Muslim Women: A Phenomenological Study of the Effects of Identity on Pursuing Higher Education

Rafael E. Harley
Lynn University

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Muslim Women: A Phenomenological Study of the Effects of Identity on Pursuing Higher Education

by

Rafael E. Harley

A Dissertation Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of Lynn University Ross College of Education in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education

Doctoral Program in Educational Leadership at Lynn University Boca Raton, Florida

May, 2015

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ABSTRACT

RAFAEL E. HARLEY: Muslim Women: A Phenomenological Study of the Effects of Identity on Pursuing Higher Education

The purpose of this study was to examine and explore the meanings, patterns, and essence of the lived experiences of Muslim women pursuing higher education, while developing a foundation for Muslim Women’s Educational Identity Theory. The goal of the study was to develop a thorough and inclusive description of how identity formation affects the pursuit of higher education in order to increase awareness and develop programs that could improve the rate of pursuit of higher education for Muslim women. The importance of lessening gender bias amongst Muslims motivated this researcher to undertake this study. The research study involved a qualitative phenomenological research approach. Data from multiple sources were collected and an inductive analysis was used to identify themes, patterns, and discrepancies of how identity affects Muslim women’s pursuit of higher education. A revised Van Kaam’s method of analysis of phenomenological data (as cited in Moustakas, 1994, pp. 120 - 121) was used to support Moustakas’ (1994) phenomenological design. This allowed participants to discuss identity and education without having to separate their individual experiences from their religious practice. Finally, seven themes emerged as being significant to the effects of identity development on Muslim women’s pursuit of higher education. The findings in this research will help promote awareness of and, an understanding of Muslim women’s identity formation and its effect on the pursuit of higher education.
MUSLIM WOMEN: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF THE EFFECTS OF IDENTITY ON PURSUING HIGHER EDUCATION

Harley, Rafael E., Ed.D.
Lynn University 2015

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I wish to thank the members of my dissertation committee who were unwavering in their support and guidance. A special thanks to Dr. Suzanne King, my committee chair, for your innumerable hours of reviewing, reflecting, reassuring, and most importantly for your patience throughout this dissertation process. Thank you Dr. Korynne Taylor-Dunlop, Dr. Joseph Melita, and Dr. Adam Kosnitzky for agreeing to serve on my committee and for your feedback and guidance.

I would like to acknowledge and thank Nekeisha Bascombe for your daily words of encouragement as I grappled with the task of completing this study. Your support made this a smoother process.

My Cohort member, Allen Farina. We’re going to do big things together for Muslims overall. Thank you for your inspiring words and continued support.

Finally, I would like to thank my special friends from Cohort 4 and now lifelong friends, April Bullard and Arshley Emile. Thank you for always being in my corner and for the many hours of conversation and reflection that kept us all motivated.
DEDICATION

I dedicate my dissertation work to my family and friends. I express special gratitude to my parents, the late Randolph Harley and my dear mother Shela Harley, for instilling the value of hard work in my siblings and I. To my entire Cohort at Lynn University, I thank you for all of your support and encouragement and we will continue to celebrate our accomplishments together.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Introduction

Whether a Muslim woman lives in an Islamic state or in a more liberal state such as the United States, her beliefs are, “governed and shaped by a set of patriarchal beliefs and laws for which divine roots and mandates are claimed. Only the elite and the minority of highly educated women have the luxury of choice...of challenging beliefs and laws” (Mir-Hosseini, 2006, p. 640).

Muslim women’s attitudes toward education can be contributed in part to their synthesis of two distinct cultures – home and school (Knott & Koker, 1993). Traditionally, the cultures of home and school for Muslim women have been heavily influenced by male-centered Islamic interpretation and, according to DeLong-Bas (2015), there is a “desire of Muslim women for greater empowerment in the practice and interpretation of their faith” (p. 2). Additionally, according to one female Muslim scholar, the perceptions of gender biases by Muslim women where they interpret their lived experiences as being viewed in a lesser role in Islam “puts them on the defensive and makes them more likely to cling to religious tradition” (p. 2). With the desire for greater empowerment, women have created a shift in higher education.

As the face of higher education is shifting to more minority and female students pursuing higher education (American Association of State Colleges and Universities [AASCU], 2006), higher education must be prepared to help Muslim women develop and identify with other groups. From adolescence to adulthood, identity becomes strong and certain (Chickering, 1969; Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Erikson 1968). Understanding a
person's identity can be complex, and as Muslim women try to transition into college, they develop new relationships and reflect on current and previous relationships and even further develop their identities. In order to improve the status of Muslim women in higher education, more needs to be known about their identity formation and reasons for pursuing higher education.

**Statement of the Problem**

The role of religion as it affects Islamic societies, how Muslims view and treat each other, the subordinate roles of women, and attitudes towards the education of women all impact Muslim women directly (Creevey, 1994). All of these fuel the women's rights debate.

At the heart of the women's rights debate — the persistence of inequalities between men and women — is the position of women as defined in the Qur’an (Mazawi, 2010). Islam, as a religion, affords to all Muslims the right to education; however, the role of women based on the Qur’an is subject to interpretation and interpretations vary by region globally (Bagheri, 2006). What appears to be consistent is that many Islamic-based systems interpret the Qur’an to place men in positions of authority and that authority may hinder the rights of women in education.

In order to understand the problems associated with Muslim women in higher education, this researcher first examined, then looked beyond religion and education to some of the strong social and cultural forces that shape their identities — gender bias, traditions, and Shari’a (Islamic Law).

**Gender Inequality.** Gender bias, specifically as it relates to Islamic women, was important to investigate because although gender inequity has been widely studied, less is
known about the obstacles facing Muslim women in particular. Cole & Ahmadi, 2003 state, “The presence and unique needs of Muslim students on college campuses have received relatively little attention in higher education literature” (p. 122). Forgrave (2010) states that the theories that look at the identity development of Muslim students are rarely found in racial and ethnic identity theories. This researcher investigated gender bias and identity as it relates this particular demographic.

**Traditions.** This researcher also investigated traditions that may hinder the Muslim woman’s pursuit of higher education. Terms like “traditional bonds” as referenced by Tahar Haddad (Salhi, 2013), a Tunisian Islamic reformer, imply that traditionally, Muslim women’s progress has been hindered. As a result, there are possible effects on the psyche of the Muslim woman, which, in turn, may influence her identity development.

**Law/Shari’a.** Shari’a may also indirectly shape the identity of Islamic women. One female scholar argues that because the Qur’an is referenced directly in determining the laws that govern Islamic states, and because Shari’a plays heavily into what one should and should not do as a Muslim, there is a direct bearing on the role of women and, in turn, Shari’a may play a part in how Islamic women develop their identities (Salim, 2008).

Because Shari’a is based on the teachings contained in the Qur’an (which affords all Muslims the right to pursue education), this researcher found it necessary to examine its effect on educational pursuit by Muslim women.
**Purpose of Study**

The purpose of this study was to investigate the perceptions of a sample of female Muslim students at several South Florida Colleges/Universities to determine how their identity formation affected their pursuit of higher education based on three distinct external contributors to the development of their identities: Gender bias, tradition, and Shari’a.

**Research Questions**

The questions that this researcher used to drive this study are based on a directional research approach. In other words, this researcher expected to find a relationship between gender roles, traditional beliefs and Shari’a in the identity formation of Islamic women, and then determine whether that identity promotes or hinders Islamic women’s pursuit of higher education. Following are the research questions:

1) What is the experience of gender in Muslim women’s identity formation?

2) What is the experience of traditional beliefs in Muslim women’s identity formation?

3) What is the experience of Islamic laws in Muslim women’s identity formation?

And,

4) What is the nature of the relationship between Muslim women’s identity and their pursuit of higher education?

**Background**

There is a relationship between identity and Muslim women’s pursuit of higher education. Whether out of issues relating to gender equality, traditional reasoning, or Shari’a, identity can influence what one does/does not do in Islam (Tyrer, 2006). Often,
as with some Muslim women, there may exist a lack of esteem for self because of these three factors. This lacking view of self can contribute to the fear of moving forward in educational pursuits by Muslim women (Tyrer, 2006). Essentially, gender roles, traditional beliefs and Shari’a may help to shape the identities of Muslim women, and it is that identity that might either hinder or encourage their pursuit of higher education. Tyrer (2006) conducted a study at Liverpool John Moores University that found that the experiences of Muslim women in higher education were directly resultant from religious and cultural identity.

Social identity requires a person to balance the differences they encounter with others as part of a group with any internal issues they may have related to their perceived place in society (Baumeister and Bushman, 2013). The more the person identifies with the group, the more the person feels like they belong, and indifference decreases (Baumeister and Bushman, 2013). This could be true, for instance, for many Muslim women who, despite the discrimination their group receives from non-Muslims, choose to wear their religious garbs, because they have identified with the Muslim community and see themselves as being a part of the bigger picture of belonging, as being a part of a large family (Baumeister and Bushman, 2013). This is of importance because of the growing number of Muslims globally – Islam is the fastest growing religion in the world (Guinness World Records 2003, p. 102). In fact, 12.5 million more people converted to Islam than to Christianity from 1990 – 2000 (Guinness World Records 2003, p. 102).

According to the Pew Research Religion & Public Life Project (2012), the worldwide regional distribution of Muslims, as illustrated in Figure 1, is approximately 1.6 billion, which is about 23% of the total world population.
From this population, there have emerged two major components of Islam – Sunni (87-90%) and Shia (10-13%). Most Muslims worldwide are located in the Asia-Pacific region (62%). Additional large concentrations of Muslims can also be found in the Middle East and North Africa (20%) and sub-Saharan Africa (16%). The West, specifically North America contains only 1% of the total Muslim world population. Out of that 1%, as illustrated in Figure 2, which shows the world Muslim population by region, approximately 3.5 million are located in North America.
World Muslim Population by Region

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Estimated 2010 Muslim Population</th>
<th>Estimated 2010 Total Population</th>
<th>Percentage of Population That is Muslim</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Asia-Pacific</td>
<td>985,530,000</td>
<td>4,054,990,000</td>
<td>24.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle East-North Africa</td>
<td>317,070,000</td>
<td>341,020,000</td>
<td>93.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sub-Saharan Africa</td>
<td>248,110,000</td>
<td>822,720,000</td>
<td>30.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Europe</td>
<td>43,490,000</td>
<td>742,550,000</td>
<td>5.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North America</td>
<td>3,480,000</td>
<td>344,530,000</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latin America-Caribbean</td>
<td>840,000</td>
<td>590,080,000</td>
<td>0.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>World Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>1,598,510,000</strong></td>
<td><strong>6,895,890,000</strong></td>
<td><strong>23.2</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Population estimates are rounded to the ten thousands. Percentages are calculated from unrounded numbers. Figures may not add exactly due to rounding.


Figure 3, shown below, is used to further illustrate the distribution of Muslim populations throughout the world. It details the ten countries with the largest number of Muslims.
10 Countries with the Largest Number of Muslims

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Estimated 2010 Muslim Population</th>
<th>Percentage of Population That is Muslim</th>
<th>Percentage of World Muslim Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Indonesia</td>
<td>209,120,000</td>
<td>87.2%</td>
<td>13.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>176,190,000</td>
<td>14.4%</td>
<td>11.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pakistan</td>
<td>167,410,000</td>
<td>96.4%</td>
<td>10.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bangladesh</td>
<td>133,540,000</td>
<td>89.8%</td>
<td>8.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nigeria</td>
<td>77,300,000</td>
<td>48.8%</td>
<td>4.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Egypt</td>
<td>76,990,000</td>
<td>94.9%</td>
<td>4.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iran</td>
<td>73,570,000</td>
<td>99.5%</td>
<td>4.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turkey</td>
<td>71,330,000</td>
<td>98.0%</td>
<td>4.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Algeria</td>
<td>34,730,000</td>
<td>97.9%</td>
<td>2.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morocco</td>
<td>31,940,000</td>
<td>99.9%</td>
<td>2.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Subtotal for the 10 Countries</strong></td>
<td>1,052,120,000</td>
<td>47.0%</td>
<td>65.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Subtotal for Rest of World</strong></td>
<td>546,400,000</td>
<td>11.7%</td>
<td>34.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>World Total</strong></td>
<td>1,598,510,000</td>
<td>23.2%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
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</table>

These statistics are important to this research because participants in the study may claim some of these countries as their home of origin and that origin may result in an increased percentage of participants in the study as compared to participants from other regions.

Muslims who reside in North America came from many parts of the world bringing with them varied histories, cultures, experiences and identities, which contributes to the North American society (Leonard, 2003). As of 2008, the gender composition for Muslims in the United States (US) shows approximately 48% of the Muslim population are women; and men make up approximately 52% of the Muslim population (Kosmin & Keysar, 2009). This means that almost half of all Muslims in the
US are female. An understanding of their experiences and identities is important because although the research on theories and models of the identity development of college students is abundant (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010), insufficient research has engrossed the identity formation of Muslim women.

Theories on the identity development of Muslim students are rarely found in racial and ethnic identity theories simply because race and ethnicity are independent of religion and Islam is, in fact, a religion (Forgrave, 2010). Additionally, spiritual identity development is embodied in an individual’s social identity development (Evans, et al., 2010) and although gender bias has been widely studied, less is known about the obstacles facing Muslim women in particular.

In order to understand the problem of educating Muslim women, it is necessary to look beyond religion and education to the strong social and cultural forces that shape their position in society. In Islamic-based systems, culture directly influences the identity development, and hence the roles of women in education (Tyrer, 2006).

Access to education on a whole has always been a major issue for women dating as far back as early civilization where boys would receive preference over girls to attend school and learn the fundamentals of reading, writing, training and hunting (Guisepi, n.d.) and the education of women was often fashioned around the tasks and roles they performed in society, which was often limited to domestic responsibilities (Sexton, 1976). Toward the end of the Middle Ages, around the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, historians agree that higher education or university schooling began, and has not changed much since its inception (Hooker, 1997; Guisepi, n.d.). By the fourteenth century, many women of the time were able to read, and in the lower schools of France, girls were
educated alongside the boys (Sexton, 1976). In the late fifteenth century, women won honors in Sciences and Arts. The universities opened to women in the medieval period began to award women doctorate degrees, and allowed women to lecture on religion, philosophy, and literature (Sexton, 1976).

Traditionally, higher education was not viewed as a place where women and men could receive equal learning. According to Calvo (as cited by Itati, 2006), women were excluded from higher education dating back to the first and oldest university in the world, the University of Bologna in Italy (Calvo, n.d.). The importance of women’s participation in higher education is necessary to investigate not only from an equality standpoint, but for the social and economic returns that can be achieved by raising women’s awareness (Calvo, n.d.).

