Abstract:

In the Academy and elsewhere, much ink has been spilt on the topics of Islam, women, oppression, and the like. While topics and issues involving Muslim men have not been ignored in the post-9/11 world, Muslim American men, Islamic concepts of masculinity, and the West are still pertinent to today’s discourse on Islam. With these ideas in mind, I have chosen to study Muslim American men and their ideas about masculinity. Broad issues to discuss are the use of masculinity by Muslim men, demonstrations of masculinity, contradictions in Muslim and American ideas of masculinity, and the construction of maleness in Islam and its sources.

Specific questions to ask include:

- How do Muslim men feel about traditional male roles and stereotypes in American culture?
- Do Muslim men believe that Western ideas about maleness affirm or abrogate Islamic principles?
- If not, are there any “Islamic” male paradigms that Muslim men look to so they can construct identities without denying their heritage?
- Is Osama bin Laden a good masculine Islamic role model?

In order to conduct my research I will need to gain an understanding of the American masculine ideal. By drawing up a list of questions that are specific and to the point, I hope to get a good grasp on ideas surrounding Islam and masculinity. Between
5 and 10 men will need to be interviewed so as to get a breadth of answers. As a reasonable guess, I purport that my subjects will affirm that American ideas of maleness are not always compatible with Islamic ideals and that the Prophet is the model of the ideal Muslim man.

Question:

1. Have the events surrounding 9/11 altered the self-perception of Muslim men?

2. If the Prophet is indeed an example of masculinity for all Muslim men to follow, is it difficult to emulate him in America?

3. Are Muslim masculine ideals and American masculine ideals counter posed? Why or why not?

4. In America, do you feel that the people have a distorted vision of what it means to be a man in Muslim society?

5. In your daily life, are there any times when you feel pressured to act in ways that are not in accordance with Islamic perceptions of maleness?

6. In the process of growing up, in what ways were Muslim ideas of maleness acquired? Was it through parenting, religious authorities, or some other source?

7. Why should Muslim men adhere to religious archetypes around maleness as opposed to secular ones?

8. Have American ideas about masculinity influenced
perceptions of your own ideas of what maleness is?

9. How do Muslim perceptions of maleness influence ideas about homosexuality in both American and Muslim cultures?

10. Is Osama bin Laden an appropriate role model for Muslim males?

Keywords: Masculinity, Islam, Stereotypes, American society, Per

Discuss
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Eric Heim

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Beyond the Terrorist: Deconstructing Stereotypes of Muslim Men

Growing up in Central Illinois, I would often turn on the television to get the news about the world. Whenever a news story was broadcast about the Muslim world, certain images would crop up repeatedly. Invariably the images shown would depict disturbing scenes of bombed out wreckage, cloak shrouded women, or men with beards wielding weapons and shouting incomprehensible things. On the movie screen at the local theater men of Near Eastern extraction were always on the lookout for easy gold and easier women. Living in Decatur, the town where I grew up, I overheard slurs like “Omar the tent nigger” and discussions about backwardness of Muslims. The examples are numerous, yet they are all permutations of the same basic
function, the stereotyping of Muslims, specifically Muslim men.

The stereotyping of any group of people can be a damaging phenomenon. For Muslims and Muslim men in particular, stereotyping has always been a problem—particularly after the September 11th terrorist attacks. Muslim men have been demonized as terrorists, religious fanatics, misogynists, and corrupt oil sheikhs. Many people, both in America and abroad, have bought into these stereotypes as relatively accurate portrayals of Muslim men. By accepting these crude images as reality people have, unwittingly or not, opened up the floodgates of hatred, racism, and suspicion against this group of people. Unfortunately, our history is replete with incidents in which stereotypes have gained the upper hand against tolerance, understanding, and reason. Today we can, as human beings, come together to confront and tear down stereotypes.

