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Veiling in Fear or in Faith?

Meanings of the *Hijab* to Practicing Muslim Wives and Husbands in the United States

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ABSTRACT: This article examines the Muslim practice of wearing the *hijab*—the veiling and covering of a woman’s head and body. More specifically, this study aims to present insiders’ perspectives regarding the personal understandings of the hijab among 20 wives and 20 husbands ($n = 40$) in religious Shia and Sunni Muslim families living in the United States. Qualitative analysis yielded three emergent themes: (1) The hijab as a symbol of religious commitment; (2) The hijab as a tool of protection, rather than oppression, for women and families; and (3) Two different views of Muslims’ reasoning behind the hijab. These data suggest that, as perceived by “insider” participants, the hijab has perceived benefits for religious Muslim families, although counterexamples and concerns are also expressed.

KEYWORDS: Religion, Religiosity, Islamic families, Muslim families, Marriage, Qualitative research

MEANINGS OF THE HIJAB

Veiling in Fear or in Faith?

Meanings of the *Hijab* to Practicing Muslim Wives and Husbands in the United States

For a majority of practicing Muslim women, wearing the *hijab*—which includes the veiling and covering of a woman’s head and body—is part of a dress code that symbolizes women’s modesty, respectability, and maturity (Dakkak & Mikulka, 2012). The issue of the hijab in Islamic society highlights where Muslim women position themselves, in terms of identity, as being either distinctly within or distinctly apart from Islamic culture (Treacher & Shukrallah, 2001). Therefore, in regard to the manifestation of the nature of religion, Muslim women who veil have long been seen as the carrier of identity (Martin, 1978). Indeed, while the hijab is, for many Muslims, a sign of strong religious belief (Alghafli, Hatch, & Marks, 2014a), the hijab can also operate as a manifestation and outward expression of one’s identity and existence (Ahmed, 1992). This is especially true when the hijab is worn voluntarily in Western cultures.

Some observers posit that the growing phenomenon of wearing the hijab among Muslim societies (especially in societies with low socioeconomic status), is a reaction to the growing frustration and lack of hope due to poverty and lack of life resources. There are others who view the hijab primarily as a tool for religious expression or as a symbol of rejection of Western worldviews and ideologies (Dakkak & Mikulka, 2012). However, a small body of literature has augmented, if not challenged, these views. Several scholars have concluded that the main reason behind lived commitment to the hijab involves the multi-faceted well-being of a person’s self, family, and society (Dakkak & Mikulka, 2012; Grima, 2013; Mutahhari, 2007; Roald, 2001).

In connection with marriage and family, a foundational purpose for the hijab is the attempt to limit all sexual desires, expression, and experience exclusively to the legal and sacred

MEANINGS OF THE HIJAB

bounds of marriage, consistent with *Sharia* or Islamic law (Mutahhari, 2007). A primary intention is to foster optimal marital development and harmony between husband and wife (Mutahhari, 2007). In terms of society, Mutahhari (2007) posits that—unlike the current Western system that frequently mixes work with sexual exploration, sexual activity, and sexual politics—the Islamic hijab serves to separate the spheres of work on one hand and intimate social and sexual relations on the other. The aim is the strict and exclusive channeling of all sexual relations into marriage within the sphere of the home. This carefully demarcated separation of work and sex, Mutahhari (2007) posited, would promote a work sphere more focused on productivity, learning, and progression, without ongoing and damaging sexual distractions and indiscretions—while sexual desires and energies would be beneficially focused within the sphere of marriage. This is a view of the hijab that serves as a commencement point for the remainder of this article.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Extant research has depicted two divergent representations of Muslim women's hijab. One has depicted the hijab as a negative feature that is a manifestation of oppression, subjugation, and abuse of women. The other has represented the hijab as a predominantly positive feature that promotes healthy individuals, marriages, families, and societies.