Significance of Study

The median age of Muslims, as seen in figure 4, in comparison to the overall median ages (as of 2010) is relevant because these include ages where participants are more likely to pursue higher education (a Muslim median age of 23 years).
Investigating college-aged participants' perceptions of the manner(s) in which identity influenced their decision to pursue higher education could aid this researcher in developing awareness programs that have a positive influence on identity development and promote social change in higher education for Muslim women.

Typical thought on the Muslim woman was captured in “Understanding the Role of Muslim Women” and reads,

The role of Muslim women in the Islamic world is one that is prone to much discussion and assumptions; unfortunately the discussion is more often than not a negative one. The most common perceptions are of women living under the
oppressive dictatorships of their husbands and fathers, forced into marriage, and of course suffocated under the veil. In terms of her contribution and role in society the caricature is one of the woman restricted to five metres away from the kitchen sink. The discussion of Muslim women and their roles is an important one for every Muslim, firstly because it's an area in which there are many misconceptions by non-Muslims which need to be corrected and secondly some Muslims treat women unjustly in the name of Islam when in actual fact their actions are often a result of cultural or tribal customs and not Islam (Understanding the Role, 2007, p. 1).

In combating these assumptions and misconceptions, the questions that were answered by the researcher may help to develop an overlooked but important area in higher education. This research can expand what is known about Muslim women pursuing higher education. This demographic has been underexposed and as a result, underdeveloped. The results of this research may also allow higher education professionals to develop programs specifically designed to help Muslim women further understand how their identity development, their decisions to pursue higher education, and faith development plays a role in the overall scheme of identity formation and educational pursuit. For those individuals that work directly with Muslim women, the results of this research may be critical to their understanding of and methods of approach to promoting educational pursuit for this demographic.
Rationale for the Study

An understanding of the lived experiences of Muslim women pursuing higher education is critical to understanding their identity because their perceived realities have implications for how Muslim women understand their identity formation and its subsequent influence on the pursuit of higher education. Additionally, their perceived realities are interpreted in different ways and have consequences for their social interactions (Patton, 2002).

With the objective being to understand participants’ realities, this researcher used a phenomenological approach. Krathwohl (1998) specifically tells us that “qualitative research methods are particularly useful in understanding how individuals understand their world, in showing how individuals’ perceptions and intentions in situations determine their behavior, in exploring phenomena to find explanations, and in providing concrete and detailed illustrations of phenomena” (p. 255).

Focusing on the individual lived-experiences of each participant, this researcher captured participant’s perceived realities of identity formation and its effect on their decision to pursue higher education. The justification for this approach was to accurately describe how the participants make meaning of their lived experiences in forming identities and how that affected their pursuit of higher education.

Definition of Terms

In order to provide the reader with a clear understanding of the discussion, the following terms are defined:

Culture. Schein (1992) provides a comprehensive definition that states: A pattern of shared basic assumptions that the group learned as it solved its problems of
external adaptation and internal integration, that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems (p. 12).

**Cultural Identity.** Schein (1992) provides a comprehensive definition, which states that cultural identity is assumptions learned by a group that are accepted as valid and taught to new members of the group.

**Self-identity.** Diligence in what one does or does not do; heavily influenced by customs and traditions, beliefs, and ultimately how individuals view themselves (Bachman & Bachman, 2009, December).

**Traditional bonds.** As referenced by Tahar Haddad, a Tunisian Islamic reformer, the term traditional bonds means hindering Islamic women’s progress (Salhi, 2013).

**Gender inequality.** An unequal treatment or view of an individual based solely on their gender (Baumeister & Bushman, 2013).

**Fundamental Rights.** Islam has laid down rights for humanity as a whole, which are to be observed and respected under all circumstances. These basic rights are associated with Islamic faith and belief because they are perceived as divinely ordained. As a result, fundamental rights in Islam are considered to be the equivalent of mandatory religious obligations, meaning that it is obligatory for every Muslim to protect them and restore them if they are violated (Ramadan, 2006).

**Da’wah.** The level of involvement by Muslims in understanding and following Shari’a. Translated in Arabic means to invite. There are two dimensions: external and internal. External da’wah is to invite non-Muslims to Islam, while internal da’wah, as
referenced in this study, is to teach Muslims about aspects of Islam. For example, Islamic fundamental rights based on Islamic Law (Ramadan, 2006).

**Hadith.** Literally means Tradition. It is often described as the second set of scriptures in Islam (second only to the Qur’an). The extent to which participants are influenced by traditional beliefs (Ramadan, 2006).

**Ijtihad.** An interpretive technique in Islamic law that may aid reformers in advancing women’s rights within Islamic states; it is resolving an Islamic legal issue through personal thought and reflection (Hursh, 2012).

**Ummah.** A community that shares specific religious beliefs or the degree to which participants share the same Islamic beliefs (Ramadan, 2006).

(Ramadan, 2006).

**Shari’a.** The moral religious code as understood in a particular region by Muslims. It is essentially the degree to which a particular group of Muslims comply with Islamic Law as outlined by what is written in the Holy Qur’an (Sunni) (Ramadan, 2006).

**Taqlid.** Following precedence (Barazangi, 2000).

**Maktab.** Islamic elementary school (Ramadan, 2006).

**Madrasa.** A school or college, often attached to a mosque, where young men study (Ramadan, 2006).

**Theoretical and/or Conceptual Framework**

**Theoretical framework.** There are few theories of identity development that are specific to Muslim women pursuing higher education (Forgrave, 2010). Because this group of women varies in race and ethnicity, cultural background, and region, the identity literature fails to capture this group in its entirety. As a result, multiple sources were used
to create the theoretical framework for this study. This theoretical view will be referred to as Muslim Women’s Educational Identity Theory. In developing the Muslim Women’s Educational Identity Theory, this researcher looked at themes developed from interview responses as well as three distinct theories: Social identity theory, social group affiliation, and faith identity development.

**Social identity.** Developed by Henri Tajfel and John Turner in 1979, social identity theory was developed “to understand the basis of intergroup discrimination, and has three components: categorization, identification, and comparison” (Chen & Li, 2009, p. 431).

Tajfel and Turner’s (1979) Social Identity Theory was used to investigate Muslim women’s identity formation. Social Identity Theory argues that an individual does not simply have a “personal self”, but multiple “selves” that are reflective of a group membership. Therefore, it is possible for an individual to have several “social identities.” Abes, Jones, and McEwen’s model of multiple dimensions of identity (Abes, Jones, & McEwen, 2007; Jones & McEwen, 2000) further sheds light on how Muslim women may come to view themselves.

**Social group affiliations.** Identity is often established once a group is formed (Worchel et al., 1998), and it is within a group that people conform to the ideas or themes, seeking membership and belongingness. People often struggle when they are involved with more than one group, and must decide with whom they should become affiliated based on similarity and liked interests. It should be noted that group membership or affiliation to groups allows a person to adopt mannerisms and behaviors that are consistent with any identity or stereotype that is attached to the group on the
whole, the group’s overall identity (Chen & Li, 2009). Additionally, belonging or affiliating oneself to a particular social group would enhance in-group relations with other members belonging to the group (Chen & Li, 2009). These concepts of identity formation can be applied to Muslim women belonging to the group that pursues higher education as well.

_Faith identity development model_. Finally, Fowler’s (1981) Faith Identity Development model will be used to view identity development in Muslim women from a faith-based perspective because da’wah— to “invite to something” in Islam, such as inviting someone to submit to the will of Allah— plays a major part in the identity formation of Muslim women.

**Context of the Study**

This study included participants with varying ethnicities and cultural backgrounds.

**Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations**

**Assumptions.**

1. Participants’ lived experiences are the central characteristic of this study.
2. Participants have formed their own opinions and realities.
3. All of the participants saw a need for gender equality in Islam.
4. Participants’ responses were open and honest.

**Limitations.** The Islamic religion in-and-of-itself is all too often misunderstood and held accountable for the unacceptable treatment of women. Rasheed Ali and Bagheri (2009) found that although the rates of Islamic student populations have steadily increased, those students face marginalization, racism, and misunderstandings. Rasheed
Ali and Bagheri (2009) did not determine in that study the percentage of those students that were women and whether gender, traditions, or laws, as they influence identity development, played a role in those outcomes. Limitations to this research include the following:

1. May not allow for understanding concepts such as Islamic traditions that are specific to particular cultures
2. Difficult to determine the truthfulness of respondents
3. Respondents may “forget” things
4. Respondents may interpret questions differently
5. Important data “may” be missed if participants fail to respond or respond inaccurately for fear of retaliation or exposure

**Delimitations.** Although this study mentions the educational right of women based on Qur’anic interpretations, it is not a purely Qur’an-based study. Therefore, this researcher only discusses the findings in this study with no claim to a global trend. As a result, this study does not make the claim that findings are applicable to all Muslim women, but rather makes a generalization to Muslim women in higher education alone.

Additionally, although this researcher is a Muslim male, bias, in this instance, is limited by discussing identity and the bias-related issues of women and education based solely on empirical data that explores identity, gender, and education, as opposed to exploring the male voice on the topic.
Summary

Muslim women develop their identities very differently based on cultural inhibitors such as gender bias, traditional beliefs, and Shari’a. Considering the lack of research specific to this population, this study explored the development of their identities as it affects their decisions to pursue higher education.

Developing a sense of identity is important for college students (Chickering, 1969; Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Erikson, 1968). Gender specific identity development theory will be critical in understanding how Muslim women’s identity influences their pursuit of higher education. Moreover, by having participants’ share their lived experiences, the researcher will be able to increase awareness and develop programs that promote educational pursuit for Muslim women.

The manner in which identity influences the pursuit of higher education for Muslim women will be critical in advancing their awareness and educational status as compared to their non-Muslim peers and to Muslim men as well.

Overview of the Dissertation

This study examined the experiences of Muslim women pursuing higher education. In order to gain an accurate understanding of those experiences, this researcher explored their backgrounds and how they experienced their identity development in relation to its effect on the pursuit of higher education. Participants shared their stories and this researcher made meaning of how they perceive their identity as affecting educational pursuit.

In the subsequent chapters, this researcher discusses the lived experiences of six Muslim women (six undergraduate/graduate students) in South Florida. Chapter two
reviews the related literature that discusses gender bias, traditional beliefs, Shari’a, and identity, as well as Muslim women in education. In chapter three, this researcher discusses the research methodology. The purpose for phenomenological research and details of how this study conforms to that approach are detailed. Additionally, this researcher explains the particular methods selected for this research. In chapter four of this dissertation, the meaning of participants’ lived experiences are presented, and finally, chapter five provides the researcher’s conclusions, implications, and recommendations. This includes a discussion of awareness programs designed to increase the rates of higher educational pursuit by Muslim women.
CHAPTER 2
REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Introduction

Several journals, books, and online sources were used to explore identity and Muslim women's right to education versus traditional and cultural inhibitors. For example, Shah (2010) provides in-depth interpretations of the Qur'an, and a clear understanding of the Qur'an was necessary for the researcher to understand the concept of the male as head of the household as well as educator for the family. This interpretation also helped the researcher better understand the religious beliefs that help to form the identity of Islamic women and whether that belief system could hinder their pursuit of higher education.

In addition to developing an understanding of the Qur'an, the researcher looked at the statistical data available on Muslim women. The Human Development Reports (2004), UNESCO Institute of Statistics (2008), Amin (2000), Bagher (2006), Mazawi (2010) and the US Library of Congress (2010) were used solely for the purpose of examining statistical data. Spring (2009, Chapter 6) was explored to give the researcher a more rounded picture of religious educational models: This chapter provided a foundation by which the researcher could gauge all of the other models explored in the literature for this study. In addition to having a basic understanding of religious educational models, the researcher also needed to understand the stereotypes and literacy challenges for Islamic women. Greany (2008) discusses, in depth, both stereotypes and literacy in the Sudan, while Khachan (2009) provides a true picture of the literacy challenges in Egypt. Both discuss theories of cultural norms and traditional beliefs.
affecting decision-making. This directly ties to the argument that identity influences how one acts and what one does.

Bishai (2008) and Teffara & Altbach (2003) explore the social factors associated with university attendance and how recent legislation has provided a platform to increase the voice of women in education. Teffara & Altbach (2003) also give a clear overview of African Higher Education across the entire African continent. By looking at higher education across the African Continent, this researcher was able to determine that issues of identity were more important in areas such as the Sudan and Egypt when compared with countries such as South Africa and the United States, where matters of identity appear to play a less vital role in Islamic women’s pursuit of higher education. Also having great bearing on the research was the discussion of the structure of women in education in Islamic-based higher education systems (Levtzion, 2000 & Maslak 2008).

While Grabska and Mehta (2008) support Bishai’s claims, they argue further that those practices lead to exile and displacement. They discuss, in detail, the bearing of customs against the right to education as afforded to women through legislation and Islam itself. The article by Cochran (2008) does the same, but is specific to Egypt. It details Egypt’s political, economic, social, and cultural history as compared to modern policies, etc. Hefner and Qasim Zaman (2007) provide further data on Islamic Education from both a cultural and political perspective. In particular, they address the issue of Muslim schools being accessible to men and less accessible to women. Hamdy (2007) supports the claim of the researcher here by detailing Islamic educational traditions as hindering opportunity for Islamic women.
The article written by Walker-Delhouse, et. al. (2009) was particularly useful to this research because it examined literacy and religious concerns by Sudanese women that had fled their homeland in defiance of its educational and cultural policies that they felt were too slow to change. Whether these women had formed a new identity is uncertain at this point. This researcher was also able to explore articles by Grabska & Mehta (2008) and Perry (2009) to further clarify the outcry of Islamic women who have begun to turn their backs on the only cultures they have ever known, in essence sacrificing their families, beliefs, and identities for a greater chance at higher education.

Research outlined in the report by El-Safty (2004) proved most important to this research. The report details the rights of Islamic women granted by Islam, government, and cultural norms and traditions. These rights are also detailed by Adamson (2001), with particular references to passages from the Qur’an and that those verses, as observed, give the right to higher education to men and not to women. Also referenced in the body of this paper is the discussion of the slow rate of progress for women (Shields, 1991).

**Muslim Women in Higher Education**

Buckner (2013) mentions that in Egypt, higher education is now more readily accessible to those in both the public and private sectors, which has implications not only for how many students attend, but also who attends, and the area of study they pursue. Previous studies also indicate that access to higher education in Egypt is biased against the poor, but expansion will most likely make education accessible to more individuals from differing socioeconomic backgrounds (Buckner, 2013). In his study on access to higher education in Egypt, Buckner (2013) suggests that gender is an important predictor for enrollment, which could in a sense influence where students attend university, either
in the public or private sectors, and that women have begun to pursue higher education at an increased rate (2013). Buckner’s (2013) article is useful to this research and to international and comparative education as a whole as it outlines the varied types of educational systems that are available in Arab countries and how understanding these systems could mean improvements for Muslim women.

