I guess they can get some people interested in Islam. (Interview, Michigan, May 2010)

Nabil, of Palestinian background (male, 20, US born, national identity: Muslim Palestinian), suggested that tension should be absorbed with humour:

I worked in my dad’s gas station for, like, ever since I was young. I would go help him out and you had a lot of people, you know, when they were sober they seemed like they were cool and everything but when they get drunk their real side comes out and they start being, you know, belligerent, very rude and everything. And you’d have to get in a couple of fights every now and then just to defend your points . . .

My dad was more of being really smart about it. We had one guy come in and he was like, ‘Go back to your country.’ My dad said, ‘If it wasn’t for me, Christopher Columbus would have missed the country. I’m the one that pointed it out.’ And the guy was so confused he just left, he didn’t know what to say. (Interview, Florida, March 2010)

Azra, of Bangladeshi background (female, 15, overseas born, national identity: Bangladeshi American), observed that not only were Muslims marginalised, Jewish people were also viewed as the ‘other’:

My brother, he was watching something on YouTube and which was also on the news. This Jewish guy came and all he said to these people was ‘Happy Hanukkah’. And these other people, they’re not Muslim, they were something else, they got mad for some reason and they were beating that guy up . . . It was by the train station. This guy gets out from the train, he’s a Muslim and he sees that guy . . . And that [Muslim] guy he came and he said, ‘Stop fighting.’ And then he even got beaten up for it. (Interview, Michigan, May 2010)

I also viewed this particular episode on YouTube. On a Friday night in December 2007 around 11.30 Walter Adler and his friends were returning from a Hanukkah party on the New York City Subway. Adler wished the passengers on the Q train ‘Happy Hanukkah’. Immediately, three people attacked him, punched him and left him and his friends with black eyes. As they hit him, they said, ‘You killed him. You killed Jesus. You killed him on Hanukkah. You dirty Jew. You f***ing Jew.’ Immediately, a Bangladeshi Muslim, Hassan Askari, who was travelling on the same train, came to their rescue, and fought off the attackers. He was also left with a black eye. Adler said that it was a Muslim, who is always painted in the media ‘as an enemy of Israel and the
Jew’, who saved the Jews. The police later arrested ten men involved in the attack. So the incident revealed the anti-Semitism that prevails in the US.

The story illustrates that there is conflict at the political level (over the Israeli–Palestinian issue) but at the local level Jews and Muslims are helping each other. Arguably, there is also a need for Muslims in the US to be more outgoing in addressing the issues impacting on them as a community. Muslim leader Zahed Omar, of African American background, commented:

We as a community, we tend to ghettoise our issues. For example, we seem to only be concerned primarily about what goes on in Palestine or having a myopic view just on issues of discrimination about hijab or racial profiling. We have to learn how we can help empower ourselves and address our human and civil rights.

Of the external challenges, since 9/11 many Muslims have gotten to be not only timid about donating to the Islamic charities, but even timid to donate to other major national organisations, down to even being timid donating to their own mosque. So this is an external challenge that we’ve been dealing with in terms of what we feel as targeting the Muslim community by the Department of Treasury as well as the Federal Bureau of Investigation. It’s been a serious challenge on an institutional level. (Interview, Michigan, May 2010)

Omar emphasised civic participation and suggested that voters should engage with their local congressman or governor through email, or by attending public meetings, and make their concerns known to them. He also pointed out that some donors were concerned that they might become a target of FBI surveillance.

Isn’t harmony a two-way street?

So far I have discussed the opinions of Muslims on how to live in harmony with the wider society. But there are certain issues within the wider society that need to be addressed. For example, in 2010 the anti-Muslim rhetoric of Pat Robertson, Jerry Falwell, Saxby Chambliss and Franklin Graham against the proposed Islamic centre at Park51 in New York revealed the rapid rise of the Tea Party movement in the USA. And in March 2011, the incident in Gainesville, Florida where Pastor Terry Jones (not associated with the Tea Party) burned the Quran was not helpful.