Nawwal El Saadawi, and Fatima Mernissi, prominent proponents of the first view, have portrayed the act of wearing the hijab as “veiling the brain” (Roald, 2001, p. 256). El Saadawi, for example, has contended that women who decide to veil are positioning themselves to be viewed in an incomplete, even false, context (Roald, 2001). El Saadawi has employed the previously mentioned idea of “veiling the brain” in many of her lectures—based on conclusions drawn from fieldwork methodology. In a related discussion, El Saadawi has written about one of her intelligent relatives who reportedly lost her ability to argue and engage in discussion after she

MEANINGS OF THE HIJAB

decided to commit to the practice of wearing the hijab (Roald, 2001). This story was used by El Saadawi as evidence that the head covering for Muslim women is not limited to only covering a woman's head and body, but that it also "covers" or at least constrains her intellectual ability and capacity to act and interact with her society (Roald, 2001). Like El Saadawi, Mernissi (1987) has opposed the practice of covering the head and body by Muslim women and has argued that wearing the hijab is neither socially important nor religiously obliged. She reported, based on studying verses relating to the hijab in the Muslim's holy book, the Koran, that she could see no clear evidence justifying such a practice (Mernissi, 1987). Ahmed (1992), in her volume entitled *Woman and Gender in Islam*, has similarly contended that wearing the hijab as a religious obligation and commandment should only be applied to the prophet's wives, rather than to every Muslim woman. Ahmed (1992) offers as rationale the Koranic passage, "Oh prophet! Tell your wives and your daughters and the wives of the believers that they should draw over themselves some of their outer garments" (Koran 33:59).

Alternatively, the idea of the hijab as a symbol of oppression and ignorance has been contested by some Islamic scholars as well as some social researchers who have studied related issues. Mai Yamani (1996), a researcher of women in Islam, has contended that the significance of the hijab in the Islamist movement is central and that the advantages of the hijab can extend into the social and economic aspects of Muslims' lives. Some have also indicated a distinction between compulsory hijab and volitional hijab, positing that the latter practice can carry with it a variety of meanings as determined by the woman who is choosing to cover.

An additional and apparently related perspective, offered by Mojab (2001) and endorsed by some Islamic feminists, is the notion of compatibility between Islam and gender equality. Mojab has contended that the hijab is not a symbol of oppression; rather it is an interconnecting

MEANINGS OF THE HIJAB

of the woman's religiosity, identity, and socio-politics. This conclusion was likewise reached by Grima (2013), who studied the meaning of the hijab for Muslim women by interviewing eleven women who wear the hijab and five others who do not. Grima (2013) reported that veiling, for these women, involved a personal process of interaction and reflection that resulted in a serious decision to commit to wearing the hijab which was taken with a long-term conviction and that the decisions was neither impulsive act nor an act of compliance. The previously reflected views of El Saadawi, Mernissi, and Ahmad are contrasted by Grima's (2013) report that:

The women's confidence in speaking about the sense of completeness, once the hijab is put on never to be removed, shows an ascetic aspect of: [a] self-discipline and control; of [b] giving up other forms of dress; and of [c] consciously endorsing the responsibility of moral behavior. This clearly goes beyond the aesthetic perspective of the hijab (p. 470).

Likewise, several scholars who studied the issue of wearing the hijab among Muslim women have arrived at a conclusion that many Muslim women who veil seem to be fully engaged with the hijab, as they are active beings in their decisions to learn, reflect, and freely choose to either veil or not to veil. Afshar, a scholar who has conducted research on Iranian women, has reported:

Islamic women are particularly defensive of the veil. The actual imposition of the veil and the form it has taken is a contested domain. Nevertheless, many Muslim women have chosen the veil as the symbol of Islamisation and have accepted it as the public face of their revivalist position. For them the veil is liberating, and not an oppressive force. They maintain that the veil enables them to become the observers and not the observed, that it liberates them from the dictates of the fashion industry and the demands of the beauty myth. In the context of the patriarchal structures that shape women's lives, the veil is a means of bypassing sexual harassment and gaining respect. In Iran, it is seen as means of

MEANINGS OF THE HIJAB

liberation from the plight of being the unveiled, exploited slaves of imperialism and [that the veil is helpful in] facilitating their full participation in the public domain (cf. Yamani, 1996, p. 201).

McGinty (2014) has recently explored the experiential and emotional dimensions of veiling practices in relation to Muslim women's community activism. In presenting and analyzing the life narratives of five Palestinian American Muslim women, McGinty provided insights into the intertwining of the internal and external process of veiling which seemed to entail both the emotional and socio-spatial developments of these women. McGinty concluded that the hijab seemed to guide these women's sense of personal virtue and self-transformation, as well as contributing to the solidification of their political and religious identity.

