

Muslim Student Experiences in the Residence Halls: A Qualitative Analysis

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With an increasing Muslim student population on college campuses across the United States it is important to understand the experiences of these students. This study addresses a lack of research about Muslim students on college campuses, specifically in the residence hall environment. Adapting the campus racial climate framework of Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pendersen, and Allen (1998), researchers conducted qualitative interviews with Muslim students about their experiences living in a residence hall. Themes from the data include: pre-residence hall experiences, perceptions of the residence hall physical environment, relationships with roommates, and positive reflections on the residence hall experience. Implications for this study explore the significance of expectations between Muslim and non-Muslim roommates prior to arriving to college and suggests practices in the residence halls that promote the inclusion of Muslim students.

The need to better understand how Muslim students experience college is a growing concern given a number of incidents which may indicate a hostile environment. Amidst the tensions following the September 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center and the subsequent War on Terror initiative led by the United States, there has been an increase in reported cases of unfair harassment and discrimination toward Muslim and Muslim American students on college campuses (Ali & Bagheri, 2009). Some Muslim women who choose to veil experience negative stereotypes, such as the misconception that a veil connotes submissiveness and inferiority to men (Cole & Ahmadi, 2003). In addition, multiple studies indicate that it is common for Muslim men to be stereotyped as potential terrorists and be subjected to verbal and physical threats about their appearance and practice of religion (Ali & Bagheri, 2009; Muedini, 2009; Speck, 1997). Additional current affairs have spurred national debate about Muslims and their place in United States society, as exemplified in 2010 by the public backlash over a proposal to construct a Muslim community center near Ground Zero, site of

the September 11, 2001 attacks in New York ("Mistrust and the Mosque", 2010). While higher education professionals should consider how to provide additional support for Muslim students who may feel unwelcome, the growing number of Muslim students in the United States signifies an additional need to further examine their experiences.

While figures on the exact size of the Muslim population are difficult to determine, it is agreed amongst scholars that they are a growing segment of the population across the United States (Ali & Bagheri, 2010). From 1990 to 2000 the number of Muslim adults in the United States nearly doubled from 527,000 to 1,104,000 (Kosmin, Mayer & Keysar, 2001). However, estimates vary widely, and others (GhaneaBassiri, 2010; Sirin & Fine, 2008) estimate that anywhere from two to eight million Muslims currently live in the United States. Despite the increases in the population, little remains known about Muslim students' perceptions and daily experiences of their college environment, particularly within residence halls.

While residence halls serve as home for many students, experiences and perceptions of the environment vary depending on the student and the climate. A Muslim student's perception of the residence hall climate is determined by a number of factors, including ethnicity, culture, and religion. Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pendersen, and Allen (1998) provide a framework for studying diversity on campus that considers a student's multidimensional identity to provide a common framework for understanding campus racial climate. For the purposes of this study a multidimensional approach was adapted to Hurtado et al's campus climate framework to study the experiences of Muslim students in the residence hall.

Given increases in discrimination amongst Muslim students and the rise of the Muslim population, this study explores the interplay of students' culture, religion, and ethnicity in the residence hall environment. Adapting the campus racial climate framework, Muslim students were interviewed to discuss their experiences within their living environment at a predominantly white institution in the Midwest. Participants shared important aspects of their pre-residence experiences, perceptions of difference amongst non-Muslim peers, relationships with roommates, and frustrations tied to their religious and cultural practices with physical components of the residence hall. Implications for this study explore the significance of expectations between Muslim and non-Muslim roommates prior to arriving to college and suggests practices in the residence halls that promote the inclusion of Muslim students.

Literature Review

Muslim College Students

Islam is currently the second largest religion in the world and one of the fastest growing religions in the United States (Ali,

Liu, & Humedian, 2004; Curtis, 2009; Eck, 2001; Ruthven, 2006). Ali and Bagheri (2010) suggest that the population of Muslim students on United States college campuses also reflects this drastic increase. Islam is a monotheistic religion informed through the teachings of Prophet Muhammad and the writings of the Qur'an, and followers of Islam are called Muslims. The Muslim American population is incredibly diverse, comprised of people representing a wide array of cultures and ethnicities (Ruthven, 2006). Moreover, there is also a wide range of beliefs in followers' interpretation of the Islamic religion. Muslim college and university students also embody this diversity of backgrounds and experiences.

