Navigating the Unknown: Experiences of International Graduate Students from Muslim-majority Countries in the Current Political Climate

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Navigating the Unknown

Experiences of International Graduate Students From Muslim Majority Countries in the Current Political Climate

When international students from Muslim-majority countries enroll in U.S. colleges and universities, they enter unwelcoming national, local, and campus environments. Graffiti threats like, “kill all Muslims,” found at Virginia Tech and the execution-style murders of three Muslim students at the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill exemplify how anti-Muslim sentiment, prejudice, and violence—perpetuated by political rhetoric—continues to worsen on college campuses. Specifically, the international graduate student population deserves special attention as they make up approximately one-quarter of the total graduate student population in U.S. postsecondary education (Okahana, 2017). In addition, these students’ adverse experiences result in challenging identity development involving negotiation of heritage culture and dominant U.S. culture, mental health concerns, and a sense of not belonging (Ali, 2014; Atri, Sharma, & Cottrell, 2006-2007; Dey, 2012; Poyrazli & Lopez, 2007; Stubbs & Sallee, 2013). In fact, 59 percent of graduate students withdraw from their degree program prematurely (Nerad & Cerny, 1993; Strayhorn, 2012). Assessing sense of belonging is necessary to shed light on the lived experiences and success for this student population.

The history of higher education is not distinct from that of U.S., and the national identity of this country has a foundation of systemic oppression (Spring, 2016). This problematic history is illustrated through colonization of Native Americans, enslavement of African Americans, and exclusionary immigration policies implemented to discriminate and oppress minoritized ethnic groups. International graduate students from Muslim-majority countries experience these systemic structures when they arrive in the U.S., and it is impossible to discuss their sense of belonging without examining how systems of oppression impact their experiences. Howard-Hamilton, Cuyjet, and Cooper (2011) defined oppression as an act of control to politically, as well as economically, disadvantaged individuals. Furthermore, Hardiman, Jackson, and Griffin (2007) described oppression as a phenomenon where a social group or organization, subconsciously or consciously, marginalizes other groups for their gain. In the U.S. context, current policies and laws create and maintain acts of oppression through forms of discrimination, exploitation, and marginalization. For instance, the Executive Order 13769 (2017), Protecting the Nation from Foreign Terrorist Entry into the U.S., was created to intentionally restrict the travel of non-citizens, visitors, and residents from seven Muslim-majority countries. This order targeted individuals labeled as ‘dangerous’ and continued to oppress those of Arab and Muslim identities who did not pose a threat to the U.S.

Historic and current U.S. policies continue to exclude and target marginalized groups; these policies have induced subsequent influences that shape the climate on college campuses. National policies of exclusion, such as the Executive Order, exacerbate the longstanding issues of racism and anti-immigrant sentiment, which often negatively influence the sense of belonging of students. Considering the current sociopolitical climate and the very limited literature on this student population (e.g., McDermott-Levy’s 2011; Tumma-la-Nara & Claudius’s 2013), this study highlights the experience of a select few international graduate students from Muslim-majority countries. This study analyzes the experiences of international graduate students from Muslim-majority countries at Midwestern University (MU), a Predominantly White Institution (PWI) in the current sociopolitical environment. The research question focused on how the sociopolitical climate in the U.S. affected sense of belonging for this student population. The purpose of this study is to disrupt the silencing of graduate students from Muslim-majority countries and give a platform to their lived experiences as college students in the U.S.

**Literature Review**

International Graduate Student Experiences

International students are those not considered residents of their country of study and are enrolled at an accredited institution on a temporary visa (Organisation for Economic Co-operation Development [OECD], 2013; World Education News and Reviews [WENR], 2009). More specifically, international graduate students are nonresidents of their country of study with a bachelor’s degree who are seeking additional education through a master’s, doctoral, or professional degree program (U.S. Department of Education, 2017). In fall 2016, over one million masters and doctoral students were enrolled in U.S. higher education institutions, 24% of whom (283,496 students) were international students (Okahana, 2017).