In his book, *Hijab: The Islamic Modest Dress*, Murtaza Mutahhari (2007) attempted to provide a comprehensive Islamic theory of hijab, based on the Koran's teachings and the prophet's traditions. Mutahhari's position was that the philosophy and meaning behind the hijab are closely tied to the regulation of men's and women's sexual desires and enjoyments by limiting them to marriage, in order to establish and promote healthy individuals, secure marriages, and productive societies. Indeed, Mutahhari emphasized that the benefits of a woman's hijab have the potential to reach the individual/psychological, familial/relational, and the communal/social aspects of her life. He pointed to statistics that may indicate that in more permissive societies with fewer social limitations on sexual activity, individuals seem to face greater psychological illness than people who live in societies that have stricter limitations on sexual expression. Mutahhari (2007) further stated:

The philosophy of the modest dress and the control of sexual desires other than with a legal wife, from the point of view of the family unit, is so that one legal partner will be

MEANINGS OF THE HIJAB

the cause for the well-being of the other, whereas in the system of free sexual relationships, one's legal partner is psychologically considered as a competitor, someone who gets in the way of that person's "fun" like a prison guard. As a result, the basis for the family becomes enmity and hatred. . . . The difference between the society which limits sexual relations to the family environment and a legal marriage [in] a society which promotes free relationships is that marriage in the first society is the end to the anticipation and deprivation whereas in the latter, it is the beginning of deprivation and limitation. In the system of free sexual relationships, the marriage contract ends the free period of boys and girls and it obliges them to learn to be loyal to each other, whereas in the Islamic system, their deprivation and anticipation is met (p. 20).

Mutahhari concluded that the hijab has a tendency to confirm the roots of the family and that it promotes stable and faithful marital relations, as well as preventing the relationship between husband and wife from growing cold and emotionless.

The discernible contradictions in the purported meanings of the hijab in extant scholarship have been delineated by Fernea (1993) who has noted that the hijab in Eastern and Western cultures, and even within varied Muslim societies, means different things. Indeed, distinctions can be seen by looking at the variation in the hijab styles Muslim women wear. Styles range from monochromatic, even plain black or white, to very colorful, even ostentatious. Personal presentation appears to be connected to variant understanding of the meaning behind veiling. Consistent with Fernea's review, a monolithic presentation or imposed interpretation of the hijab is unnecessarily and inaccurately simplistic. An array of insider perspectives appear to be in play and, in terms of family and social science, a willingness to listen to pluralistic voices seems a more promising approach than to argue for a single overriding "meaning" of the hijab.

MEANINGS OF THE HIJAB

The purpose of the present paper is to progress beyond theory and to explore the influence that the hijab reportedly has on familial relationships. More specifically, this study aims to present the personal understandings and attributed meanings of the hijab for wives and husbands in highly religious Shia and Sunni Muslim families living in the United States. We also explore their expressed interpretations of the roles the hijab plays in their marital and parenting life. Such an approach has rarely been taken before (Alghafli, 2015). The effort is intended not as an argument that the presented views are “the” truth about the hijab but rather that the perspectives obtained offer something important and value added to understandings of Islam and the hijab in a marital and family context in the United States.

METHODOLOGY

The sensitive nature of both religion and family relationships as topics has led our broader research team to favor a qualitative interview strategy that has involved both wives and husbands in an array of related work¹ (e.g., Batson & Marks, 2008; Goodman et al., 2012, 2013; Lu et al., 2012, 2013; Marks, Hopkins, Nesteruk, Chaney, & Baumgartner, 2012). As researchers, our overarching research aim in the present article and research effort was to explore not only what meanings and interpretations Muslim couples (wives and husbands) offered regarding the wearing of the hijab, but also to examine if and how these constructed meanings reportedly influenced their marital and family lives. We attempted to understand (through their insights, meaning making, and narratives) the influence the hijab has on the way they view, treat, and interact with one another as spouses; as well as how they view and mesh with dominant (non-Muslim, Western) culture and society. Our research methodology and data collection approach were qualitative and exploratory.

¹ For details, please see <https://americanfamiliesoffaith.byu.edu>

MEANINGS OF THE HIJAB

Our aim was to consider the participants' view of the hijab as an important departure for the data analysis. Therefore, three direct questions about the connection between the hijab and familial life were asked, including: (1) Does the hijab influence your marriage?; (2) If so, what are the impacts of the hijab on your marriage as a couple who lives in the United States?; and (3) What does the hijab mean to you as a wife/husband? (and) Does the hijab affect your relationship? Examples of indirect questions that led most couples to talk about the hijab included: Are there faith practices/traditions that hold special meaning for you as a family?; (and) What do your non-religious friends or family members think you give up because of your faith? The foundational approach we applied was grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), blended with a team-based approach to qualitative coding developed by the second author (Marks, 2015)—in collaboration with Professors Dave Dollahite and Katie Cherry.