Literature on Muslim students is limited and little research has focused directly on their residence hall experiences in the United States. According to Muslim Students Association National, an organization connecting Muslim students across college campuses, there are approximately 75,000 Muslim students currently enrolled in United States colleges and universities (MSA National, n.d.). For some young Muslim Americans, Islam is little more than the religion of their parents (Peek, 2005). For others, Islam is central to their concept of self and plays a large role in their interpersonal relationships (Sirin & Fine, 2008).

The September 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade center and the Pentagon were a defining moment for the current generation of Muslim American college youth (Peek, 2005; Ruthven, 2006). In the years since the attacks, Muslim Americans have become the focus of public debate and many have been victims of discrimination and harassment. Nacos and Torres-Reyna (2007) found that stereotypes in the media have negatively influenced American perceptions of Muslim Americans. According to Shammas (2009), Muslim students on community college

campuses reported statistically higher incidences of perceived discrimination than their non-Muslim peers. Furthermore, Peek (2003) reported that students living in New York City in the months after September 11 faced outward anger and harassment.

Sirin and Fine (2008) used mixed methods to research the identities and experiences of Muslim American youth which included college aged participants. According to the results of their survey, 88% of the college age participants reported at least one act of discrimination because they were Muslim. In the second part of their study, they employed focus groups with youth in which all of the participants reported feeling like outsiders in the larger American society. The college age women in their study saw it as their duty to educate others when confronted with misconceptions or discrimination, while the men tended to internalize these interactions. Both men and women reported widespread instances of profiling, particularly in airports. Though this study focused on youth in particular, the findings from participants helps portray the context for college student experiences.

A few notable studies have specifically examined how Muslim students experience the collegiate academic environment. Much of this research has underscored the importance of including religious identity in campus definitions of diversity and highlights the impact that Muslim students' religious affiliation has on their experiences. For example, Cole and Ahmadi (2003) focus on the perspective of Muslim women who veil within the larger campus environment. In a more recent study, Cole and Ahmadi (2010) used data from the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) survey comparing Christian, Jewish, and Muslim students to find that the religious identity of Muslim students has an impact on the experiences they have in college. Results indicate that while Muslim students were more involved in diversity

related activities than their Jewish peers, they were less satisfied with their overall educational experience. Cole and Ahmadi (2010) suggest further research is needed to better understand such findings and note the importance of considering religion in expanding the scope of diversity beyond race. Additionally, Seggi and Austin (2010) researched how female Muslim college students in Turkey were developmentally influenced by a federal law prohibiting veiling. In their study they found that a headscarf ban appeared to hinder the identity development of these women and caused them to question their worth and place in society, as well as their commitment to their religion.

Residence Halls

On college campuses, the residence hall environment plays an important role in the student experience. Kuh, Douglas, Lund, Ramin, and Gyurnek (1994) found that students living in the residence halls were more engaged than their off-campus counterparts. In addition, residence hall environments influenced students' feeling of comfort, connectedness, and acceptance (Astin, 1973; Bliming, 1993; Kuh, 2000). College administrators believe this environment fosters a more meaningful collegiate experience; therefore many institutions require all first-year students to live in the residence halls (Vasquez & Rohrer, 2006).

Students from diverse backgrounds co-mingle in the residence halls, giving them opportunities for social discourse and communication with people whose backgrounds are different from their own. As a result of frequent student-to-student interaction, the residence hall environment can be a valuable space for teaching students to respect other's personal beliefs, practices of religion, culture, and values (Vasquez & Rohrer, 2006). Since students are

instrumental in educating their peers (Cote & Levine, 1997), the interactions within residence halls serve as prime opportunities for educating students about diversity beyond what they might be exposed to within the confines of the classroom (Cheng, 2004; Schroeder & Jackson, 1987).