Cook (2011) also looks at education in Egypt, and reports that Egypt’s educational development strategies cannot be realized without recognizing the critical role religion and culture play. Additionally, misinterpretations of Islam have added to the problems associated with education in Egypt (Cook, 2011). He specifically states, that if one were to “reduce Egypt’s educational development to a mechanical exercise in rational planning without fully recognizing its religious and cultural dimensions would be incomplete; and the conflicting visions and interpretations of Islam in Egypt have thus created ambiguity in the country’s educational system” (p. 379). Cook’s study included a sample of 227 male and 154 female university students in Cairo, questioning how they felt about the role Islam has in higher education. Respondents felt that the educational system in Egypt took on a Westernized model with little education on Islam itself. This was problematic because they felt that their education is enhanced when Islam is incorporated into instruction. Cook’s study also looked closely at the relationship between education and religion in Islamic states. Because of the sensitivity of the discussion, Cook ensured anonymity to the participants so they could be free to express their views on the higher education in Egypt without repercussions.

Findings of this study indicate that in Egypt, the educational system may have destabilizing effects on the overall development and cultural identity in the country
Iravani’s (2012) aim in her study is geared towards explaining what happens when women are given access to certain resources – when they are able to “achieve feminist goals” (p.286). They would be able to challenge gender relations as it applies to economic, political, social and cultural life in countries at all agency levels. Middle Eastern women are often viewed as the accepting lower socioeconomic conditions than their male counterparts. Increasingly, however, many of these women resist the differential treatment they are given when it comes to financial and custody rights (Iravani, 2012). In fact, traditional middle-class women in Iran had to endure backlash from the men when the modernization of Islamic values between pro-West development and traditional Shia Islam ideologies began to clash; the men thought modernization and Western influence was inappropriate for their women (Iravani, 2012). Women were now torn between upholding the values of the traditional family and a society that promoted Western values from which they were being subjected, to receiving little or no education and holding menial jobs in the workplace in comparison to the men (Iravani, 2012).

Iravani (2012) states that women’s progress in employment in most cases is not due to a lack of education or interest, but because women are forced to stay at home and take care of their children. This article identifies considerations of rights versus traditions for the Muslim women in Iran in pursuing education.

Khattak’s (2009) research identifies a disparity in the different levels of gender equality that are present in Pakistan and will help create an area for future research in
regards to this issue. The article explores female higher education and seeks to investigate the factors that are affecting the low levels of participation in higher education in Pakistan.” (p. 102). There are three aims to the research: “to explore the degree of the factors that causes low participation of women in higher education to scrutinize the dominant factors; to judge the validity of the existing factors recognized to be responsible for gender discrimination in the Pakistan society; and to examine the best available conceptual framework that describes and analyses defining gender issues in higher education” (p. 102). Additionally, the article mentions that the Quran does not support gender discrimination when it comes to education, although it is often interpreted in that manner (Kata, 2009). Kata (2009) seeks to understand why women have lower rates of attendance in higher education and to examine the factors that hinder their attendance. Kata (2009) suggests that the missing key in feminist theory about higher education, in this case Pakistan, is the failure of the feminists to look at the role of higher education to women in this region. As per Kata (as cited by Friedan, 2003), it was believed that “the ‘feminine mystique’ prevented women from leading successful public lives, and the education system was partly to blame for the ideology of the feminine mystique” (2009, p. 105).

Lin (2011) takes a different approach and states that, even though one of the primary functions of higher education is to prepare citizens to become leaders, not enough women have access to higher education. Lin’s study seeks to investigate, through the views of undergraduate students, the factors that affect women pursuing graduate degrees (2011). Lin (2011) uses surveys and semi-structured interviews with nineteen (19) respondents who were female undergraduates, recruited from one public and two
private universities (p. 518). All students were selected purposefully from three specific fields of study – humanities/social sciences, management, and engineering/technology (p. 519). She collected data from her sample for a period of six months, from January 2008 to June 2008, when she was conducting the face-to-face semi-structured interviews which were tape-recorded and transcribed then coded in accordance with the research themes of women’s aspirations for graduate education and the factors that would contribute to those aspirations (pp. 518-519).

Her study found that many of the undergraduate students viewed college as simply a basic qualification for getting a job (Lin, 2011). Respondents viewed college as a basic qualification for career development (p. 520). Some limitations to the study involved the sample used, which was far from an accurate representation of Taiwan’s female undergraduate population, and the data generated from the study was time consuming, which prevented the author from working on a larger group of people for the study (p. 519). Moreover, Lin (2011) suggests that although women have benefited from globalization higher education, for graduate studies, they continue to enroll at lower rates than men. Her research is significant as it sheds light on some of the issues women consider to be hindrances to educational pursuit based on family traditions.

The ways in which adults learn is also important to beginning to understand Muslim women in higher education. Madsen & Cook (2010) define transformative learning as the way in which adults learn by making meaning of their experience but, questions whether they truly understand the information that is being disseminated.

In Arab societies, higher education for women is fairly new. This is because, traditionally, many of the women were married off at an early age or received little to no
education (Madsen & Cook, 2010). Madsen & Cook (2010) also mention that the limited research on the perceptions of women in higher education may make it difficult to design or develop programs that would meet these developmental needs. For many young women, “higher education is sometimes their only hope to obtain the preparation they may need to work outside of home and professionally to contribute to their communities” (p. 131). Madsen & Cook (2010) used “an online quantitative survey to explore student perceptions of transformative learning” and developed two research questions: “are individuals, learning assignments and activities, and specific outside opportunities or activities predictors of the transformative learning perceptions and experiences of female college students in Abu Dhabi; and, are any demographic variable predictors of the transformative learning process these students experience while at the college?” (p. 134). The majority of the participants between the ages of 20-25 believed they went through a transformative learning phase and learning activities and assignments helped in the transformation. Five primary limitations in using transformative learning were found: “some of the students who were invited to take the survey did not and many who started did not complete; transformative learning can be influenced by variables not measured in the study; conclusions of the study are based on self-reported data; results of the study can be generalized only to the applicable population within the institution surveyed; and, although the results were reviewed by a number of Arab speakers, further refining of the results should be done before used by other researchers” (p. 144). Madsen & Cook (2010) conclude by stating that the impact transformative learning has on women in college in this region could affect them on a global scale and recommends further research that seeks to understand how to best educate Muslim women.
Part of that understanding is discussed by Tehran (2009), who mentions that in Iran, Islamic rule has noticeably changed the lives of women, especially in an educational aspect—with measures like restricting co-education of students before the university level, enforcing practices for women to adhere to, and restricting unmarried women from studying outside of the country (Tehran, 2009).

Tehran (2009) attempts to show how increasing the rates of participation for females in higher education institutions in Iran is merely a reflection of theoretical views on gender equality. The Longwe’s study (as cited by Tehran, 2009), which uses the women’s empowerment framework, identifies the status of women in higher education and provides data that compares the male experience. Tehran (2009) uses the women’s empowerment framework to establish equality between genders from the “male-female” perspective (p. 546). Tehran (2009) believes that social interaction and increased equality between genders could aid researchers in understanding how Iranians view women in higher education.

**Gender Inequality**

The cultural and religious reproduction of gender socialization is the major point of analysis used by Hamdan’s (2006) study. Nine women, aged nineteen to fifty-five, were studied and represented a certain rebellion against the cultural norms of Arab Muslim natives. Some of the women chose to stay in the Western culture to pursue their higher education while their family remained in the Middle East. It was found that education systems and teachers play a significant role in reinforcing rather than challenging prevalent gender ideologies. Additionally, some of the women felt indebted to their education in the Western culture, because they learned to be outspoken, and
question the ascribed gender roles that Arab nations generally lay out for Muslim women. Hamdan (2006) concludes by looking at three significant and constant premises that were noticed around the interviewees’ perceptions: “the connection made to the Islamic teaching about women as the authentic source of guidance in Arab Muslims lives and more specifically to their gender perceptions; the cultural construction of what it means to be a woman; and, the way Arab Muslim women value education and are enabled to negotiate gender discourses as a result of education” (p. 62). Hamdan’s (2006) review of cultural tradition versus religion in this study is very useful as it examined some of the cultural traditions governing Arab Muslim societies where women are seen as subordinates. Additionally, the article looks closely at Islamic teaching in the Qur’an that emphasizes the importance of education and encourages women’s participation in all public spheres.

**Traditions**

Noureen & Awan’s (2011) study seeks “to understand the importance of education for women in Pakistan society and examine the barriers and obstacles to higher education for women” (p. 80). A case study was used to identify the barriers that hinder women from attending higher education: poverty, dowry, social norms and early marriages to name a few. The study was used to explore ways in which “higher education brings change in women’s lives, and provides confirmatory evidence that education plays an important role in the life of women and years of education directly influence the women’s life” (p. 80). Noureen & Awan (2011) mentions that as a result, “education has been of central significance to the development of human society” (p. 80), and “education enables women to perform gainful social roles and enhance their mobility
in society” (p. 81). Additionally, “women’s education has been strongly linked to current poverty eradication strategies, with gender disparity in primary and secondary education being taken as an indicator of the empowerment needed to overcome the political, social and economic obstacles that have kept women in poverty” (p. 82). Noureen & Awan (2011) states “a gender imbalance continues to be the norm in most academic fields, but social, economic and industrial development can only be achieved through expansion and inclusion of women in higher education” (p. 86). The article is critical to this research because it looks at all the barriers that hinder women’s pursuit of higher education in Islamic countries that have followed tradition over the rights of women and ideals of feminists. Looking at these barriers helped present insight into what is needed to improve the attendance and aspiration of women to pursue higher education.

Hamdan (2006) looked at the topic through a more dedicated lens and focused specifically on the cultural and religious reproduction of gender socialization of Arab Muslim women whose identities may have changed or possibly shifted as a result of living in or attending educational institutions outside of the Arab nations and having to adapt to two different cultures. This article seeks to highlight factors that may influence Arab Muslim women’s gender perceptions, and discuss this group of women as a diverse group shaped by their particular histories and culture.

Sechzer’s (2004) study is unique in that it explores the writings and institutional initiatives of the forty-eight Imams of the Shia Ismaili Muslims with reference to women’s education. The Imams’ approach was different in that they recognized the dignity of women as individuals worthy in and of themselves and not simply due to the function they performed in society, as per other prominent Muslim leaders as women
belonging to the domestic sphere of society. Imam Aga Khan advocated not only for women’s education to promote their socio-economic well-being, but also argued for education as a basic right that could promote inner happiness through intellectual growth. As mentioned in the article, “the Imam recognized that women had the same potential as men, and thus led him to institute a range of reforms for his female followers, which has had some impact on their educational, economic and social progress” (p. 2). It was the Imam’s religious authority that allowed him to pioneer a system of social service agencies for the well-being of the women. “The traditionalist of Islam advocated religious education for Muslim women in so far as it brought women’s religious practices in line with their understanding of Islam and focused on elaborating the correct performance of religion for women” (pp. 3-4). Modernists like the Imam, believed that “a combination of religious and secular education would be essential for the revival of Muslims in India and that Muslims needed to take advantage of western education and familiarize themselves with the social tools needed to function and compete in their environment” (p. 4). This article presents two views that should be looked into further to aid researchers in relation to the rights and traditions of Islam and the education of women.

Rights / Shari’a

Cherif (2010) mentions that countries that are highly characterized by Islamic religious traditions advantages women; and examining the nature of advances of women’s rights in Muslim countries would suggest that Islamic culture does not solely explain the lack of progress for women’s rights. Cherif (2010) study uses cross-national data to examine whether, and to what extent does Islamic culture impede a woman from gaining equal rights which could be promoted by investing in education and helping to
encourage more women to join the labor force. The research focuses on developing
countries because it would be impossible to draw valid generalizations about the impact
of religious culture without sampling both Muslim and non-Muslim and looks at focusing
on seven hypotheses, which include:

- Muslim states privilege Islamic tenets that deprive women of equal citizenship rights;
  states that adopt the Women’s Convention are more likely to promote women’s rights
  than are states that do not; states that establish domestic institutions mandated to
  promote gender equality have greater prospects for achieving equal rights than do states
  that make only international commitments; states pressured by women’s transnational
  networks are likely to have greater respect for women’s rights, and the prospects of
  equal citizenship rights are greater in states with stronger networks; the longer that
  pressure to abide by gender parity norms has been in place, the higher the likelihood
  that states will afford equal rights; states with higher levels of women in the labor force
  afford more equitable citizenship rights; and states with more educated women afford
  more equitable citizenship rights” (p. 1148-1150).

To examine the hypotheses, the author looked at two dependent variables:
inheritance rights and transmission of nationality; and independent variables: treaty,
domestic institution, treaty tenure, institution tenure, advocacy groups, education and
workforce. Cherif (2010) used a sample of 120 developing countries in order to observe how Islam’s norm-building and core rights affect women’s acquisition of equal rights. This concept of equal rights for women in Islamic countries and how they could attain it is critical to this research.

Of equal importance is the investigation of human rights abuses for this particular demographic. Lee (2009) state that because of disregard to human rights many Afghan women are forced to live in fear and terror despite the guarantee that women do have fundamental rights. The women in Afghanistan have fallen victim to discrimination and treated unfairly because many Islamic societies encounter conflict when interpreting the rights of women and that of the Islamic law. Despite equal rights for men and women being written in the 2003 Constitution, Afghan women are not afforded rights equal to men (Lee, 2009). Many women are unaware of their rights under the Afghan Constitution or Islamic law, and even legal professionals are confused about the applicable law because of delays in compilation and dissemination of the law (Lee, 2009). In this study, Lee (2009) concluded that legal reform must happen when framing constitutional laws that are consistent with the Islamic laws, as this would be needed to help rectify or address areas of gender discrimination and violence. This article is relevant to this research because it touches on what so many people have trouble differentiating between, the difference between human rights for women and Islamic rights for women.

Megahed & Lack (2011) concentrate more on middle-eastern culture and examine gender and education in Egypt and Tunisia as compared to the Middle East. If one were to interchange culture and ideology to deal with gender equality and women’s rights in
Arab Muslim countries, it is encouraged to introduce Islamic teachings and local traditions in these regions regarding women’s roles, as well as, incorporate Western colonial perception of women’s rights and looking at current international policy for women’s right.

Because of political and socio-economic transformation in Egypt, the perceptions of women’s roles and rights have changed, shifting them from being a socialist society to a capitalist society, as well as, reemerging the Muslim fundamental way of thinking and living. The article discusses the rights, traditions and practices of Muslim women in the Arab world and the issue of higher education. It is beneficial because it looks at the historical aspects of ideals, values, and norms, and compares the practices of two countries that have ties with the Arab world. It reports the perceptions of this demographic in relation to religion, western influence and education.