International students face a myriad of challenges when coming to the United States to study, including, but not limited to: cultural adjustment difficulties, limited English proficiency, separation from friends and family, immigration issues, and integration into unfamiliar educational systems (Ahktar, 2011; Church, 1982; Dus & Poyrazli, 2011; Klimo & Granelli, 2003; Mori, 2000; Wedding, McCartney, & Currey, 2009). In comparison to their typically younger, single undergraduate counterparts, international graduate students experience more difficulty with acculturation, family-related stress, and increased financial difficulties.

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The Influence of White Supremacy in the United States

The United States is founded on exclusionary practices regarding immigration, also known as “gatekeeping policies,” which have existed and been enforced in the United States for centuries (Lee, 2002). Exclusionary immigration policies historically have been a technique to ensure the privilege and power of White supremacy. White supremacy is “a historically based, institutionally perpetuated system of exploitation and oppression of continents, nations, and peoples of color by white peoples and nations of the European continent, for the purpose of maintaining and defending a system of wealth, power, and privilege” (Gardiner, 2009, p. 2). Immigration policies directly affect international graduate students’ attainment of higher education and students are subject to the will and power of the U.S. government and such exclusionary practices.

For example, the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 explicitly barred the entry of Chinese laborers into the United States for ten years, as well as complicating and prohibiting natural citizenship of Chinese immigrants (Lee, 2002). This policy gave the U.S. government the ability to limit and exclude, especially non-White, racial groups from entering the United States for decades to come. In recent history, the targeting of Muslim Americans, Arab Americans, and those with perceived Middle Eastern origin has been exacerbated by governmental policy. Examples of policy include “Operation Boulder,” which allowed law enforcement to wiretap individuals of Arab descent; a mandate requiring all Iranian students from Muslim majority countries to report their whereabouts to the government; and the establishment of the National Security Decision Directive, which called for Arab noncitizens’ mass arrests and exclusion (Akrum & Karmely, 2004). These policies contributed to the racial profiling of Arab and Muslim Americans, and post-9/11 this population saw discrimination rise exponentially (CAIR, 2017).

The racialization of Arab and Muslim Americans continues to generate fear within the American public by putting this population in “unenviable positions as, for example, enemies of the state, opponents of freedom and democracy, and oppressors of women” (El Haj, 2015, p. 13). This fear existed before 9/11 and has manifested itself in popular culture, the media, policy, and personal interactions. In the current context, Executive Order 13769 was created by the Trump administration to detect “individuals with terrorist ties and stop them from entering the United States” (Executive Order 13769, section 1, 2017). This rationalization was given to instill fear and provide justification for the creation of the travel ban under the premise that this order would ultimately keep the United States “safe.” Trump stated the “United States cannot, and should not, admit … those who would place violent ideologies over American law” (Executive Order 13769, section 1, 2017), and after the 2015 San Bernardino shooting, he publicly stated that he would implement a “total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States” (Johnson, 2015).

It is impossible to ignore the discrimination and exclusion that this executive order imposed on those who identify as being from Muslim majority countries. Although the Trump administration has denied the executive order and its revisions are a blatant form of discrimination, it is undeniable that the rhetoric expressed during the election season and thereafter is an indication that this statement is unequivocally false. The administration continues to publicize rhetoric that alienates this population, and it is likely this will continue to happen and impact international graduate students from Muslim majority countries. Existing literature about international graduate students and Muslim students is helpful in laying the foundation for this research. However, the current political climate adds a layer of complexity that was not present in any previous studies. Although the participants of this study are from Muslim majority countries, not all of them identify as Muslim, therefore literature about Muslim students is loosely applicable. This study seeks to fill the void that exists at the intersection of international graduate students from Muslim majority countries and their sense of belonging in a politically hostile environment, currently orchestrated by Trump’s administration.