Despite these benefits, living in the residence halls has been found to increase racial, ethnic, and cultural tension and lead to discrimination toward students from underrepresented backgrounds (Ancis, Sedlacek, & Mohr, 2000; Johnson, 2003). Research suggests that even within the same institution, students identifying with a minority race experience a different campus climate than their White counterparts (Ancis, Sedlacek, & Mohr, 2000). Johnson (2003) explored racial tension and discrimination in the residence halls and found that residence hall students from minority groups perceive the racial climate of residence halls differently and experience discrimination at higher rates than students in the majority. These occurrences of discrimination can have a significant impact on a student's experience, including the amount of time spent in the residence hall and their overall satisfaction with residence hall life.

Given the previously cited research about minority students on college campuses and the increased tensions faced by Muslim students within the higher education environment, Muslim students may face difficulty in the residence halls. As a minority group within many residence halls, Muslim students may encounter students who have had little interaction with their religion and/or culture. If the residence hall environment does not support students in their beliefs or practices, they may feel unwelcome or targeted (Hurtado et al., 1998). For Muslims these practices could include veiling and prayer. In addition, Ali and Bagheri (2010) found that Muslim students are more likely than Jewish or

Christian students to have a roommate of a different race or ethnicity and that having a roommate from a different faith impacts their residential life experience. Furthermore, compared to their Jewish and Christian peers, Muslim students are more likely to socialize with someone of a different race or ethnicity. Muslim students may have diverse social experiences in the residence hall; therefore, the need to better understand these experiences of these students is a central focus of this study.

Understanding Campus Climates for Diversity

To better understand the campus climate for racial and ethnic diversity, Hurtado et al.'s (1998) framework includes four interwoven dimensions that are used to analyze the campus climate, including institutional context, structural diversity, and psychological and behavioral dimensions. The first dimension looks at the institutional context and the exclusionary nature of higher education in discriminating against certain groups. The second dimension looks at the impact of structural diversity on a campus, including the impact of homogeneous environments on certain populations, such as the impact of the environment at Predominantly White Institutions on students of color. The third dimension of climate involves individuals' psychological "views of group relations, institutional responses to diversity, perceptions of discrimination or racial conflict, and attitudes toward those from other racial/ethnic backgrounds than one's own" (Hurtado et al., 2008, p. 289). The fourth dimension of the framework is the behavioral dimension, at the crux of which lie reports of general social interactions, intra-group interactions, and interactions between students of different backgrounds.

Together, these four dimensions represent the complex forces that shape individual perspectives and experiences of

racial and ethnic groups that have been historically underrepresented in higher education. This framework serves as a crucial lens through which this study is approached. Specifically, this framework informs the interview questions and analyses of participant responses.

Methods

Site and Sample

Participants in this study were students at a large public research institution in the Midwest. The institution had an undergraduate enrollment slightly above 32,000 in the 2009-2010 academic year, less than 10% of whom were international students. Approximately 12% of the undergraduate student body was comprised of domestic minority students. Roughly 10,000 students lived in on-campus residence halls at this institution. First year students are required to live on campus and have a roommate unless granted an exception. The number of Muslim students at the institution of study was unable to be determined, as the university does not officially track religious affiliation.

For this study, a total of four participants were selected using convenience sampling of the target population: undergraduate Muslim students who lived in the residence halls within the past or current academic year. Convenience sampling allows researchers to focus recruitment efforts on a specific segment of the population (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The main recruitment effort entailed emails sent to multiple student organizations that serve primarily undergraduate Muslim students. The largest student organization contacted had 100 members on their email listserv and 50-60 active members. Findings reflect the diverse backgrounds and experiences of the four interview participants. Participants included two domestic African American females, one

domestic South Asian American female, and one international South Asian male. Two of the participants were underclassmen and two of the participants were upperclassmen.

Data Collection and Analysis

Interviews and joint interviews of approximately one hour in length were held with self-identified Muslim students. One member of the research team asked interview questions while a second member of the team provided note-taking support. All interviews were audio recorded with participants' consent. Pseudonyms were selected by the participants and used to protect their identity in coding. Participants were asked semi-structured questions about their experiences as Muslim students living in the residence halls. These questions were designed utilizing an adaptation of Hurtado et al.'s (1998) framework for analyzing climate for racial and ethnic diversity on college campuses, centering on the behavioral and psychological domains.