Also focusing on the Middle East, Tetreault, Meyer & Rizzo (2009) state that the issue of women’s rights remains “a prominent political and social issue across the Middle East, and it is attracting increasing participation by many women” (p. 218). Tetreault et al., (2009) have focused on the Middle East and doing a longitudinal analysis by using Kuwait as a point of reference to investigate hindrances to education for the women in that region. The emancipation of women that dismantled the traditions and customs for the development of women were introduced by the formation of women organizations that had strong proponents of modernization deeply influenced by Arab nationalist ideology. It is essential to understand that the need for women to contribute to society and the economy is important to improve women rights. Tetreault et al., (2009) conclude their study by recognizing that the struggles of women in Kuwait does identify the gender
dynamics in this region, and the data generated from the study does provide explanation for women’s rights. This article is useful since it presents a study that examines the benefits of women’s rights to society and the need for education of women.

This research also requires some understanding of the Qur’an and its relevance to Muslim women’s pursuit of higher education. Barazangi’s (2000) uses their research in hopes of making contributions towards an educational interpretation of the Qur’an for women and using the cases presented to help create an action plan for the Muslim women to regain their identity. Additionally, the research is trying to identify any discrepancies between the overall Islamic worldview and anything that may have been inherited when looking at the Muslim religious views of education. Islam and education are in a way linked to each other. Islam as a worldview may not be recognized without its pedagogy and education would have no meaning if it does not provoke some change in an individual’s worldview. Barazangi (2000) mentions that Muslim women who are looking for gender justice from a Western point of view may receive some problems, as it does not offer religious nor secular mental emancipation from traditions. Barazangi (2000) tries to shed light on the historical changes of the roles Muslim women were intended to follow as per the Qur’an, and the introduction of Western thought on what is considered the rights of women as it pertains to higher education.

El-Safty (2004) explores the religious aspect and contends that, oftentimes in Egypt, Islam is held accountable for the unequal and violent treatment towards women. The main purpose of the study was to clarify misconceptions regarding Islam in instances where non-Muslims do not understand the practices of Islam that are strongly rooted in tradition. El-Safty (2004) suggest that the true notion female education had emerged in
the 50s when education was available for all citizens, as well as, Islam gives the right to education to women but it was slowly adopted because it contradicted with cultural value that restricted women in the past. El-Safty (2004) attempts with this article to approach the situation of Egyptian women as Muslims that are caught between the rights granted to them by Islam and the actual rights granted to them by humanity (p. 280). It is wrong to blame gender-based practices on Islam because Islam is a humane religion, which El-Safty (2004) identifies non-Muslims as misunderstanding. This article brings to light the debate between the rights of women that non-Muslims focus on that often restricts women from engaging in some of the same activities as men. It is important for any researcher to be able to differentiate between the rights of religion and the rights of women in Islam.

With religious interpretations such as those discussed by Barazangi (2000) and El-Safty (2004) comes a measure of misconceptions. Syed (2008) aims to “clarify some misconceptions in the West about the Islamic faith by presenting the position that Islam takes on human rights issues, and by exploring the practicing Muslim’s perspective and experiences of being a Muslim in the Western world” (p. 245). Syed (2008) uses “experiential narratives from a Muslim born woman and a Canadian woman who converted to Islam” as a way to emphasize “the similarities between the human rights in Islam and the United Nations (UN)” (p. 245). Syed (2008) mentions that, education is a human right that is not only misunderstood by non-Muslims, but misconception also lies with Muslims. Prophet Muhammad viewed education as something that was mandatory for every Muslim – men and women alike. To compare the rights of Islam and the United Nations, Syed (2008) mentions that traditional Islam encourages Muslims to seek
knowledge continuously, while the UN states that every person has the right to pursue knowledge; the magnitude of human rights issues in Islam is an ongoing issue that people need to explore, especially in the West, the authentic texts of the Qur’an and Hadith to gain insights into the rights of Muslim women. The article looks at the views of Muslim women who have been introduced to Western culture and their views on higher education, which is helpful to use women in the United States who are Muslim to find out their views on higher education and the challenge of rights versus traditions in the faith.

Summary

In order to provide a clear definition of identity, Tajfel & Turner (1979), Damasio (2000, 2010), Rise, Sheeran & Hukkelberg (2010), and Bachman & Bachman (2009, December) are referenced. Additionally, the researcher discusses several opposing views to Tajfel and Turner’s (1979) theory of social identity (Bem, 1974, 1981, 1993, and Mendaglio, 2008), and possible solutions as detailed by Shah (2010) are explored. Finally, the effect of identity on motivation was discussed in the research of Hardy (2005).
CHAPTER 3
METHODOLOGY

Introduction

Chapter three outlines the phenomenological research process used in conducting this study, the research questions, the methodology used in the study, and details on how this study will conform to that approach.

**Phenomenology.** Moustakas (1994), often considered the founder of phenomenology, believed that research needs to accurately reflect the heart of participants’ experiences (Chiari & Nuzzo, 1996).

In order for an individual to be certain about a particular thing, the researcher would need to ignore anything that is external to their experiences. Thus, their perceived realities should be treated as untainted “phenomena” and the only unconditional data to be explored. Phenomenology is the science of “pure phenomena” (Eagleton, 1983, p. 55).

According to Christensen, Johnson, and Turner (2010) phenomenological studies should explain the lived experiences of the participants in a study. It should be focused around a specific phenomenon and not deviate from that. In this type of study, the researcher makes an attempt to comprehend the behavior(s) of the individual or group being studied as it is seen through their eyes. Phenomenology focuses on a phenomenon rather that starting with theory.

The diligence of phenomenological research was examined by Pereira (2012) and his conclusion was that “to be judged valid, a phenomenological study must take into consideration methodological congruence (rigorous and appropriate procedures) and
This phenomenological study describes the shared perceptions and lived experiences of the relationship between identity formation and the pursuit of higher education for Muslim women. The phenomenon that was investigated is educational identity.

Table 1 outlines Moustakas' phenomenological research design that was used in carrying out the phenomenological research process for this study (some steps omitted as there is a single researcher in this instance):

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Phenomenological Processes</strong></th>
<th><strong>Outline Summary of the Phenomenological Model Processes</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Phenomenological Reduction</strong></td>
<td>Brackening the Topic or Question</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Horizontalization: Every statement has equal value</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Vary Possible Meanings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Individual Textual Descriptions: An integration, descriptively, of the invariant textural constituents and themes of each research participant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Imaginative Variation</strong></td>
<td>Vary Perspectives of the Phenomenon: From different vantage points, such as opposite meanings and various roles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Construct a list of structural qualities of the experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Develop Structural Themes: cluster the structural qualities into themes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Synthesis of composite Textural and Composite Structural Descriptions</strong></td>
<td>Intuitively-reflectively integrate the composite textural and composite structural descriptions to develop a synthesis of the meanings and essences of the phenomenon or experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Epoche</strong></td>
<td>Setting aside prejudgments and opening the research interview with an unbiased,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Preparing to Collect Data</strong></td>
<td>receptive presence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Formulate the question:</strong> Define terms of question</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Conduct literature review and determine original nature of study</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Develop criteria for selecting participants:</strong> Establish contract, obtain informed consent, insure confidentiality, agree to place and time commitments, and obtain permission to record and publish</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Develop instructions and guiding questions or topics needed for the phenomenological research interview</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Collecting Data</strong></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Engage in the Epoche process as a way of creating an atmosphere and rapport for conducting the interview</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Bracket the question</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Conduct the qualitative research interview to obtain descriptions of the experience.</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Organizing, Analyzing, and Synthesizing Data</strong></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Follow modified van Kaam method (See Appendix B)</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Summary, Implications, and Outcomes</strong></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Summarize entire study</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Relate study findings to and differentiate from findings of literature review</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Relate study to possible future research and develop an outline for a future study</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Relate study to personal outcomes</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Relate study to professional outcomes</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Relate study to social meanings and relevance</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Offer closing comments: Researcher’s future direction and goals</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note, Adopted from Moustakas (1994, p. 180-182)*

**Pilot Study**

In order for the researcher to show the rigor in which the study was conducted and to validate the phenomenological methods to be used, a pilot study was conducted upon gaining the approval of the Institutional Review Board (IRB). The goals of the pilot study were to validate the dimensions of identity to be investigated.
Two Muslim women attending a South Florida College participated in the pilot. Participants were given a dimensions of identity form with 12 dimensions of identity and asked to write about each dimension that they felt contributed to the development of their identity. The dimensions included; race, class, gender, sexuality, laws, personal values, traditions, sense of belonging, Islamic sect, culture, language, and physical state.

Research Questions

The questions that the researcher asked to guide the study were:

1) What is the experience of gender in Muslim women’s identity formation?
2) What is the experience of traditional beliefs in Muslim women’s identity formation?
3) What is the experience of Islamic laws in Muslim women’s identity formation, and
4) What is the nature of the relationship between Muslim women’s identity and their pursuit of higher education?

Access

This researcher ensured that there was continuous access to participants throughout the research process. In any qualitative research, such as this phenomenological approach, access is vital in continuing and subsequently completing the study. Glesne (1999) discusses access as the steps that a researcher must undergo, including interviews and focus groups, and the gathering of any relevant documentation. This researcher began the access process by applying for approval of the study from the IRB. Once the study was approved, and in accordance with IRB guidelines, the purpose and procedures for the study were explained to the participants in the study.
Description of Population and/or Sample

This researcher communicated with several campus-based Muslim associations (both student and Employee groups) to select participants. This study was not conducted at multiple sites; however, participants were selected from several South Florida colleges/universities.

Criterion sampling was used to select six Muslim women (3 Muslim attending college and 3 professors) for participation in this study. Because this researcher sought to investigate identity formation and the effects on the pursuit of education by Muslim women, specific criteria were set. Criterion sampling involves the selection of participants based on them meeting a predetermined set of criteria (Patton, 2002).

Criteria for participation included the following:

1. Sex: Six females participated in the study.
2. Education Level: Three college/university students and three college/university professors
3. Religion: All participants were Muslim.
4. Age: Between 18-45 years of age

Exclusion criteria included any potential participant not meeting the criteria specified (e.g., males, non-Muslims, and that have not pursued higher education).

Setting of the Study

Participants were selected from universities in South Florida; participants considered for inclusion in the study attended Lynn University, Nova University, Florida Atlantic University, and Florida International University. Because of the size and
demographic makeup of the four universities, the researcher expected to be able to obtain the desired sample size.

**Research Design**

This is a qualitative study that was ethnographically designed to explore the relationship between gender bias, traditions, Shari’a, and their effect on identity formation in relation to higher education pursuits by Muslim women. Additionally, because the variables, in this instance, were studied exactly as they exist – without any manipulation to the control – this study is non-experimental in design.

**Data Collection**

Before conducting the focus group, as well as the initial interview for each participant, this researcher dispersed and collected the following items from the participants in the study:

- Demographic Questionnaire form
- Dimensions of Identity Worksheet
- Research Subject Information and Consent Form

Initially, participants were administered a brief survey that captured their demographic information; however, it should be noted that surveys were used solely for that purpose and that demographic data may be important for future research. A focus group, interviews, and the dimensions of identity worksheets were used as the data sources for measuring the phenomenon identified by this researcher. With the data collected, this researcher was able to determine whether the participants as a whole felt that identity affects the pursuit of higher education for Muslim women.

**Surveys.** Questions that were included in the survey are:
a. Age:

b. What is your ethnicity?

c. What is your religious affiliation?

d. What is your country of birth?
   
a. If you were born outside of the Continental United States, how long have you resided in the United States?

e. What city/state do you currently reside in?

f. What generation of college student are you?

g. What is your current year in college?
   
a. For college professors, please indicate your position/department:

h. What is your current major?
   
a. For college professors, please indicate your area of expertise:

i. Marital Status (optional):

j. Please circle one: Sunni Shiite Other

Focus Group. The focus group, consisting of one undergraduate Muslim woman, one graduate Muslim woman, and one female Muslim college professor, took place three days following the deadline for submission of all forms to the researcher (a one-week turnaround was allowed once forms were provided to participants). Participants in the focus group were separate from interview participants. Focus groups are an interview method that captures the communications between participants in a research study in order to generate data. Although this method is used to capture data from several participants concurrently, it specifically uses group interactions as a part of the
methodology. Therefore, rather than the researcher simply asking the participants to take turns answering the research question(s), participants engage in group talk, responding and questioning each other about the research question. The researcher’s role as this took place was to facilitate the focus group, rather than to guide the focus group. It was essential for this researcher to begin to be able to determine not only participants’ lived experiences regarding the research topic, but also why they interpret those experiences in the manners that they do. Discussion topics developed during the focus group were transferred to the interviews in the form of targeted questions.

**Interviews.** A series of three interviews, as recommended by Seidman (2006) was conducted with the six female Muslim participants. While participants in this study had some commonalities, some of their experiences were expected to be very different; because of this, varied levels of trust needed to be established. A semi-structured interview style was used when necessary, so that responses were more specific to the study and not too broad in scope. Maxwell (2005) wrote: “Unstructured approaches, in contrast [to structured], allow you to focus on the particular phenomena being studied, which may differ from others and require individually tailored methods” (p. 22).

This approach was critical to the study because Islam has varied traditions. Although Islam itself is a unified and uncompromised religion, traditions can be very different based on sects (See figure 5) that are often specific to particular regions. In light of this, this researcher needed to vary approaches to each participant while maintaining the focus as outlined for this study.
Interview/Focus Group Procedures

The interviews were conducted in the same manner as the focus group, with the exception that the focus group consisted of two participants involved in open discussion. This researcher facilitated, but did not interfere with or attempt to influence the responses/discussion during either process.

With permission from participants, this researcher audio-recorded the focus group and interviews. Each interviewee was assigned an identifier (code) comprised of a unique digit identifying the participant as well as a date and time stamp for each interview. An example of the identifier would be (FAU/F001/15Dec2014/21:42). This
example indicates the interviewee, interview number, and date and time of the interview.

The researcher continually checked the recording device throughout the process to ensure functionality and conducted the interviews in a location with limited background noise and distraction. Any notes taken during these processes were reviewed immediately following interviews (field notes). Field notes are considered “a step toward data analysis” (Morgan, 1997, pp. 57-58), and because they require interpretation, they are “part of the analysis rather than the data collection” (Morgan, 1997, pp. 57-58).

While taking notes, this researcher was mindful that it is the perceptions of the interviewees (experiences) that are key and thus, refrained from predetermining meaning. This researcher only recorded the following types of notes:

1. Observational notes (ON) – Notes on sensory actions deemed important. (Caelli, 2001; Miles and Huberman, 1984).

2. Methodological notes (MN) – Simple reminders of procedures or “notes to self” about the process. (Caelli, 2001; Miles and Huberman, 1984).

The question that was answered during the first interview is:

How would you describe your social identity?

Given the nature of the research and that the researcher is a Muslim male, it was important to build a level of trust and comfort with participants. Therefore, the first question was open-ended and designed to capture participants’ responses while allowing for that level of comfort to build. Subsequent questions were intentionally more specific and aligned to the research questions.