Also in March 2011, Peter King, the chairman of the House Homeland Security Committee (a Republican from Long Island in his tenth term) held his first session of congressional inquiry to investigate ‘self-radicalisation going on within the Muslim community’. King alleged that Muslim Americans have failed to demonstrate ‘sufficient cooperation’ with law enforcement bodies in uncovering terrorist plots. King characterised American Muslims as one Muslim monolithic group who were not doing enough for the security of the
United States. His critics said that, in this exercise, King ignored the presence of mainstream American Muslims who were also concerned about the Islamists’ acts. Critics also observed that a recent report from Duke University and the University of North Carolina found that it was fellow Muslims who had turned in 48 of the 120 Muslims suspected of plotting domestic terrorist attacks since 11 September 2001, but King appeared to ignore this datum.25 King was also opposed to the proposed plan for the Islamic centre near Ground Zero.26

During the hearing, King singled out CAIR as the ‘other’. Yet a representative of CAIR submitted thirty pages of written testimony revealing that they had repeatedly condemned terrorist attacks in the United States and Israel. It would seem that singling out CAIR was a political action. One of the participants in my study (also a government employee) commented that one year earlier a powerful Jewish group exerted their influence on a project he was carrying out in collaboration with CAIR:

A group called Americans against Hate. It’s actually led by a Jewish group . . . I get these callers from America against Hate trying to rustle up an argument about an assignment at work, so it’s very stressful for me right now dealing with that, but you know, I’m on the basis of, it’s freedom of speech in America. Until you’re proven guilty you’re innocent . . . but there are certain things that this group is putting out that CAIR is related to Hamas. (Interview, May 2010)

From a comment of another interviewee, who was also involved with CAIR, I gathered that there is a general consensus among some American Muslims that being critical of US foreign policy is not safe. For example Yusef said:

I think [CAIR is] a strong organisation that talks about Palestine. That scares the hell out of people because they’re telling Muslims to get engaged . . . If Iraq and Palestine matters to them, they should go to their congressperson, they should talk about it. Because any criticism we make of Jews, I think, is really, there shouldn’t be any criticism of Jews and, like, ‘Oh, they’re [the Jewish lobby group] so effective and so powerful’. (Interview, Florida, March 2010)

As discussed earlier, there are some Jewish people who are sympathetic to the Palestinian cause. For example, the Jewish professor Noam Chomsky, who was awarded the Sydney Peace Prize in Australia in November 2011, has been a critic of American foreign policy. It is surprising that the United States has failed to recognise his contribution towards peace. On 31 October 2011, when a large majority of UNESCO delegates voted in favour of Palestine’s bid for membership (107 voted for and 14 voted against while 52 abstained), the US government, which provides 22 per cent of UNESCO’s budget, decided to cut off all its funding.27 Such overt partiality by the United States does not help promote world peace.
On 5 August 2012, Wade Michael Page, age 40, a US army veteran (he served in the army for six years until 1998), shot dead six people and injured three more in a gurdwara (Sikh temple) in Oak Creek, Wisconsin. Officials in Wisconsin identified the shooting as a possible act of ‘domestic terrorism’, but many people in the Sikh community suspected that the attack was a hate crime, and the most violent crime against Muslims and Sikhs since 11 September 2001. Sikhs have sometimes been mistaken for Muslims because of their appearance (turban and beard).

It was reported that Wade Michael Page was involved in neo-Nazi groups, and was well-known for the white supremacist music that he produced in a band called End Apathy. On his arm he had a tattoo of a Celtic cross marked with the number 14. The number is a code for a 14-word slogan, ‘We must secure the existence of our people and [a] future of white children’. Some witnesses observed that Page also had a ‘9/11’ tattoo on his arm.