The adaptation further emphasizes religious, ethnic and cultural identities to better understand how Muslim students experience the residence hall environment. We conceived Muslim student perceptions of their religion and culture as a lens through which students view and interpret their experience and interactions. In order to better illustrate these experiences, we chose to focus on the psychological and behavioral dimensions of Hurtado et al.'s framework. The behavioral dimension was utilized to examine student descriptions of actual interactions among students with different backgrounds in the residence halls. The psychological dimension was employed as a way for understanding student perceptions of discrimination and general attitudes of peers from different backgrounds. This adapted framework was used to develop the interview protocol. Question topics were designed along the two dimensions of

Hurtado et al.'s framework, with questions centering on feelings of worry and comfort, and how their Muslim identity interacted with those perceptions. Our findings were driven by participant responses that provided us with insight into their experiences in the residence hall.

In the data analysis process, a modified version of grounded theory was used (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). This provided a conceptual guide to examine the student experience while still allowing for flexibility to develop findings grounded in the rich experiences of the students. From the data collected, axial codes were developed to be consistent with interviewee comments relating to the psychological and behavioral dimensions. After coding the transcriptions, relevant themes emerged from our interview data. These themes included participants' pre-residence hall experiences, the impact of the residence hall physical environment, participants' relationships with roommates, and participants' positive reflections on residence hall experience.

Limitations

This study has a few limitations. First, a small number of students participated in this study which limited the scope of student experience that we could utilize to develop our findings. As researchers, we experienced difficulty in recruiting participants, presumably because Muslim students constitute a low percentage of the student population. Utilizing convenience sampling can be a limitation due to the limited scope that a random sample may yield. Second, our participants' diverse backgrounds and experiences in terms of ethnicity, race, gender, and country of origin impact their Muslim identities and made it difficult to find common themes across their experiences. A third limitation is the possibility of researcher bias, which may have influenced our findings. No one on the research team

identifies as Muslim; therefore, our interpretations of participants' experiences may be inconsistent with the students' own understandings. An attempt was made to minimize these biases through conducting background research that helped us better understand the Muslim student population.

Findings

Participants discussed a wide range of experiences viewed through the perspective of their Muslim identity. Themes from the data include: pre-residence hall experiences, perceptions of the residence hall physical environment, relationships with roommates, and positive reflections on the residence hall experience. The way in which our participants viewed their environment illuminates aspects of the climate for Muslim students in the residence halls at this institution.

"I was just really worried in the summer": Pre-Residence Hall Experiences

In our interviews, participants shared anxieties about their transition into residence halls. Participants were nervous about moving into the residence halls and concerned about how they would be perceived by others because of their Muslim identity. Here, James expresses concern as an international student about how he would be perceived as a Muslim by other United States students:

When I was about to come here, I was a little worried because of the prevailing stereotypical way of thinking that you see in the television...You see that you can be in trouble if you do something which people think should not be done especially because you are a Muslim.

This comment reflects James' belief that others would view his actions in a biased way because he was Muslim. His pre-college perception of American intolerance toward Muslims made him fearful of coming to college in the United States.

Our participants expressed other common concerns about starting college life including relationship with roommates, community dynamics, room size, and bathrooms. Prior to coming to campus, Sonya made the decision to live in a mixed gender honors community. Sonya discussed many issues about veiling in the presence of men which made her hesitant to be on a mixed gender floor but ultimately felt satisfied with her decision since there are no all-female honors floors at the university. Sonya said, "I'm on an honors floor, and I wouldn't have been there unless it was an honors floor, and that makes the biggest of difference. I could have decided to go somewhere else, so you know...it's like our choice." Despite the added challenges of being a Muslim woman living on a co-ed floor (discussed further in the following section), Sonya felt that the academic and social benefits of living in an honors community made it worth working through those challenges. To overcome these challenges, Sonya reported becoming involved with student organizations not associated with the residence hall.