The second interview was designed to more specifically narrow those experiences by attempting to remove participants’ opinions and capture what they actually are doing
or have done, discuss relationships and their relevance and then to have participants be
able to mentally recreate and tell those experiences.

The questions that were answered during the second interview were:

1. How would you describe the effect of gender roles on the development of your
   identity?
2. How would you describe the effect of traditional beliefs on the development of
   your identity?
3. How would you describe the effect of laws (Shari’a) on the development of your
   identity?

The third interview elicited a consideration of why those experiences are of
importance to them and what meaning(s) are resultant from the expressed experiences. In
the third and final interview, intellectual and emotional relevance to the discussion
topic(s) were faded as much as possible. The actual question asked during the third
interview is:

Considering what you have shared with me over the course of our interviews, how
do you comprehend your experience regarding your identity formation and
subsequent pursuit of higher education?

Seidman (2006) cautions that if any of the three interviews begin to move in a
direction other than what is intended, re-direction should be employed immediately to
bring the discussion back to topic. He follows that a proper way to validate the
participants’ perceptions would be to conduct the interviews over a minimum of three
and a maximum of seven days. Also, if there are severe variations in a participant’s
renditions, consider that they may simply be experiencing some external but immediate
problems at that time. However, if their perceptions share a common tone, those experiences should be validated.

In addition to using re-direction, Seidman (2006) suggests that the researcher should listen on three levels (page 78):

1. To what is actually being stated by the participant to internalize the meaning
2. Look for the intent and pay attention to terminology
3. Remain on schedule and make note of non-verbal cues

Additionally, in conducting the interview, the researcher should (pp. 81-93):

1. Engage in turn-taking conversation with the participant, but refrain from leading the participant’s responses to questioning. For example, “What was it like for you?”
2. Takes immediate notes on possible follow-up questions, but be mindful not to stop the participant from speaking to do so.
3. Probe for examples.
4. Request that participants recreate experiences.
5. Ask for details.
6. The researcher should limit their own personal experiences and opinions.
7. Keep an open ear: Do not take an opinion pro or con.
8. Do not attempt to “fill in information” for the participant. Be patient and just listen.

Instrumentation

Since qualitative data collecting is considered a narrative form of research, this method was applicable in finding answers for the research questions by soliciting
responses that would produce accurate and relevant data for the study – based on participants’ perceptions.

Questionnaires are tools that present a way of collecting data from a large group; however, it should be noted that questionnaires were used solely for capturing demographic information. This may be important for future research.

**Data Analysis**

Results from the focus group, interviews, and the dimensions of identity worksheet were transcribed to identify trends, relationships and patterns that were generated from this sample for the purpose of answering the research questions. This researcher was then able to funnel the amount of data collected into smaller, more manageable sets of information.

**Ethical Considerations**

**Bias.** Although this researcher is a Muslim male, this study limited the researcher bias in this instance by discussing self-identity and the bias-related issues of women and education based solely on empirical data that explores identity, gender, and education, as opposed to exploring the male voice on the topic. This researcher also discussed opposing studies on the topic in the body of the research to provide the reader with alternative views on the topic.

**Truthfulness.** Additionally, it was very important for the researcher to accurately transcribe all data collected to answer the research questions that were developed for the study and to be careful not to minimize, distort, oversimplify, or misinterpret the data (Mertler, 2012), as that may have negatively affected the validity of the results, and to be
certain that the relationships identified truly reflected what they were intended to represent in participants’ responses.

**Monitoring Subjects and Criteria for Withdrawal of Subjects from the Study.** Participants were afforded the right to revoke their permission to use and disclose information at any time throughout the research process. They were given the option to do so by providing the researcher with a written request to withdraw/revoke. In the event that a participant withdrew/revoked consent, no new information would have been gathered; however, participants were informed that previously gathered data could still be used.

Participation in this study was voluntary. Participants could decide not to participate or to leave the study at any time. Their decision would not have resulted in any penalty or loss of benefits to which they were entitled (if any). Participation could be closed at any time by the researcher without participants’ consent for any reason, including:

- when it appeared to be in their best interest;
- they failed to consent to participate after receiving a notice of changes to the study.

**Evaluation of Benefits and Risks/Discomforts.** The benefits outweighed the risks for this study. In order to improve the status of Muslim women in higher education, more needs to be known about their identity formation and reasons for pursuing higher education. By investigating college-aged participants’ perceptions of the manner(s) in which identity influenced their decision to pursue higher education, this researcher will be able to develop awareness programs that have a positive influence on identity development and promote social change in higher education for Muslim women.
There were no foreseen economic, physical, mental, emotional, or psychological risks that would result from participation in this study. Some participants may have momentarily been hesitant to answer specific questions. Therefore, they were advised in the consent form that if they felt any discomfort in responding to a specific question, they should inform the researcher immediately.

**Adverse Event Reporting and Data Monitoring.** The participants were informed that their participation in the research process would be temporarily or permanently suspended in the event that an adverse event occurred and that the reasons for stoppage would be documented in a report and the report submitted to the IRB explaining the circumstances. Furthermore, in the event that any unforeseen/adverse events took place, the researcher would inform the IRB, in writing, of the event and any proposed solutions to alleviate the adversity.

To ensure the safety of subjects, all data collected was stored in a locked file at the researcher’s office and only the researcher has access to those files. This procedure was followed throughout the research process and data will be kept for a minimum of five years following the end of the study.

**Consent and Assent Procedures and Documents.** Informed consent was provided to participants via United States (US) mail, electronic mail, or by facsimile. Prior to the consent form being sent to a potential participant, the purpose for the study as well as a full description of the methods used in conducting the study were discussed or provided in writing (all of these are detailed in the consent form). Two signatures were required from participants – One signature was required for consent to audio-recording and a second signature was required for participation/acknowledgement of all contents.
contained in the consent document. Once consent was signed and received by this researcher, the researcher signed in acknowledgement and returned a signed copy of the consent to the participant (either via US mail, electronic mail, or by facsimile). All consent forms received were securely stored with forms used for the purposes of the study and any recordings, etc. used in the collection of data or in carrying out the purposes of the study.

This study did not involve any non-English speaking subjects and no minors were selected for participation; therefore, no assent procedures were necessary in this instance. Additionally, no waiver for short form, oral consent, or alteration was applicable to this study and was not requested by the researcher. Finally, there were no vulnerable subjects (as defined by the IRB) participating in this research study.

Participant's names and any other demographic data are withheld from reporting in the findings resulting from this research. This was also detailed in the consent form required for participation in the study. Participants were informed (within the body of the consent document) that demographic data may be used in furthering this research.

Quality of Data

Trustworthiness. This researcher ensured credibility by guaranteeing that an accurate depiction of the phenomenon being investigated was presented, presents the data in a manner that allows other researchers to duplicate/further the study and, for the reader to decide if the findings can be applied to another similar setting. Finally, this researcher presents only the data that results from the phenomenon being studied, and not from personal predilections.
Triangulation. Fraenkel, Wallen, and Hyun, (2012) state that,

"Denzin (1978) and Jick (1979) both have been credited with applying the term triangulation to research methods. Triangulation (or, more precisely, methodological triangulation) involves using different methods and/or types of data to study the same research question. If the results are in agreement, they help validate the finding of each. Denzin used triangulation when he utilized multiple data sources to study the same phenomenon. Jick discussed the use of triangulation within a single method (quantitative or qualitative) and across methods (both quantitative and qualitative). He noted how the strengths of one method could offset the weaknesses of another.

Interviews, focus group transcripts, and a dimensions of identity worksheet were the methods used to triangulate the data in this study.

Delimitations

This study discusses the educational rights of Muslim women; however, this is not a study based on the Qur’an, nor does the researcher attempt to make any personal interpretation of the meanings of the Qur’an. Additionally, the discussion of self-identity is not from a male-driven perspective, but rather a discussion of empirical data sources and participant’s lived experiences.
Limitations

Some of the limitations in this study include the following:

1. Where participants feared retaliation for their responses, they may have been fearful and limiting in their discussion – In this instance, important data may have been missed;

2. Because of the close geographic proximity of the sample, it cannot be used as an accurate representation of Muslim women as a whole;

3. Identifying and interpreting themes that developed in answering the research questions was time-consuming and, therefore, did not allow this researcher to interview a larger number of participants.

4. Because of the specific purpose for this study and time constraints developing Muslim Women’s Educational Identity Theory was not possible. This theory will be further developed in subsequent research.

Summary

This researcher used a phenomenological approach in order to understand the lived experiences of six Muslim women and the ways in which they conceptualize their meaning of identity and educational pursuit. In order to maintain a varied cultural background in the sample (Islam has varied traditions), this researcher used criterion (purposeful) sampling to select participants. Participants selected to participate in the study were three college students and three professors. All of the participants were female and Muslim. Additionally, this researcher used Moustakas’ (1994) phenomenological research design to develop categories and themes. Finally, to ensure that the research maintained trustworthiness, triangulation (utilizing the dimensions of
identity worksheets, semi-structured interviews, and a focus group), peer debriefing, and member checking was used.
CHAPTER 4
FINDINGS

Introduction

Data were gathered using a demographic questionnaire, dimensions of identity worksheet, a focus group, and semi-structured interviews. Questionnaires and the dimensions of identity worksheets were emailed to each participant (ensuring a time and date stamp on each). A focus group was conducted with three participants and 18 individual interviews among six participants (3 interviews each). Both the focus group, and interviews were audio-recorded to allow this researcher to accurately transcribe the interviews. The focus group and 18 interviews resulted in more than 19 hours of recordings. Following the focus group and all interviews, member-checking was used. Participants were sent a transcript for verification (signature assuring accuracy was required) of its accuracy via email, and the signed transcripts were returned in the same manner.

Utilizing the modified Van Kaam method of analysis for phenomenological data, this researcher was able to separate and code the relevant data to identify common themes in participants’ responses. From the focus group, several themes were identified and subsequently validated from interview responses as being relevant to participants’ identity development and subsequent pursuit of higher education.

Participant Profiles

In order to develop a context for the discussion of themes, I will first introduce each participant. Interview introductions, dimensions of identity worksheets, and demographic questionnaires were used to develop participant profiles. The demographic
makeup of the participants in this study is detailed in Table 2 below.

**Table 2**

Demographic Makeup of Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Sect</th>
<th>Nationality</th>
<th>Socio-Economic Status</th>
<th>Education Obtained</th>
<th>Convert</th>
<th>Lived in Middle East Region</th>
<th>Lived in Africa</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participant A</td>
<td>Miami, Florida</td>
<td>Sunni</td>
<td>African-American</td>
<td>Upper Class</td>
<td>B.S.</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant B</td>
<td>Boca Raton, Florida</td>
<td>Sunni</td>
<td>Palestinian-American</td>
<td>Middle Class</td>
<td>M.S.</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant C</td>
<td>South Florida</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Palestinian-American</td>
<td>Middle Class</td>
<td>B.S.</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant D</td>
<td>Boca Raton, Florida</td>
<td>Sunni</td>
<td>Latin-American</td>
<td>Middle Class</td>
<td>B.S.</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant E</td>
<td>Ft. Laud., Florida</td>
<td>Sunni</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Upper Middle Class</td>
<td>Ph.D.</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant F</td>
<td>Davie, Florida</td>
<td>Shiite</td>
<td>Sudanese</td>
<td>Middle Class</td>
<td>B.S. (In Progress)</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To ensure confidentiality in reporting the findings in this study, participants’ names are withheld. Each participant was assigned an identifier (code) comprised of a unique digit identifying the participant as well as a date and time stamp for each interview (e.g., FAU/F001/15Dec2014/21:42). This example indicates the interviewee, interview number, and date and time of the interview. Participant responses were transcribed verbatim using transcribe.com in order to ensure accuracy.

**Participant MN/S001/16Mar2015/20:31 (Participant A).** After I formally introduced myself, Participant A did the same and we had some light chatter as she slouched a bit more in the chair – indicating a greater level of comfort or was feeling intimidated with me. Participant A can be described as a very vibrant, hard-working, and opinionated student at a large south Florida university. She was married (arranged by her
parents) at the age of 17. Not long after marriage, she lost her only child shortly after giving birth and has questioned her religious beliefs ever since. Participant A is also the daughter of an Imam at a South Florida Mosque. She is from the Ivory Coast (Africa) and came to the United States at the age of fourteen. She stated her external identities as being African, upper class, heterosexual, and less religious than before but still a practicing Muslim. When discussing the contextual influences that shaped her identity, she took a deep breath and stated that she is an only child. She was not allowed to have an opinion in the home, so, in turn she found herself being more opinionated with friends and outside of the home (e.g., in school).

Participant DS/S002/02Apr2015/12:52 (Participant B). Participant B”s identity formation was directly influenced by the traditional practices observed in the home – particularly the submissive nature of her mother to her father. She perceives her identity as being influenced by Western culture as well as traditional Palestinian practices in Islam. Because of this meshing of customs, she is not in complete agreement with Shari’a in its totality.

Referring to herself as Palestinian-American, Participant B is twenty-four years of age, married, and currently attending a South Florida University. She discussed her contextual influences as follows: “My family is originally Palestinian. I was born in Florida. Moved to Palestine when I was four. Moved to United Arab Emirates (UAE) when I was twelve. Moved back to Florida at the age of fourteen. I have five sisters and two brothers.”

Participant MA/S003/30Mar2015/20:30 (Participant C). Participant C is a mid-twenties Muslim born in the United States. She is a first-generation college student
currently in her sixth year of college. Participant C also works as a health administrator. She identifies as Sunni. She described herself as adventurous, calm, caring, confident, friendly and sociable, happy, responsible, and logical. She was also open about what she perceived as her “negative traits;” argumentative, blunt, clumsy, impatient, and secretive. She reported some of her external identities as Palestinian-American, Arab, middle class, and heterosexual.

**Participant LC/S004/01Apr2015/20:35 (Participant D).** A self-described hardworking individual, Participant D stated that she is,

> Not realistic, and I have high standards. I’m what others will consider the minority. I’m a Latin woman who happens to be a revert Muslim, wears hijab, and speak Spanish. I do not care about what other people think about me. I’m very sensitive, caring, and what others think of me is none of my business.

She described her external identities as female, Muslim, and Latina. When describing her contextual influences, “In my country public expressions of love are not shunned upon. You can see people kissing and holding hands all over the place. Even though I am Muslim, I celebrate the holidays with my family. It’s all about having a good time around family.”

**Participant NS/S005/26Mar2015/11:23 (Participant E).** Participant E made me promise (over and over again) that I would never reveal her identity to anyone, and so I made that promise – four times. She is from the Middle East and was born into Islam. It must be noted here that Participant E was one of two participants whose participant core,
external identities, and contextual influences were not influenced by Western culture. She came to the United States of America (USA) after both parents were killed in a suicide bombing. That event in particular, changed her outlook on life.