Our study involved in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 20 Muslim couples (6 Shia Muslim couples, and 14 Sunni Muslim couples) whose ages varied between 26 and 63. These couples were recruited within the four regions of the United States²—and included participants with diverse racial and ethnic origins [including African/African American, Arab/Arab American (from Iraq, Jordan, and Palestine), European American, Indian (India), and Iranian participants]. The combined sample was also diverse in terms of socioeconomic status (education levels ranged from completing some high school to completing Ph.D./M.D. degrees).

The participant sample of this study included only religiously involved Muslim wives and husbands who were married and had at least one child, with an average of four children in each

² Eighteen of the 20 families interviewed for the present article were interviewed while the first and/or second authors were affiliated with Louisiana State University. The two additional interviews were conducted while the second author was affiliated with the University of Delaware. In both cases, the research was independent and unfunded, although these data are now part of a 200 family data set, the *American Families of Faith* project that has received funding.

MEANINGS OF THE HIJAB

family. The presence of children allowed the researchers to examine both marital and parent-child relationships. All wives that were interviewed were wearing the hijab at the time of the interview, but had been doing so for varying portions of their lives (as discussed later).

The authors of this study share an agreement on reflexivity or revealing biases and experiences that relate to the data being considered, and in the spirit of transparency and authenticity we share the following: Like the participants, the four authors are all married. Further, all of us are parents. In terms of religious involvement and affiliation, the first author is a Shia Muslim woman who wears the hijab; the other authors are members of LDS faith communities. Thus, our research team included researchers with both insider and outsider perspectives (Daly, 2007; Marks, 2015).

In the interviews, both husband and wife were present and interviewed simultaneously so that three perspectives of one reality were captured (i.e., wife's report, husband's report, and interviewer's observations). The practice of joint couple interviewing has been extolled by some researchers as potentially synergistic (Dollahite, Hawkins, & Parr, 2012; Marks et al., 2008), but has been criticized by others as ineffectively dealing with issues of gender, power, social desirability effects, and other potential problems (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Dwyer & Chauveron, 2016). From a standpoint of methodological rigor, the argument has been cogently made that an ideal approach to couple interviewing might well include: (a) interviewing a wife separately, (b) interviewing a husband separately, and then (c) interviewing the couple together (Dwyer & Chauveron, 2016). The second author has employed this methodology elsewhere with benefit (Plaque, Marks, & Hawkins, 2016), but it is costly. The interview length in the present study varied from two to four hours and tripling that time is not feasible for most families. A more important issue, however, is one of cultural sensitivity. As we discuss later in this article, the

MEANINGS OF THE HIJAB

beliefs of many Muslims prohibit physical contact (including shaking hands) across gender lines. For some, this restriction also extends to discouraging (or at least minimizing) “unnecessary” conversation with unrelated members of the opposite sex (a point addressed in the Findings section of the present study). Accordingly, for a female interviewer to request a 90-120 minute solo interview with a Muslim woman’s husband—or for a male interviewer to similarly request a solo interview a Muslim wife—would be culturally inappropriate and offensive. Variations regarding boundaries in across-gender relations exist in many other faiths as well, and an effective researcher must navigate those boundaries with sensitivity.

Following digital recording of the interviews and completion of verbatim transcriptions, each interview was analyzed using a technique that combined elements of analytic induction and grounded theory, into what Daly (2007) has referred to as an abductive approach. For the grounded theory portion of the analyses, an “open coding” approach was used in order to determine emergent themes relating to the hijab, as discussed next.

FINDINGS

The participants’ qualitative reports seemed consistent with previous work that for many highly religious individuals, “The profound [dualities] of stigma and self-knowledge, sacrifice and gain, and pain and joy often seemed to meld together” (Marks, 2002, p. 41). More specifically, as we analyzed the interview data three major hijab-related themes emerged, including: 1) The hijab as a symbol of religious commitment; (2) The hijab as a tool of protection, rather than oppression, for women and families; and (3) Two different views of Muslims’ reasoning behind the hijab.