Critics said that the United States should implement laws that prevent people having easy access to guns. There have been several tragedies based on the availability of guns, for example, the Virginia Tech (April 2007) and Arizona (January 2011) shooting incidents (discussed in Chapter 4). Critics also speculated that it is an election year, so President Barack Hussein Obama would not speak out about gun control in apprehension that the powerful gun lobby might retaliate against him. One editorial commented:

> Once again, Americans must ask themselves: Is there something about our culture that is causing the isolation and rage behind these mass killings? We do know this: guns may not be the source of this sickness, but once again, they have magnified its lethality.

I believe harmony is a two-way street. US Homeland Security officials can sometimes go overboard with racial profiling of visible minorities (discussed in Chapter 3). It is time for them to start being vigilant about the rise of white supremacists. The constant representation of the ‘Muslim other’ in some media has not been helpful.

**To sum up**

Throughout this book, and especially in Chapter 3, I have discussed the dynamics of young American Muslims’ identity/identities. I tried to find the basis of their identity construction. In some cases, their identities appeared to be natural; for example, when they said they were American Muslims or just Muslims or just Americans, they felt connected to those particular groups. In some cases, their definition of identity was spontaneous, that is they said what they felt on the spur of the moment. Other times, they negotiated their identity depending on the circumstances they encountered. But in times of
crisis, their identity would crystallise; for example, an Iranian American would feel very Iranian if she felt her ethnicity was under attack. Sometimes an Arab American’s identity would polarise, for example, because of repercussions they faced after the 9/11 attacks.

In this chapter, I have put particular emphasis on these issues: the status of women, economy, youth, biculturalism, music, media and harmony. I have taken the position that it is important for minorities (such as Muslims) to feel connected to their host countries, and argued that this is possible only when people are economically solvent, feel accepted in society and also learn to be a part of mainstream society. Young Muslim Americans need support from their own community and the wider community and, unless they feel accepted and recognised by both sectors, their identity will be in a state of flux and they may feel insecure in American society. I believe that a policy of biculturalism needs to be adopted by all concerned. It offers young people from any background the best prospect for negotiating a viable identity in a rapidly changing American society.

This study has been an exploration of the identity of young American Muslims. The questions I prepared for the participants were semi-structured, allowing room for them to express their naturally occurring concerns, and some themes were not solicited by the questions. For example, an unexpected outcome of this study was the Palestinian question. When I asked questions about the media or President Obama, some participants, while critiquing the media or US foreign policy, raised the question of Palestine.

Overall, most young people were surprisingly vigilant and concerned about global politics, such as the Israeli–Palestinian conflict and the US involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan. They were enthusiastic about the election of the first black American president, Barack Hussein Obama, but a few were also disappointed with him and considered that he was just like any other US president who did not bring the ‘change’ that he had promised before he was elected.

The study also revealed an impressive degree of maturity and fair-mindedness in the participants. Conscious of the injustice of the media and American foreign policy, the young American Muslims tried hard to be even-handed in their criticism. I am not able to compare their outlook with mainstream American youths but the participants were remarkably aware of international issues, sometimes from the vantage point of the Muslim diaspora in the sense that they were ‘on the edge’, conscious of the stigma driven unjustifiably by the media and some politicians, and therefore of their minority status.

The participants also spoke about cultural issues, mindful of the restrictions placed upon them by both cultures. But their acquisition of bicultural skills will surely stand them in good stead in an uncertain world. In spite of eruptions of anti-Islamic sentiment from time to time, these young participants have acquired an optimistic view of America and beyond, which augurs well for them and society at large.
Notes

9. Ibid. p. 661.
11. Ibid. p. 30.
13. ‘The Cat’s comeback: from rock star to Muslim devotee to a melding of the two, Yusuf Islam, formerly known as Cat Stevens, assures his fans: “I didn’t change, I just developed”’, *Globe and Mail* (Toronto), 22 May 2000, p. R1.
17. Ibid. p. 41.
29. Ravinder Kaur, ‘Sharing the same difference’, *Hindu* (Chennai, India), 13 August 2012.
30. Ibid.