Participant E is widowed and a mother of two children (both girls). Her husband was an architect and worked for a large firm in their country. After his death she returned to her parents’ home and subsequently moved in with her brother in the US following their deaths. Participant E defines herself as “a strict Muslim,” submissive, and peaceful. She described her external identities simply as Muslim and Arab. Her family is from the Middle East, where she was born and raised. When describing her religious beliefs, she identified as, “Sunni, but our household was more strict.”

Participant E stated, “My brother asked me to begin college last year because he is sick and fears that I will not be able to take care of my two children and his son if I don’t get an education. When he gave me the list of things I could study, I chose nursing.”

Participant AK/S006/20Mar2015/15:05 (Participant F). Participant F, the second participant to exclaim that she has not and will never be influenced by Western culture, was born and raised in Northern Sudan (Africa). She is in her mid-thirties and has been in the United States for five years. She is married with two children and identifies Shiite, which means that she believes that the fourth Caliph and his heirs are the true successors of Muhammad (S.A.W.) – as opposed to Sunni Muslims who believe that all four Caliphs inherited the overseeing of the religion. She was very soft-spoken and described herself as dedicated, calm, loving, happy, and a “great thinker.” Her external identities were stated as female, Muslim, Sudanese, middle-class, and heterosexual.
Participant F’s contextual influences were stated as having,

One sibling: An older brother. Of course he was able to express himself more than I. It is something I am ok with. It is a respect that keeps order. I don’t look down on tradition. Tradition has made our nation stronger (she made it clear that she spoke of the Sudan) and our family stays strong because of our teachings and culture. It is our accepted norm. I am happy to follow my husband. He has never led me down a wrong path. I am going to college because I must to stay in this country. None of us are citizens. My husband and I came here on F-1 student visas. This is why it is important for you to keep my identity concealed. I told my husband this study will help Muslims and he agreed to it.

Finally, she views Shari’a law as, “Clear, fair, and necessary.” “You’re not telling who we are, right,” She asked again.

Results

In this section of Chapter 4, this researcher presents and examines each of the themes that resulted from the interview procedures. The themes that emerged as relevant to the research questions are: 1) Individual ideas about gender, 2) Minimized expression, 3) Shari’a and economic status, 4) Shari’a yields order, 5) Shari’a vs. Culture, 6) Accepted laws, and 7) Identity and education. Following is a description of the meanings of themes as they relate to the research questions.
Research Question 1. What is the experience of gender in Muslim women’s identity formation?

Theme 1. Individual ideas about gender. Where Muslim women perceive themselves as having gender inequalities several effects on their identity formation may develop. First, those experiences may make the Muslim woman want to go against what she views as negative effects on gender. For example, Participant A stated, “When I think about it… I had to kinda do stuff against what I was taught about men and women in Islam. I kinda always questioned the ‘him teaching us everything’ (flicking her fingers to indicate a quote) part because Islam is supposed to give every Muslim a right to education. My only thing was, a lot of things that happened was abusive and that kinda made me decide that when I got older I was gonna do what I felt.” Likewise, Participant B explained that, “Um, I think it’s expected especially for women to be a housewife in the older thinking process and to bear children. Um, so I think education is a way to get away from that gender inequality the what they expect of a woman in a household I think.” Participant D stated, “I’m what others will consider the minority. I’m a Latin woman who happens to be a revert Muslim, wears hijab, and speak Spanish. I do not care about what other people think about me. I’m very sensitive, caring, and what others think of me is none of my business. So men can say whatever. I decide who I will be.” It was then, as she made that statement, that I realized that she was the outlier in this study. Everything about her – from attitudes to experiences and cultural/ethnic background was noticeably different from the other participants.

Research Question 2. What is the experience of traditional beliefs in Muslim women’s identity formation?
Theme 2. Minimized expression. Participant C clearly felt that she couldn’t be open about her feeling when she responded, “Growing up, I hid things I knew would disappointment my parents. Now that I’m older, my first reaction is not to share my personal life, wrong or right, even with the closest friends and family members.” Participant E made me promise (over and over again) that I would never reveal her identity to anyone. “You’re not telling who we are, right,” Participant F asked.

Theme 3. Shari’a and economic status. This theme was perceived by three participants who stated: “So, it depends on the social-economic status of the family [crosstalk] and where they’re actually coming from. We were in other parts of the country and men and women can do whatever they want, you know, people who doesn’t have money” (Participant D); “It’s ok for women to be mistreated. This is only in the lower socio-economic parts” (Participant A); and, “I’m from-from a s-small but like rich town, so they are taking longer to follow that” (Participant B).

Research Question 3. What is the experience of Islamic laws in Muslim women’s identity formation?

Theme 4. Shari’a yields order.

Shari’a it’s like a um blueprint my father told us. God gave men and women rules to like live by, you know? It’s like what we say all over. Rules there so, like, everything is in harmony. Everything is ordered, so you have less a chance for chaos. Imagine no traffic rules... People dead everywhere from everybody speeding and driving crazy!
Shari’a is like rules for us to have order and consistency in our practice as Muslims, Participant A stated.

Participant D explained, “As we are learning about something, we want to do it right. So people feel – I feel strong as a Muslim because of it. A um strong p-person can hold to blueprint. Shari’a is a blueprint for our lives – you know Muslims’ living.” In a similar voice, Participant E answered, “It is our legal system like they have one here in the US. It really is alternative to what Western practices are. For whatever they think is best. Even some places outside Islam practice our law because it holds order.”

Theme 5. Shari’a is not Culture. Participant B replied, “I-I think each country has their own culture,” while participant D had a more lengthy response and stated,

You know, that was — that was actually a good question.

So, well, there's a big difference when it comes to Sharia Law and when it comes to culture. And... I can see the difference betw — between what is actually and what's it — it's — is in the Quran and the — and the Sunnah compared to the culture because a lot of who are born and raised Muslim, they don't understand... At the same time because I have born a Muslim and this is what the Quran says or this is what the Sunnah says I understand. They don't have a understanding of what the Shar — the Shari’a says because they were brought up this way. That's the way it's supposed to be. So, they — they're not as able to separate the two as someone that converts to Islam. So
typically, they — they're not as, uh — as able to separate the two to differentiate between the two.

Participant D feels that Shari’a has, “Helped her be a better person. As long as Shari’a is not mixed with culture.” She continued, “I might be the exception, but depending on what law we are talking about. Some of it I take with a grain of salt.” “A lot of it is the cultural influence in that country. That’s why I said tradition is important because then Shari’a is the same,” Participant E explained. Participant F supported this theme by stating, “People don’t know that different Islamic cultures practice different levels of Shari’a because of that – different ways for the same laws.”

**Theme 6. Accepted laws.** “Shari’a it’s like a um blueprint my father told us. God gave men and women rules to like live by, you know? It’s like what we say all over. Rules there so, like, everything is in harmony. Everything is ordered, so you have less a chance for chaos,” Participant A stated. Participant D explained, “As we are learning about something, we want to do it right. So people feel – I feel strong as a Muslim because of it. A um strong p-person can hold to blueprint. Shari’a is a blueprint for our lives – you know Muslims’ living.” Participant E answered, “It is our law. It is even accepted outside of Islam in some places.” “There is nothing much to say about Shari’a. It is law and good Muslims, even a good um citizen follows law,” Participant F responded to the question.

**Research Question 4.** What is the nature of the relationship between Muslim women's identity and their pursuit of higher education?
Theme 7. Identity and education.

So women at the Masjid sometimes I can tell look at me funny. Everybody know I got divorced and all that and graduating college but I am too happy to be looking back and wondering what they talkin' bout. I'm doing me. So everything I was suppose not to do is everything that make me do it, Participant A stated.

Participant B said, “When Muslim women have strong identities, I think it all encourages it. It-it-it makes it’s a posi-it has a positive influence on Muslim women’s education.” In line with the perceptions of Participants A and B, Participant C felt that gender inequalities, traditions, and Shari’a, “Makes the Muslim women more powerful as women and it definitely pushes you to want to pursue and higher, a higher education or higher degree.” With a more involved response, Participant E began,

I never looked at my identity this way. If you would have asked me if my identity played a role in my decision to go to college before discussing the three things we talked about, I would have said no. But when you consider them, it means that Muslim women are just now beginning to be seen for what they’re worth. We want more for ourselves. Muslim men are realizing the benefit to another income, so they don’t view Shari’a and gender inequalities like they used to.
She continued, “Traditions are still most important, I think, but all of them help to shape a stronger, more determined Muslim woman.”

Essential themes and accompanying thematic statements are outlined in the following table (Table 3):

Table 3

Overview of Essential Themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Essential Theme</th>
<th>Thematic Statement</th>
<th>Number of Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Individual ideas about gender</td>
<td>Muslim women that perceive themselves as experiencing gender inequalities will sometimes develop their own ideas about gender roles</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minimized expression</td>
<td>Where traditional practices are strong. Muslim women can become less open about what they are feeling</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shari’a and economic status</td>
<td>Traditional practices and the practice of Shari’a can sometimes be traced back to the economic levels and geographic locations of particular communities</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shari’a yields order</td>
<td>Shari’a helps to maintain order in Islam</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shari’a is not Culture</td>
<td>Muslims aren’t always able to distinguish between Shari’a and culture</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accepted laws</td>
<td>Although some non-Muslims view Shari’a as cruel and unusual punishment, Muslims that practice Shari’a view it in the same manner as citizens of other countries view their own laws</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identity and education</td>
<td>Muslim women with strong, rather than submissive identities are more likely to pursue higher education</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Patterns

Gender Inequalities Positively Affect Muslim Women’s Identity. In line with the results reflected in Hamdan’s (2006) study, which showed that some of the women felt indebted to their education in the Western culture, because they learned to be outspoken, and question the ascribed gender roles that Arab nations generally lay out for Muslim women, five out of the six participants (Participants A, B, D, E, and F – all that experienced gender biases in some manner) that participated in interviews perceived gender inequalities as positively affecting Muslim women’s identity formation in that it
strengthened their resolve to become stronger, more independent and determined Muslim women. Essentially, those experiences may prompt the Muslim woman want to go against what she views as negative effects on gender. For example, Participant A stated, “When I think about it... I had to kinda do stuff against what I was taught about men and women in Islam. Likewise, Participant B explained that, “...I think education is a way to get away from that gender inequality the-the what-what they expect of a woman in a household I think.” As a result of having experienced gender biases, all 5 women felt that it help them to identify as stronger, more independent Muslim women.

**Traditions Negatively Affect Muslim Women’s Identity.** All but two participants perceived traditions as negatively affecting Muslim women’s identity formation. Participants A, B, C, and D, in answering the research question, felt that traditional beliefs hindered their identity development; however, they also felt that because of those hindrances, they became more determined to break away from those traditional practices that they perceived as hindering the advancement of Muslim women. All of these participants also felt that traditional practices most negatively affected Muslim women who are from Islamic States. They all experienced traditional practices of lesser impact here in the United States.

**Shari’a Positively Affects Muslim Women’s Identity.** Participants’ perceptions of Shari’a are consistent with a study conducted by the Pew Research Center (2013, Q66) that reported,

Most Muslims feel that Sharia is the revealed word of God rather than a body of law developed by men based on the word of God. Muslims also tend to believe sharia has only
one, true understanding, but this opinion is far from universal; in some countries, substantial minorities of Muslims believe sharia should be open to multiple interpretations. Religious commitment is closely linked to views about sharia: Muslims who pray several times a day are more likely to say sharia is the revealed word of God, to say that it has only one interpretation and to support the implementation of Islamic law in their country (p.41).

Three of the six participants of participants perceived Shari’a as being the divine word of God and subsequently positively influencing Muslim women’s identity formation. The percentage of Muslims that accept Shari’a as the divine word of God based on the Pew Research Center’s (2013) report, which investigated age, gender, education and support for Shari’a, can be seen in Figure 6. The Pew Research Center’s (2013) findings are important to this research because it validates the findings in this instance of participants’ support of Shari’a – a key variable in the development of their educational identities.
Because most Muslims view Shari'a as the revealed word of God, it is often viewed in a literal context, as is the case with the participants in this study. As a result, those participants perceive Shari'a as positively affecting the ways in which they formed their identities.

**Shari'a Has No Affect on Muslim Women's Identity.** “I don’t know enough about it” and, “It doesn’t pertain to me,” Participants B and C stated respectively when I asked about the effect of Shari’a on how Muslim women formed their identities. Both participants spent most of their formative years in Western culture and were heavily influenced by US customs. For them, Shari’a law was almost a foreign concept.

**Identity Affects Muslim Women’s Pursuit of Higher Education.** Whether there are negative effects in identity formation that strengthen the Muslim woman’s
resolve (as with Participant A), or positive influences to how their identity was formed (as seen with Participants B, C, and D), and even a very neutral effect because of what is "supposed" to be accepted (the cases of Participants E and F), all resulted in their willingness, a longing even, to pursue higher education. Participants’ reasons for educational pursuit were all shaped in positive and negative manners of identity influences; however, the result of the themes identified still resulted in a pursuit of higher education by each.

Discrepancies

**Gender Inequalities Have No Affect on Muslim Women’s Identity.**
Participant C was the sole respondent that felt that gender inequalities have no effect on Muslim women’s identity formation. She stated repeatedly over the course of the three interviews held with her that she didn’t experience any gender biases. Her experiences with biases related to gender had much to do with an influx of Western culture into the city where she lived in Ecuador.

**Traditions Positively Affect Muslim Women’s Identity.** The same two participants (E and F) repeatedly perceived their experiences as being a stricter, but better practice of Islam. Their perceptions were typically and consistently in direct opposition to the other four women. This means that only 2 participants perceived traditions as positively affecting Muslim women’s identity formation. It should be noted that those two participants only recently moved to the United States and have experienced less of Western culture than the other four participants.

**Shari’a Negatively Affects Muslim Women’s Identity.** The sole participant to view her lived experiences with Shari’a as having a negative affect on how her identity
was formed was Participant A. She stated that because men interpret Shari'a, she finds it difficult to agree with a lot of the explanations of how the laws should be implemented and that they are weighted against Muslim women. Again this was, as she perceived it, just another reason to not conform to what she was previously taught and to pursue her own agenda, absent her father's wishes.

Table 4 summarized the patterns and discrepancies resulting from participant responses.