The function of this paper is not to pinpoint the origins or roles of stereotypes of Muslim men, even though that will be touched upon. Instead, it seeks to deconstruct these prevalent stereotypes by depicting Muslim men as whole human beings with real thoughts and feelings. By illustrating the complexities and differences between Muslim men, categories such as “terrorist”, “fanatic”, or “misogynist” can be negated and shown to be hollow representations masquerading as reality. Deconstructing stereotypes is an integral part of overcoming fear of the “Other”. In the words of one participant I interviewed, “The point is to take ‘the other’ and make a ‘brother’” To that end, I have divided up the paper into two different sections. The first section will detail the non-Muslim participants while the second half
will focus on the Muslim students I interviewed.

In addition to the Muslim men that were interviewed, I also spoke with three non-Muslim men. I wanted to understand their perceptions of Muslim men and how stereotypes had colored their views at all. By interviewing non-Muslim men, I gained a better understanding of how and why non-Muslims choose to embrace or reject existing stereotypes. Although I hesitate to project my findings onto society at large, the information gathered is still, I feel, indicative of general sentiment.

My research methodology was quite simple. Due to the limited nature of my time, I drew upon connections with people that I already knew through activism, class, or personal relationships. My Muslim participants were all of Middle Eastern or South Asian descent since they are the ones so often stereotyped negatively. There was one participant each from Palestine, Pakistan, and India. All of my interviewees were practicing the Muslims. Non-Muslims I interviewed consisted of residents of St. John’s Catholic Newman Hall. In selecting non-Muslim participants, I attempted to find a range of opinions in order to make up for the small number of interviewees. Two of them were practicing Catholics while the other was more or less secular. The interviews I conducted were between one and one and a half hour in length. They consisted of a free flowing conversation interspersed with some questions.

Non-Muslims
Interviewing non-Muslim men, I expected them to build an image of Muslim men that was, if not explicitly negative, was not exactly optimistic either. Instead, what I learned surprised me. Their picture of the Muslim man was not nearly as driven by stereotypes as I imagined. In fact sometimes they were quite different.

To start the interviews with I threw out some simple questions like “What do the words ‘Muslim man’ mean to you?” The three people I interviewed gave different responses. The first person, Gary, in particular gave a rather distinct detailed vision of a Muslim man. According to him the average Muslim man was someone of Middle East or South Asian origin. A Muslim man was “fierce” in his religion and they accordingly lived in tight, close knit communities and lived clean lives. Gary also believed that Muslim men had done a “good job” of integrating into American society and becoming American by learning English and generally following the laws. Then he ended his description of his idea of a Muslim man by stating that he had not heard of any real problems that were prevalent within the Muslim American community.

Later on in the interview, I asked Gary what he thought some stereotypical images of Muslim men would be. For him, the first picture that came to mind was of the corrupt, opulent business man or sultan surrounded by lots of money and women. The other stereotypical image of the Muslim man that he had was of the poor, desperate, and often fanatical terrorist. Even though he realized that these are popular images of Muslim men that are consumed by
the public, Gary didn’t feel that they were very accurate and stated that his own image of Muslim men was by far more realistic. He felt that “People are all human and that most abide by a certain commonality”. In other words, it was Gary’s opinion that while some Muslim men may perpetrate attacks on America, most Muslim men were more concerned with just living their lives. He ultimately felt that stereotypes were stand-ins for real people and were a simplistic way of perceiving the world.

The next interview, with a man named Martin, started in a similar way to the first by asking him what image came to his mind when thinking about Muslim men. Again like the Gary, he mentioned a man speaking unintelligible words, desert attire, and black hair. Unlike, Gary, however, he explained quickly that he didn’t feel comfortable reverting to what he called “American stereotypes” of people of different faith and of different opinion. He also felt that if he were a Muslim, he would probably have considered “radical” Islam to be a form of heresy.

Even though Martin’s awareness of Arab and Muslim men and terrorism were heightened after the September 11th attacks, he stated that he felt influenced by damaging stereotypes of Muslim men for only a short while afterwards. His faith as Roman Catholic helped him to see Muslim men in a different, more positive light. According to him, “The Catholic faith calls me to embrace all people” and therefore he felt the need to attempt to see beyond stereotypes of people, including Muslim men. Within the Catholic Church one tool in particular helped him reject stereotypical ideas about people. This
group of Church teachings is known as missionary theology. In missionary theology classes in high school and college, Martin learned about other religions and societies through the process of inculturation. Inculturation is a Roman Catholic teaching technique that seeks to bring understanding between people of diverse cultures by finding and emphasizing commonalities instead of differences. In the end, Martin decided that reducing people to stereotypes was neither healthy for him as a human being or for his Roman Catholic faith.