Theme 1. The *Hijab* as a Symbol of Religious Commitment

MEANINGS OF THE HIJAB

According to most interpretations of Islamic law, or *Sharia*, the hijab is one of the major precepts a Muslim woman should follow (Alghafli, Hatch, & Marks, 2014b, 2014c). The majority of the participants in this study, wives and husbands, explicitly or implicitly mentioned that how a Muslim woman dresses in public is an indicator of her level of religious commitment, as illustrated by these excerpts:

*Maytham*³ (Shia husband): I think [my wife's hijab] is a really good sign for me in two ways. One way is [that it] indicates the general [religious] belief of my wife. So when someone such as my wife is ready to take [on] the burden and take the hard time [to wear the hijab, especially] when it is hot in summer . . . [and she makes the effort to] wear extra clothes and be careful about that, this is not something that you naturally want to do. In winter you can say, "That is okay, I can wear extra clothes." But when it comes to summer and someone is happily obeying what she is seeing [as] part of religion, and part of faith, it makes me pleased with her. And she has no complaint about it. Nothing. And she does it. *It is a good indicator of the depth of faith . . .* which makes me happy.

Maytham subsequently discussed another symbolic meaning of the hijab as a husband and man.

[There is another] particular [benefit] about covering up: This is also pleasant for me to see that she is observing chastity by wearing modest clothes and covering herself. So I think if I can put it in this way, one part of me which is more related to religious and faith is happy with it and the other part of me as a man is also happy with it. So in both aspects I am happy with [her decision to cover].

Maytham summarized by explaining that, for him, his wife Bahira's decision to veil in a culture that views the practice as peculiar conveys the reported message, "As long as I am doing the

³ All participants' names have been replaced with pseudonyms to preserve anonymity.

MEANINGS OF THE HIJAB

right thing [and honoring] someone that I care about, I do not care what others think.” This conviction of Bahira’s is one that Maytham honored in his wife.

Moayed, a Shia husband, identified the hijab as a major characteristic a devout Muslim man should consider when looking for his life-long partner and the mother of his future children.

Moayed reflected:

When I was looking to establish a family and to get married, I was looking for a lady who wears hijab, and this is one of the things I was looking for in the woman I [would] propose to. . . . It is not that she is committing to me; it is something between her and Allah.

Scholarship on husbands’ perspectives on the hijab is rare, and these data offer novel insight and context. Another husband, Hassan, similarly mentioned that the hijab, for him, was the “number one feature” when selecting his wife. Hassan justified his strong belief in the hijab saying, “When a woman has a hijab, the other things would follow, too.” Hassan’s implication was that those “other things” are qualities that are found in a devout Muslim woman—qualities that purportedly support a strong, healthy marriage.

Maryam, Hassan’s wife, agreed with her husband on the importance of the hijab, and considered it to be one of the most important customs a Muslim woman should honor in order to show commitment to her religion. However, for Maryam, the clothing-related aspect of the hijab “is not everything.” She explained that although the hijab includes covering the head and the body, that this not enough. Maryam discussed her belief that the hijab:

is not the only thing that can protect [a woman]. I have to have some other characteristics to protect myself, not just the hijab. It includes even the way I talk to men.

MEANINGS OF THE HIJAB

As illustrated in the aforementioned quotes, a woman's hijab and the way she dresses in public can reportedly communicate a great deal about her commitment to her religion, but for some the hijab runs much deeper than "just" clothing and covering. For Hassan, Maryam, Maytham, Moayed, and many other participants, the hijab was viewed as more than a head and body covering. It is rather a symbolic indicator of how important Islam is to the lady herself. When participants were asked about the connection between the hijab and family life, the common answer among most of them was that the hijab is "a protection." This view of the hijab as a protective force is exemplified in participants' words in the next section.

Theme 2. The *Hijab* as a Tool of Protection, Rather than Oppression, for Women and Families

This theme depicts the connections participants seemed to draw between the concept of the hijab in Islam and their marital and familial relationships. Many explicitly stated that the hijab can positively influence various family members, including the wife, husband, and their children. Special emphasis was given to the hijab as a tool of protection for people who live in a "permissive" society like the United States. The following interview excerpt by Maytham is illustrative:

Maytham (Shia husband): In a permissive society like American society, you need some extra barriers between you and things that happen there. I am not saying that you need to separate yourself from society itself, but [you must stay away] from bad things in society. . . Having the hijab is helping us—not only her, but also me—to keep away from things we do not like and stick to things we do like.