Table 4

Summary of Patterns and Discrepancies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Patterns and Discrepancies Amongst Participants (Based on their lived experiences)</th>
<th>Participant A (Africa)</th>
<th>Participant B (Middle East)</th>
<th>Participant C (Middle East)</th>
<th>Participant D (South America)</th>
<th>Participant E (Middle East)</th>
<th>Participant F (Africa)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender Inequalities negatively affect Muslim women's identity formation</td>
<td>No (Makes you stronger)</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No (Didn't experience any)</td>
<td>No (No, I don't see roles as inequalities)</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender Inequalities positively affect Muslim women's identity formation</td>
<td>Yes (Makes you want to be more independent)</td>
<td>Yes (Makes you want to get away from expectations of housewife)</td>
<td>No (Didn't experience any)</td>
<td>Yes (My country is different)</td>
<td>Yes (Roles are clear)</td>
<td>Yes (Keeps order)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender Inequalities have no effect on Muslim women's identity formation</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>True (I didn't experience any)</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traditions negatively affect Muslim women's identity formation</td>
<td>Yes (But, I knew I would make my own choices)</td>
<td>Yes (Most follow it and don't know what they can do; only what they're told)</td>
<td>Yes (Held me back for a long time)</td>
<td>Yes (Women have to be quiet and not go to school)</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traditions positively affect Muslim women's identity formation</td>
<td>No (I'm different. It helped me be who I am)</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes (Important to the survival of the religion)</td>
<td>Yes (Make Women strong who accept tradition)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traditions have no effect on Muslim</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Summary of Results

In Chapter 4, this researcher discussed seven themes that developed regarding Muslim women’s identity formation and subsequent pursuit of higher education. The themes discussed were: 1) Individual ideas about gender, 2) Minimized expression, 3) Shari’a and economic status, 4) Shari’a yields order, 5) Shari’a vs. Culture, 6) Accepted laws, and 7) Identity and education.

The individual themes that emerged throughout the research process all contributed to participant’s identity formation. The ways in which they perceived their identity as a whole was instrumental in their decision to pursue higher education. In Chapter 5, this researcher will provide an overview of the study, the results of the study, a summary, implications for practice, and recommendations for future research.
CHAPTER 5
CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Overview of the Study

The purpose of this study was to investigate the perceptions of a sample of female Muslim students at several south Florida universities to determine how their identity formation affected their pursuit of higher education based on three distinct external contributors to the development of their identities: Gender bias, tradition, and Shari’a.

Over the course of three interviews conducted with each participant, data were collected and analyzed, and the emerging themes with supporting direct quotes from participants were reported in Chapter 4. Moustakas’ (1994) phenomenological research design and a revised Van Kaam’s method of analysis of phenomenological data (as cited in Moustakas, 1994, pp. 120 - 121) were the methodology used to guide the study. In Chapter 5, an overview of the study, the results of the study, the limitations of the study, several recommendations for future research, implications for practice, a theoretical overview, and conclusions are deliberated.

Results of the Study

This phenomenological study found that gender inequalities, traditions and Shari’a affect the manner in which Muslim women’s identity is formed; all three were described by participants as having contributed to their pursuit of higher education. Throughout the interview process, themes emerged and repeated as having contributed to participant’s perceptions of their identity.

Research question 1 asked the question, “What is the experience of gender in Muslim women’s identity formation?” When framing the question, this researcher
looked at studies that specifically looked at gender inequality. In one study, Hamdan (2006) looked at “the connection made to the Islamic teaching about women as the authentic source of guidance in Arab Muslims lives and more specifically to their gender perceptions” (p. 62). In another, Noureen & Awan (2011) mentions that, “education has been of central significance to the development of human society” (p. 80), and “education enables women to perform gainful social roles and enhance their mobility in society” (p. 81).

It was, therefore, important for this researcher to investigate the perceptions of gender for those Muslim women that have pursued higher education. The research question was framed for that purpose. This question was purposefully asked first to solicit a longer discussion from participants. The reasoning for this was to allow participants to become comfortable with the researcher while discussing a sensitive topic. Because this researcher is a Muslim male, it was important to get participants to feel comfortable enough in responding that they were open and truthful when discussing their lived experiences.

The theme that emerged was *Individual ideas about gender*. The thematic statement developed as a result of this theme is, *Muslim women that perceive themselves as experiencing gender inequalities will sometimes develop their own ideas about gender roles.*

Three participants reported making their own meanings of the manners in which gender roles should be carried out. As a result, those participants developed their own ideas about gender roles. Because of the negative experiences of gender inequalities for the three participants who reported making their own meaning of gender roles, it was
necessary for them to develop an understanding of gender that was more specific to their purposes. These included such things as shared responsibility within the household for men and women, the opportunity to pursue higher education without fear of reprimand, and the need to have an equal voice in discussions of family and religion.

By investigating college-aged Muslim women’s perceptions of the manner(s) in which gender inequalities influenced their identity formation and subsequent decision to pursue higher education, researchers may be able to develop awareness programs that have a positive influence on identity development and promote social change in higher education for Muslim women. This researcher recommends the following:

1. Limit the barriers to gender equality by hiring Muslim women for instructional positions in madrasas.

2. Reduce the level of gender inequality in Islam by promoting increased participation in education by Muslim women. This must include participation in research specific to Muslim women, research positions in colleges and universities, and promoting the pursuit of advanced degrees by Muslim women.

Researchers and educational practitioners should develop programs that help this overlooked group maintain pace with other groups in acquiring an education.

Organizations such as the Canadian Muslim Women’s Institute (CMWI) have begun to do just that through a sewing program for fair trade and fair wages. The program, The Canadian Muslim Women’s Sewing Training Program and Social Enterprise is made up of two components: a one year training program and the establishment of a social enterprise called “SewFair”. The organization states the following on their website:
The program has brought women of many diverse cultures together and has broken the isolation many of them experience as they move to a new country where they do not know the language, have no friends, are missing the families they left back home combined with the trauma of war. It is almost like a support group with economic benefits. (CMWI, 2015)

Women’s rights issues that are specific to Muslim women’s identity formation is an area that can benefit from research-based programs such as the Canadian Muslim Women’s Sewing Training Program and Social Enterprise that promote independence for Muslim women. It is an area that warrants increased investigation (Astin et al., 2005). In fact, several researchers have insisted that identity as related to higher education has become increasingly important in recent years, particularly with today’s college students (Astin et al., 2005; Garza & Herringer, 1987; Nash, 2001). This researcher recommends that:

1. In developing programs to help Muslim women maintain pace with their male counterparts, researchers should first familiarize themselves with the Muslim woman’s struggles and then use that awareness to develop ways to reduce the gender gap.

As discussed in Chapter 2, Noureen & Awan’s (2011) study is critical to this research because it looked at all the barriers that hinder women’s pursuit of higher education in Islamic countries that have followed tradition over the rights of women and ideals of feminists. Looking at these barriers was helpful in determining what is needed
to improve the attendance and aspiration of Muslim women to pursue higher education. As a result, this researcher used traditions as a basis for developing Research Question 2: What is the experience of traditional beliefs in Muslim women’s identity formation?

The themes that were identified as a result of participants’ responses are: *Minimized expression, and Shari’a and economic status.* The resulting thematic statements are:

1. *Where traditional practices are strong, Muslim women can become less open about what they are feeling,* and
2. *Traditional practices and the practice of Shari’a can sometimes be traced back to the economic levels and geographic locations of particular communities.*

Fear of retaliation has forced many Muslim women to remain silent about their opposition of many traditional Islamic practices. Although these practices vary by region and even economic status, participants in this study perceived both as having contributed to how they formed their identities and the subsequent effect on the decision to pursue higher education. To improve their understanding of their identities and the pursuit of higher education, this researcher recommends that educational practitioners and community activists:

1. Develop mentoring programs where Muslim women college graduates can mentor other Muslim women that are struggling with the decision of whether to pursue higher education.

Both negative as well as positive traditional influences were perceived as contributing to their decisions to pursue higher education. For those participants whose lived experiences of traditional practices were negative, they became stronger, more
independent Muslim women as a result. Additionally, lived experiences of positive traditional practices that were in direct opposition of the more oppressive practices experienced in lower socio-economic areas strengthened participants’ resolve to make a better life for themselves by pursuing higher education.

As a result of the themes that emerged in answering this question, this researcher recommends the following:

1. For those individuals that work directly with Muslim women, this research question is critical to their understanding of and methods of approach to investigating traditional practices in Islam and for promoting educational pursuit for Muslim women. Practitioners should have further discussion with Muslim women to develop an understanding of the manners in which traditions affect their identity formation.
   a. Those discussions should be used to promote awareness for Muslim men regarding the affects of practices that have historically hindered the advancement of Muslim women.
      i. Multilateral international treaties such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) provide an international platform by which this major change in mindset can begin to be debated.
      ii. The Qur’an is the primary source of Shari’a, and since it is the voice of God, it is not amendable in any way. While the text of the
Qur'an is immutable, its interpretation is not. Leading scholars must begin to argue that a more open reinterpretation of the Qur'an and the hadith (the two primary sources of Islamic law) is both legitimate and necessary.

1. Begin to follow Ijtihad when reinterpreting the Qur'an.

Ijtihad is an interpretive technique in Islamic law that may aid reformers in advancing women's rights within Islamic states; it is resolving an Islamic legal issue through personal thought and reflection (Hursh, 2012). Ijtihad allows a qualified individual to make a legal determination when there is not consensus as to what the Qur'an and the Sunna require. Ijtihad does not allow Muslims to interpret Islamic law however they want or to apply this technique at all times. Nonetheless, used strategically, Ijtihad may allow for progressive reform and an expansion of women's rights.

Of equal importance to the advancement of Muslim women in higher education is the investigation of Muslim women's rights. This is evident in this study as well as one conducted by Lee (2009), who states “human rights abuses have forced Afghan women to live in fear and terror, despite the guarantee that women have fundamental rights, they are faced with many challenges in this country” (p. 531-532). Women in Afghanistan are “victims of discrimination and human rights abuses because Islamic societies often interpret human rights for women to conflict with Islamic law” (p. 533). Despite “equal
rights for men and women being written in the 2003 Constitution, Afghan women are not afforded rights equal to men” (p. 533). Many women are “unaware of their rights under the Afghan Constitution or Islamic law, and even legal professionals are confused about the applicable law because of delays in compilation and dissemination of the law” (p. 547). Lee (2009) concludes that “in order to address gender discrimination and gender violence in Afghanistan, legal reform must be addressed in regards to the cultural beliefs and frame constitutional laws are consistent with Islamic laws” (p. 561). This article is relevant to supporting the findings of this research because it touches on the difference between human rights for women and Islamic rights for women – including the right to education. Because of the need for a better understanding of Muslim women’s right to education, Research Question 3 was developed and reads, “What is the experience of Islamic Laws in Muslim women’s identity formation?”

Several themes emerged as relevant to participant’s lived experiences of Shari’a: *Shari’a yields order; Shari’a is not culture; and, Accepted Laws*. Resulting thematic statements are:

1. *Shari’a helps to maintain order in Islam*

2. *Muslims aren’t always able to distinguish between Shari’a and culture*

3. *Although some non-Muslims view Shari’a as cruel and unusual punishment, Muslims that practice Shari’a view it in the same manner as citizens of other countries view their own laws.*

In order to better understand the effects of Shari’a on Muslim women’s identity formation and subsequent pursuit of higher education, the manners in which Muslim
women perceive Shari’ a as affecting the natural order of Islam, this researcher strongly recommends that higher education professionals do the following:

1. Women’s rights issues that are specific to Muslim women’s identity formation should be included in investigations of research-based programs that promote the pursuit of higher education by Muslim women.

2. Higher education professionals should develop programs specifically designed to help Muslim women further understand Shari’a where it is perceived as accepted law, faith development for Muslims, and their decisions to pursue higher education.

Tajfel and Turner’s (1979) Social Identity Theory states that individuals have multiple “selves” that is reflective of a group membership. Therefore, it is possible for an individual to have several identities. Additionally, Abes, Jones, and McEwen’s model of multiple dimensions of identity (Abes, Jones, & McEwen, 2007; Jones & McEwen, 2000) further helped shed light on how Muslim women may come to view themselves. The manners in which they came to view the effects of identity on educational pursuit were evident in their discussions of their lived experiences regarding the pursuit of higher education.

In answering Research Question 4, which reads, “Research Question 4: What is the nature of the relationship between Muslim women’s identity and their pursuit of higher education?” this researcher found that four of the six participants in this study perceived themselves as having stronger, more individually tailored identities as a result of their lived experiences with gender inequalities, traditional influences, and Shari’a.

The themes – Individual ideas about gender, Minimized expression, Shari’a and
economic status, Shari’a yields order, Shari’a is not culture, Accepted Laws, and Identity and Education – that emerged as common to the majority of participants positively affected their decisions to pursue higher education. Without those influences higher education may not have even been considered (based on their perceptions of the strong traditional and gender influences that may prevent Muslim women from realizing an education).

The questions that were answered by the researcher may help to develop an overlooked but important area in higher education – Muslim women’s identity formation. The investigation of the effects of identity on the pursuit of higher education can expand what is known about Muslim women pursuing higher education. This demographic has been underexposed and as a result, underdeveloped. These results may allow higher education professionals to develop programs specifically designed to help Muslim women further understand their identity development, faith development, and their decisions to pursue higher education. To assist in the development of such programs, this researcher recommends that:

1. Researchers develop awareness programs that have a positive influence on identity development and promote social change in higher education for Muslim women.
2. This researcher should further this study to establish Muslim Women’s Educational Identity Theory as a valid and applicable theory.
3. All need to understand a major culture shift is necessary for any of this to occur. And, like all change, will be slow and over time.
Summary

In conducting this phenomenological study, this researcher was able to make meaning of the lived experiences of six Muslim women currently attending colleges and universities and determine how their identities affected their pursuit of higher education. As stated in Chapter 1, the purpose of this study was to investigate the perceptions of a sample of female Muslim students at several South Florida Colleges/Universities to determine how their identity formation affected their pursuit of higher education based on three distinct external contributors to the development of their identities: Gender bias, tradition, and Shari’a. This research also found that Muslim women were found to have both positive as well as negative experiences of identity that affected their pursuit of higher education. The findings have indicated that the ways in which participants perceived their identity as a whole was instrumental in their decision to pursue higher education. Without all of the themes that emerged as having had effect on their identity, the resulting pursuit of higher education may not have taken place.

Table 5

Summary of Patterns, Discrepancies, and Themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question 1: What is the experience of gender in Muslim women’s identity formation?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Patterns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender Inequalities Positively Affect Muslim Women’s Identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Themes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual ideas about gender</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question 2: What is the experience of traditional beliefs in Muslim women’s identity formation?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Patterns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traditions Negatively Affect Muslim Women’s Identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Themes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As reflected in Table 5, the patterns, discrepancies, and themes identified as a result of participant’s responses help us to understand the manner in which identity development influences educational pursuit for Muslim women. Also, the themes that emerged as a result of this phenomenological study have shown that there is a need for understanding the role of Muslim women’s identity in pursuing higher education.