Conceptual Framework:

Sense of Belonging of Graduate Students

Several factors can influence a student’s experience through higher education and among these is a campus climate where students feel they belong and are valued (Kuh, 2001). Strayhorn defined the sense of belonging as “a feeling of connectedness, that one is important or matters to others” (Strayhorn, 2012, p. 1). Strayhorn’s empirical research focuses on addressing a gap in the literature about the underlying causal factors that impact the sense of belonging among graduate students, the most important of these factors being socialization. Agents of socialization, such as faculty members and peers serve as spheres of influence for individuals in their process to acquire knowledge and skills. Successful socialization allows individuals to not only develop skills and competencies but is also necessary to fully immerse individuals within the program of study and help positively influence student success, outcomes, and overall sense of belonging.

Findings gathered from Strayhorn’s (2012) empirical study suggest persistence among graduate students is largely attributed to a sense of belonging, socialization in their communities, and connections to others in the graduate department or professional field. There are important distinctions between undergraduate and graduate student experiences; specifically, graduate students face statistically higher challenges with persistence (Hernández-Curry, 1993; Strayhorn, 2012). Considering 50% of graduate students withdraw prematurely, assessing the sense of belonging among graduate students is necessary to improve student success and motivations for this student population. Assessing a student’s sense of belonging can help in understanding their perceived feelings of acceptance within the campus climate. The researchers examined how MIU engages and fosters a sense of belonging according to Strayhorn’s definition among international graduate students from Muslim majority countries through the lens of
the graduate student socialization theory and sense of belonging constructs. With isolation and fear already existing for Muslim and Arab populations, particularly in the U.S. context, the researchers' aim was to discover how the international graduate student population made sense of their belonging at MU.

In addition, the storytelling element of narrative design allows the lived experiences of students to be centered, which is an important factor considering the historical silencing of this population.

Research Design
Using a critical perspective, based on critical social theory, is important while analyzing the way power and justice manipulate social systems that affect individuals (Kincheloe, McLaren, Steinberg, & Monzó, 2017). The researchers decided on a critical narrative inquiry approach to address the systemic issues at play in the participants’ stories. Therefore, a narrative inquiry is the most appropriate methodological approach to bring forth the voices of these international graduate students (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). In narrative research, the data collected consists of the stories and experiences of individuals and how interacting with others in their environment affects their everyday experiences. This design allowed the researchers to analyze the participants’ sense of belonging on campus, explore commonalities in their experiences, and understand how systems of oppression affect students in everyday life at MU (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). In addition, the researchers aimed to understand students’ perceptions about their sense of belonging at MU given their identities and experiences. Additionally, participants were asked to create their own pseudonyms to protect their identities.

Data Collection
Recruit additional participants from those who had interviewed (Creswell, 2015). Once participants expressed interest via email, they completed an intake form, providing demographic information to ensure sample group criteria was met. The researchers aimed to interview six to twelve participants and ended with a sample of nine international graduate students from Muslim majority countries.

Data Analysis
After the completion of each interview, the interviewer transcribed the content verbatim based on the audio recording, utilizing the software Kaltura. After ensuring correct transcription, the raw data from the interviews were then coded by two separate researchers. The research team implemented a generic systematic coding process as outlined by Cooper and Shelley (2009), drawing heavily on open coding to initially categorize the information. To minimize the effects of carrying over any preconceived notions regarding interview content, the researcher who conducted and transcribed an interview did not code the interviews. The first coding member identified initial themes within the transcription, and the second coding member reviewed these emergent themes and made notes on discrepancies identified by the first. Axial coding was used to connect the various themes found in the data as well as to identify central themes and peripheral themes (Cooper & Shelley, 2009; Corbin & Strauss, 2008). After the coding process was completed, the researchers met to review the transcripts and identified themes and to collectively discuss any discrepancies that arose.