For my final non-Muslim interviewee I spoke with James, a student also living at Newman Hall. Beginning the discussion on Muslim men, James stated that he believed that while there were all types of Muslims, the most devout would generally be the most peaceful. He also told me that he had never actually known any Muslim men in real life and that the only ones he had ever seen were on the television depicted as terrorists or street protesters. Interestingly, James told me that he didn’t feel that the media had gone out of its way to portray Muslims in a bad light. Instead of deliberate bad intent he felt that the way Muslim men were depicted in the media was “an unintentional reflection of society at large”. Besides presentation in the media, James also wasn’t to sure whether or not Islam was a violent religion against non-believers but admitted to not understanding the history of the religion too well. “A lot of Middle Eastern types”, James also said, “are Holocaust deniers”. All the same, James felt that by and large the typical Muslim man had some things in common with him including family oriented
values and a belief in God. He even went so far to say that he would be “more likely to be suspicious of Blacks or Mexicans rather than Muslims”.

Generally, James described himself as “not a xenophobe” and ended the discussion by saying that stereotyping is a continuing problem in our society because it can lead to violence.

What conclusions about stereotypes surrounding Muslim men can be drawn from the interviews above? To start with, all of my subjects spoke only of Muslim men that appeared to be Middle Eastern or South Asian. This fact illustrates a stereotype in our society in and of itself- that a Muslim has to look a certain way in order to be considered to be “Muslim”. None of them mentioned the fact that there were white Muslims, African-America Muslims or the fact that South East Asia harbors large populations of Muslims. So even when my interviewees claimed to have an opinion of Muslim men that was shaped beyond stereotypes, they were still constructing their image within relatively narrow parameters of the diversity of Islam.

Earlier, I stated as my hypothesis that the non-Muslims I interviewed would be more inclined to take a negative and stereotyped view of Muslim men. With the possible exception of the third person I interviewed, my hypothesis was apparently shown to be wrong. Even with the third subject, he seemed to understand the difference between “terrorist” Muslims and “moderate” Muslims and acknowledged that religion has been twisted and distorted by a tiny minority in order to justify violence.
Regardless of the participant’s answers to my questions, they all agreed on one important issue: the need for education. Education both in and outside of school, they felt, was absolutely critical to combating racist ideas and stereotypes. Martin in particular advocated more interfaith dialogue between different religious groups. Gary felt that more Muslim organizations needed to do outreach and getting involved in more community based issue. This way he felt that an image of Muslim men as well as Islam as a whole could be built on the pillar of service to others instead of through warped and racist ideas transmitted via the media.

The contradiction between my hypothesis and what I found when I actually conducted the interviews lead to one of two interpretations. The first explanation is that I was wrong about them and their views and that they were as unbiased as they said they were. This answer makes sense because my interviewees were quite intelligent and thoughtful individuals for the most part. The first and third persons I interviewed had even owned and read a copy of the Q’uran in order to gain a better understanding of the religion itself. As they themselves said, my subjects used their common sense and Catholic faith to reject negative stereotypes of Muslim men and instead subscribe to more realistic opinions about them. If this conclusion is true then the results should not be seen as representative of American society as a whole, but rather as limited to my own study.

Besides the conclusion offered above, there is another way to interpret why my findings were so disparate from what my hypothesis was. Because I had a
limited amount of time for the project I used the resources I had at my disposal already i.e. I drew upon people I already knew for the interviews. Because the people that I interviewed knew me and the various causes I support they may have either consciously or not modified their answers to my questions in order to make themselves fall more closely into line with my worldview. Even though I tried to safeguard against this by repeatedly telling my subjects that I wanted them to be honest and give their full opinions this explanation can not be discounted.