**Implications for Practice**

This researcher conducted this study due to the lack of sufficient research encompassing Muslim women’s pursuit of higher education and the manners in which
their perceptions of identity affected that pursuit. Therefore, one of the implications for practice would be for researchers to be educated on and to educate students on perspectives other than their own common understandings. This phenomenological study investigated the meanings of the lived experiences of six Muslim women from various socio-economic statuses, educational backgrounds, ages, countries of origin, Islamic sects, and universities attended in relation to how their identities were formed and what impact the development of those identities had on educational pursuit. The findings of this study could aid in raising awareness of the effects of identity on Muslim women’s educational pursuit. In turn, awareness programs can be developed to help Muslim women better understand the effects of their identity on educational pursuit and to promote increased participation in higher education.

Additionally, the results of this and subsequent studies may increase the available literature regarding Muslim women’s identity. This could be helpful in furthering the research on this topic. The gender inequalities gap can be narrowed where interest in this topic is increased for those who sympathize with the treatment of Muslim women (e.g., Muslim men, charities, financial institutions in that support women’s rights initiatives, Islamic as well as non-Islamic governments, and non-Muslims).

Another implication for practice is increased understanding of Islam. When instructing courses on education, educators should develop promote the investigation and discussion of religions that are experiencing misconceptions. Several participants felt that Muslims are all too often misunderstood and that an awareness of the true practices of the religion was necessary even prior to the events of 9/11. To allow misinterpretations to continue could hinder the voice of Muslim students in and outside
the classroom. This can lead to less engaged learning.

Interfaith discussions are necessary for students to able to better understand and accept one another. Patel and Brodeur (2006) discussed the necessity of having meaningful conversations about varying faith identities. Patel and Brodeur (2006) wrote, “Learning to talk about the variety of religious identities, among many other kinds of overlapping identities, requires active and self-reflective interfaith activities” (p. 3). Learning to have discussions about religions other than one’s own could foster a more active and meaningful learning environment.

Although all of the participants in this study identified as Muslim, it is important for educational practitioners to understand that the lived experiences of individual Muslim women – and Muslims overall – can be very different, as there are degrees to which Shari’a is practiced, variations of traditional practices based on region and socio-economic status, and truly varied experiences of gender inequalities. Examples of this could be the Muslim woman’s decision to wear, or not wear the hijab, consuming only halal food, the observance of Ramadan, or simple interactions between men and women.

Finally, this study only highlights a viewpoint of the meanings of the lived experiences of six Muslim women attending colleges or universities in south Florida. For a richer understanding of the phenomena being studied a more expanded approach is needed. This one qualitative study cannot explain all phenomena, as there is little research that examines the lived experiences of Muslim women’s identity formation as it effects educational pursuit. As such, researchers should investigate more thoroughly the lived experiences of Muslim women, Islam as a religion, Shari’a as accepted law for Muslims, gender inequalities, traditional practices in Islam, and educational pursuit for
Muslims.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

This phenomenological study offers a rich comprehensive description of the positive and negative lived experiences of six Muslim women, as well as an understanding of their beliefs, ideologies, and practices. The results of this study may help to increase awareness and develop an increased understanding of their pursuit of higher education. Little is known about the process of identity formation among Muslim women in pursuing higher education. Since few studies have specifically investigated the effects of identity in pursuing higher education for Muslim, this researcher makes several recommendations for future research.

The first recommendation for future research, then, is that gender inequalities that are specific to Muslim women warrant the attention of educational sociologists. The need for theories specific to gender when inequalities exists for Muslim could help to explain both positive and negative effects on identity formation in Muslim women. Second, the decision-making processes in education require more attention. The presence of Muslim women in research and madrasas must improve. Because studies often rely heavily on available literature, the individual views of Muslim women are necessary to accurately understanding educational experiences and outcomes. Third, all aspects of the educational experiences of Muslim women must be considered in the general account of educational inequality. This research has shown that gender inequality is both a matter of inequalities in access as well as differentiation in educational experiences and outcomes. Processes and outcomes must be measured directly with the general analysis of education for Muslim women. There are several studies that describe educational processes, but
few have fused those processes with an account of gender inequalities for Muslim women. Finally, international comparisons of Muslim women’s identity and the effect on the pursuit of higher education warrant further research. A logical first step would be to assess the role of identity in educational pursuit across countries. Although the assessment of outcomes may be more complicated than those in this study, the linkages between identity and education across borders should be investigated.

The challenge facing further research on Muslim women’s identity formation and the effects on educational pursuit is to find ways to look beyond simply documenting gender effects but to develop more theoretically sound accounts of their experiences. The substantial research that exists in various fields for women in education should be used to catapult the investigation of the Muslim woman and her pursuit of higher education.
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APPENDICES
APPENDIX A: RESEARCH DESIGN

Source: Created by Rafael Harley, November 2014)
APPENDIX B: MODIFIED VAN KAAM METHOD OF ANALYSIS OF
PHENOMENOLOGICAL DATA (Moustakas, 1994, p. 120 – 121)

Use the full transcription of each participant.

- Listing and Preliminary Groupings – Horizontalization □ (List every quote relevant to the experience)
- Reduction and Elimination □ (determine the invariant constituents by testing each expression for two requirements)

Does it contain a moment of the experience that is necessary and sufficient for understanding it? □
- Is it possible to abstract and label it? If yes, it is a horizon of experience? □
- (If an expression does not meet to above two requirements, it is eliminated. Other expressions that are eliminated (or presented in more exact terms) are ones that include overlapping, repetitive, and vague language. What remains are the invariant constituents of the experience.)

- Clustering and Thematizing the Invariant Constituents □ (Cluster the related invariant constituents of experience into a thematic label. These clustered and labeled constituents are the cores themes of the experience)
- Final Identification of the Invariant Constituents and Themes by Application: Validation □ Check the invariant constituents and themes against the complete record of the participant and ask:

Are they expressed explicitly in the complete transcript? □
- Are they compatible if not explicitly expressed? □
- (If they are not explicit or compatible, they are not relevant to the participants experience and should be deleted.)

- Using the relevant, validated invariant constituents and themes, construct an Individual Textural Description for each participant of the experience □ (Include verbatim examples from the transcribed interview)
- Construct an Individual Structural Description for each participant based on the Individual Textural Description and Imaginative Variation
- Construct a Textural-Structural Description for each participant of the meanings and essences of the experience, incorporating the invariant constituents and themes
- From here, develop a Composite Description of the meanings and essences of the experience, representing the group as a whole
Title of Study: Muslim Women: A Phenomenological Study of the Effects of Identity In Pursuing Higher Education

IRB NUMBER: 2015/083

STUDY-RELATED PHONE NUMBER(S): [Redacted]

SPONSOR: Suzanne King, Ed.D.

RESEARCHER: Rafael E. Harley

You are being asked to be in a research study. The purpose of this consent form is to help you decide if you want to be in the research study. You should not join this research study until all of your questions are answered.

Things to know before deciding to take part in a research study:

- The main goal of a research study is to learn things to help others in the future.
- After reading the consent form and having a discussion with the research staff, you should know which parts of the study are experimental and which are standard.
- Your demographic information may become part of the research record. If that happens, your demographic data (only as discussed in the body of the research document) may be looked at and/or copied by the sponsor of this study and may be referenced by future researchers.

If you take part in this research study, you will be given a copy of this signed and dated consent form.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study will be to investigate the perceptions of a sample of female Muslim students at several South Florida Colleges/Universities to determine how their identity formation affected their pursuit of higher education based on three distinct external contributors to the development of their identities: Gender bias, tradition, and laws.

PROCEDURES

With your agreement to participate in this study, you will be asked to share your lived experiences over the course of three interviews (for college student participants) or the focus group (for college professor participants) in which you will discuss your lived experiences/perceptions of your identity as it relates to your decision to pursue higher education. The questions that will drive the study are focused on: Identity, gender bias, traditions, and Islamic laws. The interviews and focus group will be conducted in a private, sound proof, and previously agreed upon location and will total approximately 90 minutes (30 minutes for each of the three interviews and 90 minutes total for the focus group). The interviews and focus group will be audio-recorded and transcribed. As a participant, the researcher will provide you with a copy of the transcribed interview and asked to validate the accuracy of the transcriptions. Audio recordings will be destroyed once the study has concluded.

RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS

There are no foreseen economic, physical, mental, emotional, or psychological risks that would result from participation in this study. Some participants may momentarily be hesitant to answer specific questions. Should you feel any discomfort in responding to a specific question, please inform the researcher immediately.

NEW INFORMATION

You will be told about any new information that might change your decision to be in this study. You may be asked to sign a new consent form if this occurs.

BENEFITS

Your participation can help develop awareness programs for Islamic women and can better inform higher education practice and future research.

COSTS

There are no costs associated with you as a participant in this study.
PAYMENT FOR PARTICIPATION
You will not be compensated in any form for participation in this study.

ALTERNATIVE TREATMENT
Your alternative is not to participate in this study and a decision to decline participation will not hinder/limit your participation in other studies.

CONFIDENTIALITY/PERMISSIONS
All of your information will be kept confidential. All data will be stored securely in the researchers office. Transcriptions will be password protected in an electronic file at the same location and research recordings will be destroyed once they are transcribed and the research is concluded. Your demographic data (only as discussed in the body of the research document) may be looked at and/or copied by the sponsor of this study and may be referenced by future researchers that decide to cite this study. Demographic information will be for background purposes only and will not include such identifiers as name, date of birth, etc.

May I withdraw or revoke (cancel) my consent or permission to use information?
You have the right to revoke your permission to use and disclose your information at any time. You may do so by providing the researcher with a written request to withdraw/revoke.
Once you withdraw/revoke consent, no new information will be gathered; however, previously gathered data may still be used.

VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL
Your participation in this study is voluntary. You may decide not to participate or you may leave the study at any time. Your decision will not result in any penalty or loss of benefits to which you are entitled.
Your participation may be closed at any time by the researcher without your consent for any reason, including:
- when it appears to be in your best interest;
- you have failed to consent to participate after receiving a notice of changes to the study.

SOURCE OF FUNDING FOR THE STUDY
This study is completely funded by the researcher.

CONTACTS
Should you have any questions regarding the research project, processes, research questions, or any matter(s) not listed, please contact the researcher, Rafael E. Harley at [contact information] or via landline at [contact information]. Additionally, the faculty sponsor, Dr. Suzanne King, may be reached at [contact information].

CONSENT to Audio-recording

Participant’s Name (printed)

Signature of Participant Date

CONSENT to participation
I have read this consent form (or it has been read to me). All of my questions about the study and my part in it have been answered. I freely consent to participate in this research study.
By signing this consent form, I have not given up any of my legal rights.

Participant’s Name (printed)

Signature of Participant Date

Researcher’s Name (printed)

Signature of Researcher Date
APPENDIX D: APPROVAL LETTER FROM INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD
Dear Rafael Harley,

The proposal that you have submitted, “Muslim Women: A Phenomenological Study of the Effects of Identity on Pursuing Higher Education”, has been approved by the Lynn University’s Institutional Review Board.

You are responsible for complying with all stipulations described under the Code of Federal Regulations 45 CFR 46 (Protection of Human Subjects). This document can be obtained from the following address:

http://www.hhs.gov/ohrp/humansubjects/guidance/45cfr46.htm

Form B [Termination Form]
https://my.lynn.edu/ICS/Portlets/ICS/Handoutportlet/viewhandler.ashx?handout_id=b1e2f159-ce0f-4774-b727-36d56c4b3b34 needs to be completed and returned to Farideh Farazmand when you fulfill your study. You are reminded that should you need an extension or report a change in the circumstances of your study, an additional document must be completed.

For further information, please click on the following
http://www.hhs.gov/ohrp/humansubjects/anprmchange.html
Good luck in all your future endeavors!

Warmest regards,

Farideh Farazmand

Farideh Farazmand, PhD
IRB Chair

Cc: Dr. Gregg Cox
File 2015-083
APPENDIX E: DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE FORM

Participant ID Code: _________

Demographic Questionnaire

Background information:

Age: ____________________________

What is your race/ethnicity? ____________________________

What is your religious affiliation? ____________________________

What is your country of Birth? ____________________________

If you were born outside of the Continental United States, how long have you resided in the United States? ____________________________

What city/state do you currently reside in? ____________________________

What generation of college student are you (Please circle one)?

1st to attend college  2nd - parent(s) pursued higher education  3rd - grandparent(s) pursued higher education  4th or more college higher education

What is you current year in college? ____________________________

For college professors, please indicate your position/department: ____________________________

What is your current major? ____________________________

For college professors, please indicate your area of expertise: ____________________________

Marital Status (optional):

Please circle one: Sunni  Shiite
APPENDIX F: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL FOR SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS

Before conducting the focus group and initial interview, the researcher will disperse and collect the following items from the participants in the study:

- Demographic Questionnaire form
- Research Subject Information and Consent Form
- Dimensions of Identity Worksheet

Demographic Questionnaire

Background information:

a. Age:
b. What is your ethnicity?
c. What is your religious affiliation?
d. What is your country of birth?
   1. If you were born outside of the Continental United States, how long have you resided in the United States?
e. What city/state do you currently reside in?
f. What generation of college student are you?
g. What is your current year in college?
   1. For college professors, please indicate your position/department:
h. What is your current major?
   1. For college professors, please indicate your area of expertise:
i. Marital Status (optional):
j. Please circle one: Sunni Shiite Other

The researcher will have ready the following items for the three interviews and focus group:

- Voice recording device
- Interview guide
- Note-taking materials
  - Paper (8.5” x 11” in size, preferably white)
  - Colored pencils (specific color used for each research question discussion)
  - Colored pens and/or markers
- Copy of signed consent
- Demographic questionnaires (completed)
- Dimensions of Identity worksheet

At the focus group, and throughout the series of three interviews, the researcher will:

- Conduct introduction with the participant
- Reiterate the research topic and discuss the specific interview process
- Take time to address any concerns that the participant may have
- Deliver a copy of their signed consent to the participant
- Notify the participant that they may feel uncomfortable at times with the discussion, and may refuse to answer questions that they feel are too discomforting or menacing.
- Notify the participant that the researcher is specifically interested in hearing about their lived experiences.
- Notify the participant that confidentiality will be adhered to as outlined in the consent form, and that specific identifiers (such as names of friends, faculty or family members, or anyone else being referenced during discussions) should be omitted during the interview and focus group.
- Request that participants complete the Dimensions of Identity Worksheet (at initial interview and at the focus group).
- Start recording device.
- Conduct the interview or focus group.
- Conclude the interview and thank the participant.
APPENDIX G: DIMENSIONS OF IDENTITY WORKSHEET

Participant Core (Personal traits & individualities that define you as an individual)

Personal traits/individualities:

External Identities:  
- Gender  
- Religion  
- Ethnicity  
- Disability  
- Race  
- Class  
- Sexual Orientation

Contextual Influences (Explain how each has shaped your identity)

- Family Background  
- Cultural Traditions  
- Shari’a (Islamic Law)

Gender Biases