Trustworthiness
In this study, the research team utilized three central methods to increase the trustworthiness of the study findings: two-person coding, member checking, and

<table>
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<th>Participant Demographics</th>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Country of Birth</th>
<th>Academic School*</th>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Daria</td>
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*School names have been modified for confidentiality
participants are from Muslim majority countries, their findings cannot be broadly applied to the greater population of international graduate students from Muslim majority countries at MU. Uncovering these narratives brings a different perspective to campus environments, including a vast range of experiences summarized with a quote by Diana: ‘I bring something different to the table ... [international graduate students] always have something very different to say. We come from very different backgrounds, political systems in our countries work differently ... The culture is different and so there is always something new we can bring to the table.

The researchers identified four themes persistent throughout the participants’ stories: ambassadorship of international students, influence of faculty and staff on sense of belonging, opportunities and complications building meaningful relationships, and fear and uncertainty in the current political climate. These themes all relate to how the participants experience a sense of belonging (or not) at MU. A summary of the participants’ demographics is included in Table 1.

Ambassadorship of International Students

Several participants expressed that international graduate students serve as ambassadors or educators on campus, teaching others about their culture. One participant, Sarah, lived in the United States as a child and had been in the United States for over seven years as a graduate student. In her interview, she discussed her experience of feeling like she is a part of both U.S. and Saudi Arabian cultures, stating: ‘I feel like I’m part of both cultures and I feel like the U.S. is my country and Saudi is my country ... I always feel that I’m responsible for building a bridge between them because that’s where I live. I live on that bridge, and there are a lot of people that should be on that bridge that are still trying to choose between two places when we’re really, just all of us are one big mix.

Ilia shared similar thoughts, also using a bridge metaphor and expressing the role of international students to create “bridges between different countries.” Three participants also noted the burden of serving as a role model to undergraduate students with similar national and religious identities, both domestic and international. Sarah noted that within their role in cultural student organizations, they “wanted [Saudi students] to feel proud of their identity and [they] wanted them to feel like they can be part of this community and be with themselves and at the same time, be an MU student.”

The duality of the responsibility of being a bridge to both the outside community and members of their own community is certainly a burden for many international students, yet one in which some international students find a sense of belonging and purpose.

However, participants complicated this theme of ambassadorship by expressing that they are not sure that the burden of this should fall on international students. Several participants noted that they should not have to serve in this role. Combating the stereotypes produced in the media about those from Muslim majority countries can be difficult and draining. Sam shared his thoughts on the burden of having to consistently combat others’ perceptions: ‘Because [I’m from] Iraq it is hard for me to get a visa to fly almost anywhere—it’s hard to get a visa. I always feel like I’m guilty of something, you know, I felt this way for a long time. Coming here I felt guilty. Now I’m more aware and I realize it’s, it’s not guilt, it’s a burden. So that’s why I said it’s a lot, yes it’s a burden. It’s a burden in a sense that I need to give a better image because media and politics has distorted [our] image to the people. Although Sam feels it is his responsibility to take on this burden, the above quotation explores the complexity of international graduate students’ role on campus.

Even though participants expressed that they often serve as ambassadors on campus, they also expressed frustration with being seen as outsiders and temporary; they are often not included in the people of color community at MU. Sarah frames this in the following statement, “I mean the logo is ‘MU for All.’ We really need to work on ‘MU For All’! It’s a great logo, but I don’t believe that ‘MU for All’ includes international.” Although this bridge-like role exists prominently in the themes pulled from each interview, often this role is one of isolation and separation from each shore of the bridge, unable to truly exist on either side.

Influence of Faculty and Staff on Sense of Belonging

All the participants spoke about how their interactions with faculty and staff impacted their sense of belonging, but responses varied depending on the participant and whether or not these interactions positively or negatively impacted their sense of belonging. Every participant stressed that they felt a greater sense of belonging to their academic school than to MU as a whole. Participants identified faculty, advisors, academic school-based support services, and the staff at the International Student Support Office (ISSO) as sources of support.