Muslims

When interviewing Muslims my primary goals were different than they were when interviewing non-Muslims. The purpose behind my interviewing of non-Muslims was to gain an understanding of any perceptions of Muslims they had, their feelings about Muslim male stereotypes, and to understand why they had or had not rejected those stereotypes. In addition to interviews, I did observation of Muslim men in the registered student organization complex in the Illini Union. By interviewing non-Muslims my purpose was to take first hand information gained from Muslim men and apply what I learned in deconstructing stereotypes.

The first Muslim man I spoke with was Tariq. He is a senior in psychology and was born in Chicago. Tariq remembers that after the 9/11 terrorist attacks he did not know how to react to such horrible events. He did, however, feel that the stereotypes associated with Muslims needed to be dealt with. At first
Tariq acted in an exaggerated manner—showing average Americans that there was such a thing as a “good Muslim” by condemning the attack and explaining his personal religious convictions. In response to the attacks, Tariq in essence felt the need to compensate for the blow that he felt had been delivered to Islam. After acting in this outward manner for a while, Tariq decided to stop doing this because he felt it was disingenuous and not an effective way to combat stereotypes. From that point on he decided that the best way to combat stereotypes was by living his life in a quiet manner and not going out of the way to show people he was a “good” Muslim. One way that Tariq has found to combat stereotypes in his everyday life is through playing basketball at the gym with his friends. While there, they can meet up with other non-Muslims and play games with them. Conversations flow naturally from these encounters Tariq believes that by showing other non-Muslims that the followers of Islam can and do lead regular lives, he can help reduce or eliminate people’s racist feelings about them.

The next interview I conducted was with two Muslim men named Amro and M. Amro was in high school when the events of September 11th happened and people started to ask him basic questions about Islam and terrorism. He would explain to people what he felt about Osama bin Laden and what had happened. Amro would explain “What he(bin Laden) did was completely unacceptable and he is not an Islamic authority but a construction worker.” In addition to helping explain why most Muslims reject the ideas and actions of “fundamentalist” Islam Amro also felt that working in his community would
be a good way to counter prevalent stereotypes of Muslim men as violent, intolerant people. While at the University of Illinois Amro has volunteered at several locations including St. Jude’s Catholic Worker House and at one of the local hospitals. At these locations Amro felt that he could help raise awareness about problems facing the Muslim community.

Along with Amro, M was also concerned about the prevalence of negative Muslim male stereotypes in America. M spoke about how, even though he was Muslim, he lived just like any other American. On Friday nights he would often hang out with his friends or go to the movies. Other times, like Tariq, he would go play basketball at the gym with his friends. Often, when playing basketball, people would ask if he and his friends were Muslim and they would often be surprised when M and his friends said yes. By doing all of these things, he hoped to show Americans that Muslims are every day normal people with the same hopes and dreams as everyone else. He felt Muslim men should be thought of as “Just the guys that we played basketball with last night”.

Mirroring the non-Muslim men I spoke with, all of the Muslim men said that dialogue and education would be crucial in order to stamp out the stereotypes of Muslim men and replace them with real people. All three of the Muslim men I interviewed had participated in some for another in a civic or religious organization. On campus all three of them were involved with either Council on American Islamic Relations, the Muslim Student Association, or Students for Justice in Palestine. These groups are dedicated to fighting injustice and
the spread of racist ideas through education and action. In addition to on
campus activities, Tariq, Amro, and M all took place in the demonstrations
against the war on Ghaza in December and January. They all felt that part of
deconstructing harmful stereotypes of Palestinians is important to bringing
and end to them here in America.

Conclusion

Why should stereotypes be challenged and overturned? When people employ
stereotypes to inform them about the world, a coherent picture of reality is not
able to form clearly. Even more dangerous, harmful stereotypes have been
used to scapegoat and oppress minorities like the Japanese during World War
II. Today after the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the subsequent brutal wars still
being waged against the people of the Middle East, Muslims and especially
Muslim men have been targeted in America as potential threats. Muslim men
should not be seen as a threat but rather as contributors to the vibrant society
of America. This paper and the research that it embodies was done in the
hopes that it could help in the overturning of racist, negative ideas of people
that should be considered our friends and allies in the struggle for a better
world.