Some participants had specific pre-college experiences that helped alleviate anxieties. Both Sally and Sonya discussed how their experiences in a pre-college transition program provided the opportunity to better understand what to expect of residence hall life by interacting with current students. From her experience in a pre-college mentor program, Sally knew what to expect when living in the residence hall: "I think because I did the shadow program and I got to see rooms, even though it wasn't the room I was placed in, I had a pretty good idea of what it would look like." Sonya describes

her pre-college experience with a current student mentor:

They paired me with a mentor who is a junior this year...so before I actually moved in I sent her a hundred e-mails and a hundred text messages asking her up to the detail of what is the shower like, how many stalls are there in the bathrooms, and she was able to tell me. Because of that I knew what I needed, so moving in was nice.

Sonya and Sally's experiences interacting with peers gave them a better understanding of the residence hall experience before they arrived on campus. These experiences gave them the ability to recognize some of the challenges they were going to face upon their arrival in the residence hall.

"I did the little peek out the door and ran down the hall": Residence Hall Physical Environment

Our participants described many interactions with Muslim and non-Muslim students in their hall that impacted their perceptions of its physical spaces (e.g., bathrooms, hallways, and personal rooms). In particular, female participants spoke in detail about their experiences adjusting to public restrooms on their co-ed floors. All three female participants wore headscarves their freshman year and felt inconvenienced by the physical arrangement of the showers. Reflecting on her experience, Kayla said, "You weren't supposed to see my hair, so I had to run into my room when there was a guy on the floor. When I got out of the shower it was very awkward and weird." Kayla notes that these challenges were typical of the floor environment:

Everyone has their boyfriends and lives and you can't expect them - because you're a certain religion or you want something a certain way for everybody on your floor - to follow suit. So I did the little peek out the door thing and ran down the hall.

Similarly, Sonya also had challenges with using the bathrooms on her co-ed floor, stating that she frequently thought about the inconveniences of bathroom structure:

When we use the bathroom we have to clean ourselves with water. We have a little pail, it looks like a watering can. I just keep that in the bathroom. The first couple days I would take it and bring it back in case people would freak out and throw it away and I needed it.

These comments illustrate strategies these women utilized to adjust their daily behavior when the residence hall did not meet their needs. According to Islamic tradition in some cultures, the *lota*, or small watering can, is used for cleansing after using the restroom. Sonya felt that it was convenient to leave the *lota* in the bathroom, but worried that her peers on the floor would not understand the use and religious significance of the *lota* and would discard it. Her worries suggest fear that others would be insensitive about her religious practices. Further, Sonya and Sally's comments suggest their recognition that the physical space of the residence halls were not accommodating to some Muslim women's needs. These women were very conscious of their physical environment and had to adjust their routine to meet their needs.

Our participants also experienced challenges related to the layout of their rooms. Sonya highlighted that Muslim students are often forced to make sacrifices in the residence halls if they have a

roommate. Sonya asked, "How important is it that you be able to pray when you want? Well, based on that you will make any sacrifice... I did request a single room purely for religious reasons." In reference to living in a single room, Kayla said, "I think that [having a single room] made it a lot easier for me living by myself and praying, wearing my scarf, things like that." Kayla said that living in a single room made it easier for her practice her religion.

However, other participants discussed various hurdles when requesting a single room. Sally discussed the financial implications of requesting a single room to better accommodate her religious needs:

Based on the fact that I was Muslim, or I was different, I feel like that's kind of hard coming to the realization that you have to pay for the fact that, literally and figuratively, you have to pay for the fact that you're different.

In this comment, Sally suggested that the residence life department did not consider specific religious needs in room assignments and rates. Subsequently, Sally questioned the residence life department's commitment to diversity, saying, "I come to [this university] and they push...from a marketing perspective that 'we're a place for everybody.'" Sally's comments indicate her belief that the institution could be doing more to make the housing accessible and affordable for people with different needs.

"It's frustrating when people assume": Perceptions of Difference

Participants emphasized how other students in the residence halls made them feel different and heightened their awareness of their Muslim identity. James stated that other residents "used to ask me questions, you know, 'Where are you from?' and 'Are you a Muslim or not?'" James perceived that

other residents lacked experience with Muslims, which compounded his feelings of alienation on his floor, stating, "I don't blame them or blame their ignorance but I think that they were never really exposed to [Muslims]." Due to James' religious beliefs, he also mentioned feeling uncomfortable with his roommate's alcohol usage, which may have further highlighted James' feelings of difference.