Overall, participants identified that campus support
services met their basic needs as international students. One participant, Mustafa, stressed his appreciation for offices like the ISSO and international student support in the School of Law by telling a story of how his law advisor helped him apply for internships and get approval for a modified exam schedule. He stated, “I think it’s important that you feel welcomed. You know, if you have a problem, you know where to go.” Participants spoke favorably of their academic advisors, with one participant stating that her advisor always tried to make her feel comfortable and welcome. “I am really, really blessed that my advisor always tried to make her feel comfortable and welcome.”

Some participants stated resources on campus went above and beyond to support them, yet others felt that support was focused more on practical needs like paperwork than on support that addressed their sense of belonging. One participant emphasized that ISSO staff approached international students with a deficit mindset by assuming that international students need help with everything or that every international student has the same set of needs. Several noted frustration with bureaucratic processes, especially immunization policy changes and forms not including a racial category that they identified with. This lack of consideration for international graduate students resulted in many feeling as though they are seen as temporary in the campus environment, and that when MU sees them as such, there is little incentive to serve the community fully.

Opportunities and Complications Building Meaningful Relationships

Participants identified that their experiences with U.S. culture and MU impacted their sense of belonging and ability to build meaningful relationships. Many international graduate students in the study expressed experiencing culture shock when leaving their home countries and arriving at a PWI in the Midwest. “You know that American city is a small city, very very quiet … I don’t know but when I came here I feel like shock, it’s not what I imagined in like the nation” was Lalla’s thought when she first arrived at the institution. In her interview, Daria reflected on her visit in the United States. A fellow international student asked if she felt as though she belonged on campus, and she responded: “And the first thing that crossed my mind was that it’s a White institution, why would I belong here?” Although this sentiment of shock was expressed by several participants, several also spoke about the opportunity to engage in programming that helped ease the transition and form relationships.

Five participants spoke or alluded to difficulty building and maintaining meaningful relationships with domestic students at MU. Diana noted, “One interesting thing is that most of my friends are international students and not Americans.” Six other participants echoed this sentiment of having more ease connecting with international peers. Mustafa stated:

“It is difficult in this country to make friends with Americans. So, sometimes, like most of my time, if I want to hang out or just do fun activities, I go with friends from my country or, you know, who speak my language. I know a lot of international students in the law school and I have friends, but Americans, I’ve found it’s difficult. Just classmates, but not friends.

Joey explained that conversing with domestic students was challenging because they didn’t “have time to speak” or were “not familiar with second language people, how they are speaking.” Sam shared an example of losing a relationship he had formed with a domestic student after a news story broke of an Arab man who drove a pickup truck down a bicycle path near the World Trade Center, killing eight and injuring twelve people.

For example, Sarah felt the need to protect her children from Muslim majority countries because of the rhetoric and stereotypes that exist about Arab culture in the United States. Building relationships in college is difficult, but this population faces more hurdles in accomplishing the same task in comparison to their national peers. Mustafa stated:

“I still felt the repercussions of September 11th and I still felt that I needed to protect my kids … I am not joking that there were many nights … the way I slept that night was one foot out of the bed and one foot on the bed with the lights on, and I was ready in case I heard anything.

And another participant, Ilias, mentioned that he is concerned about political rhetoric validating Islamophobia, especially amongst Trump supporters. Ilias also expressed that his fear is the forbear of fear for women, concluding that Muslim women have a harder time feeling safe because their hijab identifies them as Muslim; he mentioned knowing a woman who is too afraid to wear her hijab. Ilias shared his opinion on the experience of women who wear hijab: “Women here, who wear hijab, being as a Muslim, have many difficulties more than men. I notice that with colleagues and with my wife as well. They feel not as comfortable as us.”

Although higher degrees of fear were a concern for several participants, others expressed having lower levels of fear. Ilias, a student in the School of Law, said he feels safe because of the government’s checks and balances—he feels everyone is protected by the law and that studying the law of the United States gives him a sense of security. Ilias said he is not afraid of President Trump because “no one person runs the country.”

