

Black Pathology in the American Muslim Community

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Abstract – Blacks make up approximately one-quarter of the Muslim population in the United States. Despite representing a significant percentage of the population, damaging effects of racial prejudice, bias, and stereotypes skew their perception throughout the American Muslim community. Tracing their legacy back to the first slaves brought to the United States, Black Muslims have been a part of American culture longer than any other ethnic Muslim group. Blacks in the United States have endured slavery, othering, and the effects of bias as constant victims of pervasive institutional racism. As Blacks are often negatively portrayed in the news and media, they frequently deal with adverse treatment due to their social identity. Furthermore, Black Muslims often face intergroup prejudice and identity and experience erasure within their respective Muslim community, despite sharing the same religious belief system. This paper seeks to outline the history of Black Muslims in the United States and propose solutions to mediate the effects of racial prejudice and bias found within the American Muslim community.

Keywords – Black pathology, Islam, Muslims, African American, prejudice, racism, false-consensus effect, contact hypothesis.

INTRODUCTION

On December 25, Hamza Yusuf Hanson, a well-known Muslim scholar, took to the stage at the Reviving the Islamic Spirit conference and spoke about the prevalence of black-on-black crime. He went further to discuss how the uprising against white privilege makes him 'sick to his stomach' (Angail, 2016). As he continued speaking, the audience applauded his comments. Many people who are familiar with him also took to his defense when he was subjected to criticism for his statements (Angail, 2016). In his defense, Hanson deflected the accusation of being racist by claiming there is no possible way he could be racist because his mother was a civil rights protester and he is married to a Mexican wife (Angail, 2016). His comments were not anything many African Americans have not heard before. In fact, his remarks are rooted in black pathology, the view that blacks are inherently flawed by virtue of the color of their skin (Washington, Byrd, Booth, & Henfield, 2014), and this issue of black pathology has found itself at the center of the American Muslim community (Barkan & Cohn, 2005;

Dovidio, Kawakami, & Gaertner, 2002; Sinclair, Dunn, & Lowery, 2005).

After the shooting of Trayvon Martin and the Ferguson uprising after the shooting of Michael Brown, a discussion has emerged in the American Islamic community about race relations in America and the treatment of black Muslims within the community (Beydoun, 2015). Like Ethiopian Jews are shunned in Israel (Ben-Eliezer, 2007), as an ethnic minority, black Muslims also face prejudice and othering within their respective religious communities. Black Muslims often find themselves isolated in mosques that they frequent by being excluded from activities, religious functions, and are often met with silence when addressing members of another ethnicity within the congregation (Karim, 2006).

BACKGROUND

Muslims have existed in the United States for hundreds of years, and there are historical records that attest to the fact that they were even here long before Columbus (Halim, 2006). With the increasing need to locate new lands and open trade routes, Muslims traveled far and wide in search of these new opportunities. Interwoven in this narrative of Muslim exploration is the story of black Muslims, who were forcefully brought to America because of the burgeoning slave trade, sold by Arab slave traders to European colonizers for financial gain (Vink, 2003). It is estimated at least one-third of slaves brought to the United States from Africa were Muslim (Winters, 1978). However, much of the history and details of what happened to Black Muslims enslaved in the United States has been lost.

Among surviving narratives are the stories of famous Black Muslims such as Ayuba Suleiman Diallo, also known as Job Ben Solomon, a well-educated African who was captured and brought to America as a slave (Lofkrantz & Ojo, 2012); or the likes of Abdul Rahman Ibrahima ibn Sori, a prince, who, like Diallo, was a well-educated African-born Muslim who was enslaved for 40 years (Kronemer, Barbash, & Wolfe, 2006). Both men were known to be of nobility and were learned in multiple languages as well as having the ability to read and write. Their intellect would eventually free them, but it would be many years before this would occur.

Slavery proved to be detrimental to the practice of any religious belief or practice held before being a slave (Greene, 2000; Hale, 1997). Because of the method of indoctrinating slaves with the religious beliefs of their slave masters, religious beliefs and spiritual practices that were previously performed were systematically erased in the name of

Christianity (Cannon, 2008). It would not be until the 1930s that Fard Muhammad, the teacher of Elijah Muhammad, would give rise to the rebirth of another kind of Islam in America that would soon be recognized as a powerful voice throughout the black community (Rashid & Muhammad, 1992). The growing popularity of the Nation of Islam in the 1950s and 60s helped paved the way for the open practice of Islam (Al-Romi, 2000). Speakers, such as El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz, better known as Malcolm X, rose to fame within the ranks of the Nation of Islam with his focus on the defense of the black community and criticism of American politics (Davis & Davenport, 2015). His unorthodox views and subsequent conversion to mainstream Islam would eventually lead to his assassination (Dyson, 1993).