In addition to questions about their religion, culture, and background, some participants felt like they were stared at and treated differently by other residents because of their Muslim identity. Sally expressed irritation at the assumptions other residents initially made about her, stating, "It's frustrating when people assume that I won't want to go someplace or do something [because I'm Muslim]." Sally's peers assumed that she would not want to participate in activities because her religious beliefs might forbid certain activities. Sally's comments suggest that these experiences led to feelings of social isolation.

This social isolation existed in different forms as participants shared their experiences explaining their Muslim identity to peers. Sonya was comfortable answering any questions regarding her Muslim identity and preferred that peers ask questions rather than make assumptions:

If someone asks me a question, I'll answer. Freshman year in high school this one guy was very annoying and ignorant and everything. He'd say whatever he wanted like is Osama Bin Laden your uncle? Instead of getting mad I'd just answer, of course not. And then he's like do you wear that in the shower (referring to my headscarf)? Those kinds of questions I welcome because

honestly I'd rather people ask than assume.

Sonya's high school experience displays how she has developed strategies for dealing with interpersonal issues and bias related to her identity. Kayla was also comfortable answering questions, but held a slightly different perspective:

People always want to know, do you really pray five times a day? Why do you do that? Where do you do it? I mean, I don't mind the questions but I just want to make sure people aren't so amazed by it that they still realize they should respect it.

Kayla's comments reflect a desire for others to respect her religious practices without demeaning them. Alternatively, Sally mentioned that she often grew tired of answering certain questions about her Muslim identity. Sally discussed the perception that Muslims should look a certain way and be from a certain place. As a Hispanic and African American Muslim, Sally mentioned that she had to not only answer questions about her religion, but also explain why she does not "look Muslim." In addition, Sally mentioned that she was reluctant to continually educate her non-Muslim peers, stating, "You don't always want to be the Wikipedia in the room." These varying perceptions demonstrate the diversity of backgrounds and experiences held by Muslim American college students and sheds light on how students prefer to address questions of difference.

Despite the challenges participants experienced living in the residence halls, each participant also reported finding more support within the residence hall than they expected. James found that his concern about American attitudes toward Muslims did not always prove to be accurate. He shared, "It is

definitely not as hostile or unwelcoming as I predicted.” James made many friends in his residence hall, had a good relationship with his Resident Assistant (RA), and took an active role in floor activities and governance. Kayla echoed James’ sentiments, saying that she enjoyed interacting with the people living in her residence hall: “It’s so crazy because the people in the residence halls were people that were more genuinely inquisitive - they really just wanted to know. Get to know me and what I was about.” Both Kayla and James found peers they could interact with on their floors.

**“She would freak out if she sees me praying”:
Relationship with Roommate**

Each participant discussed experiences with their roommates. Sonya, a domestic student, contacted her roommate before she moved into the residence hall to discuss how they would share the room: “I needed to know if she was going to be uptight about my habits that I was going to have especially because of being Muslim.” Sonya “talked about almost everything” with her roommate before she arrived, especially boundaries with the opposite sex: “I had to be like in case you do have a boyfriend you have to realize you can’t just bring him in the room whenever you want. Staying overnight is just obviously out of the question.” Sonya also felt comfortable asserting her expectations and let her roommate know that she would not tolerate alcohol and drugs in the room. Likewise, Sonya was pleasantly surprised at her roommate’s response: “It was fine and she’s really relaxed. It’s more than I could ask for.”

Sally described her experience with her roommate as not being as pleasant as Sonya’s. Sally did not discuss living situations with her roommate before arriving on campus and she voiced this may have caused some conflict. Sally felt that her roommate, who was Jewish, had an unconventional sleep

schedule and stayed up too late, disrupting Sally’s daily life. Sally felt communicating about these issues prior to move-in would have alleviated some of the conflict; instead, Sally let the conflict go unaddressed for fear that she would not find support on the floor:

In the back of my mind the entire time I just kept thinking if anything happens or if a fight ever breaks out, I’m afraid that no one is going to be on my side because I’m the Muslim kid and there’s way more Jews here than there are Muslims.