Feelings of fear related to uncertainty were also mentioned by participants. Six participants expressed feelings of uncertainty regarding their abilities to obtain visas, their abilities to go home and have their loved ones come to the United States, and postgraduation opportunities. Sam expressed the level of uncertainty by stating:

“I’m doing a masters or to continue PhD, and I’m genuinely thinking that I should apply [outside of the United States] or maybe Germany or something. I don’t want to stay because I thought the situation would change, but at the end of the day this is really bad. And based on today’s okay, and tomorrow there might be a ban, and then I will not be able to go to United States. I wasn’t traveling but I know of friends that were traveling to visit their families they couldn’t get back and you know what happens with the airports and courts.
Resilience, Resistance, & Reclamation

Several participants were also sure to mention that personal safety and feelings of fear are not new phenomena due to the current political climate, noting difficulties obtaining visas and extensive airport security screenings as examples of preexisting challenges. The United States has experienced Islamophobic sentiment for an extended period. Participants disclosed that Arab and Muslim people already do not feel safe in the United States and the current political climate simply exacerbates their fear.

Discussion

Together, the four themes explore how participants conceptualize their sense of belonging at MU and how both the campus and sociopolitical climates impact their student experience. The first two themes, ambassadorship and influence of faculty and staff, focus on how campus life influences their sense of belonging. Every participant noted that they feel a stronger sense of belonging on campuses. However, they also indicated that their experiences are not always positive. Participants expressed that institutional changes are needed to support students.

Implications

There are two sets of implications to improve the sense of belonging for this student population. First, the research team recommends focusing on the importance of campus life and that they never have a permanent role in the fabric of MU. The second set of themes involved beyond MU and focused on how outside factors affected the participants' sense of belonging. Students spend the majority of their time on campuses, but it is important to make the distinction between the local and national environment. The participants spoke about their experiences with general American culture and the ways others perceived their belonging based on the current political climate.

Specifically, several students referenced the rhetoric of the 2016 presidential election, which impacted them in negative ways. The participants' reporting being fearful of what could happen while walking down the street or interacting with domestic students. There was a distinct difference in the way students perceived their fear and this was largely related to their gender identification. Most of the male students stated that they felt a level of fear but recognized that their physical appearance may not always make it clear that they are from a Muslim-majority country or have certain religious beliefs. Conversely, the women stated a greater level of fear, specifically the women who wore religious identifying garments. Additionally, the researchers noticed a pattern for students who attended the law school in regard to feelings of security and support. Knowledge of U.S. laws and regulations helped alleviate some of the fears that were present after news of the travel ban.

Aside from fear, many of the students discussed being in a state of constant uncertainty relating to the executive orders. Fear and a sense of uncertainty arise from seeing how students feel like they belong in the MU community does not see the value in investing in them. Participants spoke of exclusionary practices as normal and expected. This normalization is dangerous and should inspire action from those who see create more campuses where all students feel like they belong. To truly achieve a welcoming environment, a broader change of campus and national culture is needed.

Systemic change will require collective action to break down systems of oppression.

Conclusions

This study exposes the stories of international graduate students from Muslim-majority countries in the United States. Key findings reveal how their individual experiences of having a sense of belonging are influenced by the campus environment and extend to the broader political climate. Interviews with participants revealed that White supremacy is so ingrained at MU that the institution's reaction to the executive orders was seen as significantly positive, considering that doing the bare minimum to support these students has become the norm. Support for this population of students should be seen continuously, not retroactively. Institutions have an obligation to create environments that allow all students to feel like they belong, not just students with dominant identities. It may be difficult for domestic students, staff, and faculty to comprehend the constant fear that is present for these students. This population exhibits resilience and resistance on a daily basis and it is time to reclaim their belonging within the higher education system.

References:
Can be found at the end of this special issue.

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