The Nation of Islam, which had flourished, reaching 100,000 members at its height, would eventually see their numbers dwindle after the death of Malcolm X (L. P. Brown, 1965). It would be several years later after the death of Elijah Muhammad that black Muslims would be introduced to mainstream Islam *en masse*. Warith Deen Muhammad, the son of Elijah Muhammad, now at the helm of the Nation of Islam, decided it would be best to separate from the Nation of Islam, thus ushering a new age of Islam for blacks in America (Ansari, 1985; Haniff, 2003). Although many followed W.D. Muhammad, others would choose to stay a part of the old vanguard and follow in the footsteps of Louis Farrakhan or split into other smaller groups such as the Five Percenters (Halim, 2006).

This resurgence of Islam among African Americans came with its set of issues which were not specific to Muslims, and this new-found belief system was introduced at a time when blacks in America were fighting for basic civil and human rights. Jim Crow laws and “black codes” hindered the advances of blacks by limiting the right to vote and ability to gain an education (Shofner, 1977). Pay disparity kept many African Americans from owning property or businesses. African Americans continued to fight against racism and prejudice by staging acts of civil disobedience and organizing marches (Calhoun-Brown, 2000). A year before the death of Malcolm X, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was ratified, bringing an end to overt discrimination and segregation based on skin color, religion, and sex (Hall, 2005). Although this was a major victory for African Americans and other minority groups in America, it would not be the end of the struggle. Many of the same minority groups would have to continue to fight against racism and oppression in their subtlest forms (Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000; Sue, Bucci, Lin, Nadal, & Torino, 2009; Sue et al., 2008).

For Black Muslims, racism has been a recurring issue in the Muslim community. It is understood that racism was stemming from their originating countries still influence the racial perceptions of many Muslims, as blacks are sometimes referred to as ‘abeed,’ or slave, which is a designation for them as people of color (Jureidini, 2005). Other Muslims have embraced the racist views of some American whites by espousing the view of black pathology, using it to justify the structural racism affecting blacks. In many of the originating

countries of several Muslims, having black or darker brown skin is viewed negatively (Dlova, Hamed, Tsoka Gwegweni, & Grobler, 2015). The very thought of having dark skin color drives some towards a state of desperation to ‘whiten’ their skin tone to appear more desirable (Hunter, 2007).

These views lead to the belief that those who have white skin are better than those who have dark skin (Abdulrahim, James, Yamout, & Baker, 2012). Also, blacks, in general, tend to be of a lower socio-economic status than their religious counterparts, which segregates the community and can lead to out-group bias (Cairns, Kenworthy, Campbell, & Hewstone, 2006). Many in the Muslim community attempt to employ the view of colorblindness, that they do not see color because Islam does not promote racism (Grewal, 2009). However, this causes a greater disparity by not acknowledging that prejudice and discrimination occur within the community because of skin color.

The difference between the black Muslim community and the Asian and Arab community was strikingly evident in two recent homicides. In Chapel Hill, NC three students were killed, and there was an outpouring of support for them. The hashtag #OurThreeWinners and a scholarship were created to honor their memory (Swift, 2016). When three black kids (two Muslim, one Christian) were executed, they did not receive the same outpouring of support. Although the hashtag #OurThreeBoys was created to bring awareness to their plight, their killing was widely ignored by the news and media as well as the general Muslim community. Instead, several people in the Muslim community questioned whether they were killed by gang or criminal-related activity (Swift, 2016).

Stereotypes have also promoted racism in the Muslim community through the biased reporting of blacks in the news and media (Dixon, 2015). The myth of black-on-black crime, as mentioned by Hamza Yusuf Hanson, is an indication of wider structural inequalities and not of the reality of the situations blacks face daily. Although blacks and whites commit crimes at the same rate, black crime is reported in the news at a higher frequency and crimes perpetrated by blacks lead to higher incarceration rates (Dixon, 2015). Movies and television shows also add to this sentiment by way of cinematic racism, by showcasing lower-class, uneducated blacks and dehumanizing them (Hughey, 2009).

In one of the most notable examples of prejudice blacks face in American society is the New York Police Department’s (NYPD) stop-and-frisk policy. Records from the NYPD show most people who are randomly selected to be stopped and frisked are people of African descent or Latino. People of African descent and Latinos make up almost 90% of the random searches (Mathias, 2012). Since 2011, random stop-and-frisk searches have increased 600% with the statistics remaining the same. These practices increase social segregation between whites, blacks, and Latinos. Blacks and Latinos feel that they are unjustly targeted, and this results in increased distrust of law enforcement (Schlesinger, 2012). No one wants to be subjected to this type of treatment. However, the people who pass and approve these laws are not the affected by their enforcement.