Sally felt that as a religious minority on the floor, she could not address these issues with her roommate because her roommate was Jewish. Though Judaism and Islam are both minority religions on campus, Sally’s perception of the relatively high concentration of Jewish students magnified her feelings of alienation on her floor. This indicates that Sally felt that she would be unsupported by her peers because she was a religious minority amongst a perceived religious majority of Jews on the floor.

James, an international student, did not have the opportunity to speak to his roommate before moving into the residence halls, leaving boundaries undecided. As their relationship as roommates progressed, James’ roommate engaged in activities that he viewed as “highly condemned sins.” James implies that his roommate’s behavior caused him great discomfort and was incompatible with his religious values: “In our religion and in our culture, such exposure to women is not called for.” James went on to elaborate how he confronted his roommate about these activities:

So what I did was I told him that this is a thing that I cannot let it happen in front of me, so whenever you have to do such a

thing, you have to tell me beforehand so that I leave and you can do whatever you want... This was the turning point of our relationship as well, with that particular roommate, because he took it the wrong way.

Although James did not feel comfortable disclosing what specifically occurred in this instance, James was offended and felt disrespected by his roommate's behavior and took action to educate his roommate and change the situation. Like James, other participants also felt that they were responsible for educating their roommates about their Muslim identity and needs.

Discussion

The experiences of the students we spoke with have direct implications for the understanding of residence hall climate as it pertains to cultural and religious diversity, specifically concerning Muslim identity. We found that participants expressed concerns in both the psychological and behavioral dimensions (Hurtado, et al., 1998) of campus climate. In our findings, we found these dimensions to be highly interwoven, as one behavior or interaction would lead to a perception, and vice versa. Therefore, we decided to discuss the findings using these dimensions as a guideline without distinctly delineating between the two.

Hurtado et al.'s definition of the behavioral and psychological dimensions of campus diversity climate consists of multiple aspects, including actual and perceived interactions across diverse groups of people and the nature of those relationships. Our participants' perceptions of life in their residence halls were frequently illustrated through interactions with roommates. One of the emergent findings in our data is that interactions with peers play a large role in shaping the participant's perception of the

residence hall climate. Students' perception of intergroup relations on campus hinges largely on their perception of the quality of the interactions across group differences. As suggested by her comments, Sonya had a positive interaction with her roommate and may have been more likely to view the nature of relations between Muslims and non-Muslims in the residence hall as positive, while Sally may have had a different perspective due to her challenging relationship with her first roommate. James may have seen the institution as somewhat hostile toward Muslims due to the cultural ignorance he perceived in his peers.

Most of the students in our study reported positive interactions with the RA working on their floors. James had a positive experience with his RA, who was one of the first people he interacted with upon his arrival at the residence hall, which may have mitigated some of James' preconceptions of the university climate. Similarly, Sonya noted positive experiences with her RA, feeling comfortable asking questions and seeking support. These positive behavioral interactions reflect a supportive residence hall environment for these Muslim students. This has implications for the overall institutional culture as these two students may be more likely to perceive the institution as supportive to their needs if they have a positive interaction with a university representative.

One key finding involves the psychological perceptions of support from the institution. In contrast to positive behavioral interactions, Sally discussed how she felt the residence life division did not adequately support diverse students by highlighting the fact that if a Muslim student wanted a private room for religiously based reasons, he or she would be charged twice the amount to have a single room. From a diverse climate perspective, Sally's psychological perception would influence her

understanding of how the institution responds to diversity. Hurtado, et al. (1998) state: "Institutions should do all they can to ensure that students perceive the institutional climate as fair and just" (p. 291). It is Sally's perception that a Muslim student having to pay for a single room to accommodate religious practices is unfair. While it may be unlikely that discounted single room rates could be offered solely based on religious needs, residence hall departments should be aware of the added financial burdens some students incur for religious reasons by seeking to accommodate them accordingly or providing specific support to help them navigate the new environment. Housing departments could consider including a question about cultural or religious needs on residence hall room applications. This could give staff a better understanding of how to support these students or help departments place students in more accommodating environments.

