Antecedents and consequences of identity integration for American Muslim young adults

Keywords: identity, parent-child relationship, well-being

Identity development is a multidimensional construct that, although persists across the lifespan, has a critical period of evolution during adolescence and encompasses a myriad of domains (i.e., race/ethnicity, politics). An important aspect of healthy identity development is identity integration, which indicates a level of “sameness and continuity” for an individual across domains and environments. Research demonstrates how development of specific identity dimensions, for example ethnic identity, may lead to positive overall well-being and mental health. However, limited research has been conducted to explore the antecedents and consequences of identity integration across multiple domains.

Identity integration is influenced by a multitude of contributing factors. A prominent early antecedent is the parent-child relationship. The bioecological theory of human development suggests that development occurs through bidirectional interactions with proximal contexts (i.e., parents) and more distal environmental contexts (i.e., culture or society). Previous parent-child relationship research establishes how influential parenting practices are for young children’s development (i.e., academic success, self-regulation). However, very little is known about how the parent-child relationship influences identity integration for Americans in general, and specifically not for Muslim Americans. Muslim values, culture, and traditions passed down from parent to child, in many cases, conflict with mainstream American culture (i.e., drinking alcohol, clothing choices) potentially causing more differences than in most parent-child relationships, which may, in turn, may cause integration challenges. Unfortunately, minimal research has been conducted on this marginalized population of young adults.

As an NSF fellow, I seek to discover what factors of the parent-child relationship influence Muslim American young adults’ identity integration across social situations. Furthermore, I am interested in exploring the psychological and physiological effects of identity integration. The proposed work is a crucial step toward my goal of developing evidence-based intervention programs targeting young Muslim Americans and their parents to promote healthy identity integration.

Research Plan: In order to address these important questions, I propose two mixed-method studies that will fill gaps in the current literature for Muslim Americans and the broader field of identity integration. First, I will explore the antecedents of identity integration in context of the parent-child relationship (Study 1). Second, I will examine the consequences of identity integration in a constructed paradigm that threatens one or more identity domains to explore potential psychological or physiological outcomes (Study 2). These mixed-method studies will combine complementary quantitative and qualitative measures to provide for greater depth of knowledge. Furthermore, the use of narrative questions will allow for people to tell their stories, which is empowering for individuals from marginalized communities.

Study 1: The purpose of Study 1 is to address the question of what aspects of the parent-child relationship influences identity integration. I hypothesize that less restricting parent-child interactions (i.e., less rules), more open communication regarding both cultures, and less negative talk towards host country will contribute to stable identity integration. I will recruit both non-Muslim and Muslim American young adults (18-28; n=200) and their parents from Minnesota. Parents and young adults will fill out scales that quantitatively measure identity, identity exploration, psychological functioning, and family conflict. Participants will also answer narrative based questions regarding 1) their identity in different social situations, 2) identity negotiation, 3) past parent-child discussion of identity, and 4) parental conflict. Study 1 will explore the extent to which parents influence young adults’ identity integration and how non-
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Muslim and Muslim American parents may differ in influence. This study will allow both within group and between group analysis that uses multiple reporters and a mixed-method approach.

**Study 2:** In Study 2, I plan to explore within-group variation of how successful identity integration affects psychological and physiological well-being for young Muslim Americans when one’s identity is being threatened. I hypothesize that Muslim American’s with stable identity integration will display a lower stress response (arousal) when their identity is threatened. I will recruit Muslim American young adults (18-28; n=100) to come to University of Minnesota’s Multisensory Perception Lab. Participants will be randomized to read one of two paradigm prompts, one that elicits emotion and one that represents a neutral control. The active paradigm threatens a person’s identity in a social situation to potentially activate an emotional and physiological response to the situation. Before and after the paradigm, the participants will complete a questionnaire regarding their current psychological distress and anxiety. During the paradigm, participants’ stress will be measured by skin conductance levels (SCL) to provide data not skewed by self-report. SCL capture the change in eccrine sweat gland release in the hands and feet.  This occurs when the sympathetic nervous system is activated under perceived threat. All participants will respond to identity measures and identity narrative based questions. Study 2 will provide information regarding the mental and physical health effects of identity integration using self-reports of mental health and direct measures of stress.

The mentorship and expertise from my advisor Dr. Moin Syed and other faculty members in the Psychology Department at the University of Minnesota (U of M) make this ambitious project feasible. Dr. Syed is experienced with working with community samples. Additionally, I have already partnered with the Somali Parent Association, which provides services to the large Somali refugee population in Minnesota, to assist with their parent-training and youth afterschool program. Furthermore, this proposal will be made possible by research funds available through the U of M.

**Intellectual Merits:** The current state of literature for young Muslim Americans and identity integration is lacking. The two proposed studies would provide great value as they examine both the upstream and downstream processes of identity integration for young adults. Furthermore, this proposal would fill gaps of knowledge regarding the psychological and stress processes related to identity integration for Muslim Americans.

**Broader Impacts:** Muslim Americans are a growing population in the United States. The proposed work will help the American community understand this growing young population. In addition to traditional dissemination through journal articles and conference presentations, I intend to disseminate my findings to community members, nonprofit organizations, and schools to facilitate change in how individuals and groups engage Muslim American youth. I plan to develop evidence-based programs to promote identity integration in Muslim Americans through 1) parent intervention programs to help educate parents on what behaviors contribute to health identity integration for their children, and 2) afterschool programs that can buffer against the potentially negative affects of the parent-child relationship to foster healthy identity cohesion. An NSF fellowship will give me the time and opportunity to collaborate with experts at the U of M to accomplish these broad goals.