DISCUSSION

To counter the effects of prejudice experienced by Black Muslims within the Muslim community, several interventions can be established from a multi-pronged approach. The first issue to address is the 'false consensus effect' and what role it plays in invoking the assumption that Muslims with prejudiced attitudes have more community support of their views. Watt and Larkin (2010) explain how, in this instance, false consensus effect leads to an overestimation the number of Muslims who share their views. Moreover, those who hold prejudice attitudes believe they have socially-appropriate views and feel justified in publicly sharing these views (West & Hewstone, 2012). Therefore, how can social psychologists address this issue?

In his research on modern racism and intervention effectiveness, Guerin (2006) discusses how interventions addressing racist speech and actions are more successful when they address the social context or function of racist language. Rather than assuming a person's degree of racist attitude, which can lead to labeling and deter individuals from intervention participation, Guerin (2003) suggests focusing on the function of language context. One function he mentions is the use of language for social relationship management. Within this function, three main strategies are valuable foci for further examination: gaining and keeping attention, influencing the degree of like or dislike from conversation participants, and regulating individual social group or community status/ranking (Guerin, 2003). Moreover, Guerin (2003) concludes that countering with explanatory information and solid conversational skills, rather than stating opposing facts, is crucial for minimizing the social impact and influence of racist language. Therefore, using this type of intervention within a framework of storytelling and high-status discussion can serve to shift the landscape of social relationship regulation by providing highly-influential but less threatening dialogue. This dialogue can be effective in decreasing the potency and probability of a counterattack seeking to devalue social status/ranking of the victim and re-establish the social status/ranking of the offender (Guerin, 2006).

The contact hypothesis, a theory developed by Gordon Allport in the 1950s, hypothesizes that under certain conditions contact between two groups can promote acceptance and tolerance, is one way to reduce intergroup bias by creating contact between members of different social groups (Pettigrew, 1998). In a research study, Ellison and Powers (1994) suggest that if African Americans formed friendships early in life with whites, there was less of a chance of a negative perception and intergroup bias against them. This includes African Americans' perception of whites and white-dominated society.

This phenomenon was further discussed by Irizarry (2012) who concludes that it will take more than just interracial contact and opportunities during childhood. Rather, living in the same neighborhood has a significant effect on blacks' perception of white prejudice. Irizarry (2012) also mentions that there is merit in intergroup contact

as a means of reducing prejudice, and studies have shown that while as a minority group, blacks' perception of white prejudice did not change by way of interracial contact in schools, but whites' perception of blacks did.

Allport's theory is further proven in a longitudinal study done by Schroeder and Risen (2016) using Israeli and Palestinian teenagers, participants' attitudes towards the outgroup improved when friendships formed during the study. This, in turn, increased more positive feelings towards outgroup campers and which also increased positivity toward all out-group members (Schroeder & Risen, 2016). This study is important because the Israeli-Palestinian conflicts are one of the oldest conflicts to date. Both groups are indoctrinated from birth to have hatred and animosity for the other. However, the findings of the study show that even in the case of decades-old hostility, contact theory could successfully mitigate prejudiced attitudes. Due to the design of the study, Schroeder and Risen (2016) could correctly predict the extent to which outgroup friendships formed.

One of the main issues in the American Muslim community is the lack of cross-group friendships, despite its racially diverse population (Park, 2012). Much of the Muslim community is separated into different cultures and racial subgroups. However, cross-group friendships have proven to be very beneficial, and with higher frequencies of positive contact, aid in reducing social bias (e.g. R. Brown & Hewstone, 2005; Davies, Tropp, Aron, Pettigrew, & Wright, 2011; Turner, Hewstone, Voci, Paolini, & Christ, 2010).

In the conditions mentioned by Pettigrew (1998), a neutral setting is required for social contact to reduce prejudice. As the American Muslim community is a religious-based community, the best neutral setting to use is the place of worship (mosque). One of the limitations of the Schroeder and Risen (2016) study is that contact made between the Palestinians and Israeli participants took place in a setting that was not natural to either group, or they were relocated to a place outside of their native countries. However, I do not see this as being an issue for strategic cross-group contact between black and non-black Muslims, as they already interact at the mosque. But Pettigrew (1998) also mentions there must be common goals and intergroup cooperation for this to succeed. Increasing mosque-wide community service initiatives could help remedy this problem. By community members coming together to achieve the collective goal of helping others within and outside their respective religious group, they would fulfill the requirements of having shared goals and intergroup cooperation with regards to social contact theory.

CONCLUSION

Islam is the fastest growing religion in the world, attracting a multicultural throng of adherents. Despite a growing number of Muslims publicly sharing experiences of being Black in an increasingly diverse religious population, there exists other Muslims who attempt to demean and devalue the worthiness of their faith. However, the American Muslim community must proactively address severe

intergroup diversity and inclusion conflicts targeting marginalized subgroups if the community is going to thrive in a country where Muslims are a minority.

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