Implications for Practice and Research

Findings suggest multiple implications for housing and residence life professionals. First, the role of peer interactions before arriving at college is critical. Each female participant reported apprehension before arriving on campus. In addition to the apprehension that most students have when beginning their college experience, participants shared heightened anxiety and fears related to their cultural differences and religious identity. Colleges should work to promote outreach among incoming student populations to address the diverse needs of students. For example, peer-mentoring programs could provide students with a connection to campus before they arrive. As cited by Hurtado et al. (1998), students from diverse backgrounds interpret campus climate and environment differently; therefore, a process in which incoming

students ask questions of peers may help students transition to college.

Second, discussion of expectations between roommates before and during college is an important part of creating a residence hall space that is welcoming to student needs. Muslim students with roommates expressed concern about religious and cultural practices that may have been different than those of their roommates. One participant, Sonya, was very straightforward about her needs and expressed her concerns to her roommate before coming to college. James experienced some conflict and discomfort with a roommate's use of alcohol and his roommate's female guest, which he stated was culturally forbidden to him. Residential life staff members should encourage mutually derived expectations from roommates and promote discussion that allows space for cultural differences to be expressed and shared.

Lastly, colleges should review their uses of residence hall spaces. Colleges should assess the physical facilities within the residence hall to better meet students' cultural and religious needs. Students cited numerous housing concerns including the design and location of the restrooms. One possibility for residence life departments is to consider exploring special interest communities that serve both physical space needs and provide opportunities for themed programming. At Georgetown University, the Office of Residence Life created a Muslim Student Living Learning community. Muslim students at Georgetown University requested a Muslim-friendly living learning community because, among other things, living close to members of the opposite sex and sharing bathrooms with them was against their fundamental beliefs (Crooker, 1998). This community serves both Muslim and non-Muslim students in creating a supportive climate within the residence hall, and

encourages participants to educate faculty, students, and staff (Georgetown University, 2010).

Future research should explore the satisfaction of Muslim students within the residence hall. Findings indicate that when Muslim students reflect on their experience within the residence hall, they express satisfaction, particularly with their peer relationships. Furthermore, the students in the study were pleased with their interactions with their RAs. However, there were no explicit connections between participants' satisfaction and the content of any policies or procedures from the residence life department. Finally, while some participants highlighted the importance of professional and student-staff members in housing, this was not adequately explored in our study.

Research has suggested that Muslims constitute the most ethnically and racially diverse religious group in the United States (Kosmin, Mayer, & Keysar, 2010). Therefore, future studies must work to incorporate the different perspectives that Muslims have and explore the effects of various intersections of Muslim identity including, but not limited to, gender, race, and ethnicity. The differences between experiences of domestic and international students must also be further highlighted, as national origin appeared to be an important factor in this study as well as in previous research (Cole & Ahmadi, 2003).

Conclusion

This research adds to the discussion not only on Muslim students but also on the experience of racial and ethnic minority students and their experience of climate within residence halls. More specifically, our findings discuss an area previously unexplored in providing qualitative data on the experiences of Muslim students in the residence hall context. This research

supports the argument made by Cole and Ahmadi (2010) that being Muslim does have an impact on the kinds of experiences that students have while in college, but seeks to further explore the nuances of student perceptions and experiences. Furthermore, our research suggests that Muslim students perceive the residence hall climate differently than their non-Muslim peers, as aspects of their culture and religion directly shape how they interact with peers and use facilities.

The climate within the residence halls influences the experience of Muslim student residents and their perception of the overall campus climate. Higher numbers of Muslim students are enrolling on United States college campuses while concurrently facing increasing islamophobic bias and discrimination and an overall ignorance to actual Muslim practices and values. In order to best support Muslim students in this environment, it is important for student affairs professionals to educate themselves about the needs of the individuals and this community. Residence life professionals can work to help Muslim students create positive experiences within the residence hall environment based on improved communication and understanding of difference. Through an integral understanding of the residence life experience, practitioners can create climates where Muslim students feel valued in their community, encouraging positive growth and development.

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