Hameidah, a Shia wife, explained that the hijab places certain social expectations on a Muslim woman that help to prevent her from engaging in inappropriate behaviors. She said:

MEANINGS OF THE HIJAB

With the hijab, it will be so awkward [to go to bars]. Everyone will start saying, “. . . Look at this woman! She is with this hijab and with this covering, [and] she came to this place!”

Mokthar, Hameidah’s husband, added that this idea of isolating oneself from inappropriate influence due to the hijab is not restricted to women:

Sometimes my friends come and tell me, “Let’s go and see the bar in New Orleans.” I can’t go, it is not a place for [Muslims]. That protects us, the hijab or our practice. For example, when we went to St. Louis, some places we could not eat. We had to be in certain places to perform our prayer. I mean [the hijab] is really helpful for us.

According to several participants, the visibility and protective aspects of the hijab are essential elements of the practice. Many participants (including Shia and Sunni, wives and husbands) stated that the way a woman dresses communicates her intentions to the other gender. Thus, the hijab, as a sign of modesty, would be more likely to create a barrier between a woman and other men in society, so that she is more protected. Some female participants shared life experiences and stories, conveying their perceptions that the hijab has protected them from being sexually harassed. As a result, the hijab for these participants reportedly meant protection rather than oppression. Jane, an adult convert to Sunni Islam, explained:

I cover my head. Why do I cover my head? Because in our religion, I do not want men to flirt with me. Let’s face it, if I were standing next to a woman in a bikini, men would lust over her and not over me. I don’t want men to lust over me, whether I’m married or not. One of the ways to prevent that is to cover up. . . . I don’t call this a sacrifice. Think about all the women who spend hours and hours doing their hair, I don’t have [to do] that. . . . I used to have to get up at the crack of dawn to style. [Now] I can get up and wash it, dry

MEANINGS OF THE HIJAB

it, braid it, and go. I don't have that pressure or the pressure of wearing fad clothes. I don't think it's a sacrifice in any way. I think I gained beyond my wildest dreams. . . I feel that in Islam, I have more rights than I did before.

Jane's view was consistent with Mutahhari who implied that, in general, individuals' choices of clothing and presentation communicate their intentions. Mutahhari (2007) stated:

Sometimes the clothes of an individual speak. His or her shoes speak. The way she or he talks says something else. Take a man, for instance, who speaks in such a way so as to say, "Fear me," or dresses in such a way . . . [that he] communicates to the people, "Respect me" (p. 53).

For some, clothing is indeed a language. Alya, who (like Jane) was an adult convert to Islam, reflected how she thought non-Muslim Americans perceived her hijab and body covering:

A lot of [my American, non-Muslim friends] have not really grasped the concept of wearing hijab, like [my] scarf and being modestly dressed. They are like, "Aren't you [feeling] hot? We have never seen your hair [or] what your hair looks like." I think they think that I have lost my freedom to just show myself off, and to me [it] is not a loss. It is more freedom to know that I do not have to primp and [be shown] off for the rest of the world.

Like Jane (referenced earlier) and Alya (immediately previous), Yanna, another adult convert to Islam, mentioned rights and expressed that Islam provides her with more rights than she had before her conversion. Similarly, writer Nadia Malik has remarked that her hijab made her feel liberated and commented, "How can I explain to people who see hijab as a tool of oppression that [deciding to wear it] was one of the most liberating experiences of my life?"

MEANINGS OF THE HIJAB

Discussion of the hijab in the interviews often stimulated participant discussion regarding the idea of gender separation. Two subsequent camps of thought emerged. Some of the participants reportedly thought that the concept of the hijab involved both a physical covering and in a sharp gender separation designed to protect family relationships. The proponents of this view seemed to believe that the purpose behind the hijab, which they deemed to be protection, could not be achieved without both the physical covering *and* gender separation. A husband named Ali said:

Something we have grown to agree about [is] that there has to be a gender separation in the sense that she would not communicate . . . much across gender and [that] she would [dress] conservatively. That keeps the woman away from a strange man and by covering half of her face or more. What this does is block identity, because if you have many people who dress that [modest] way, the woman is not going to be talked about. So if they dress that way there is a barrier and I think that is what hijab is in Islam.

Several participants expressed the idea that gender separation is a key factor for a healthy marriage, and the lack of it would promote marital infidelity. Another participant, Alya, compared her marriage that is based on Islamic law (*Sharia*) with the marriage of her non-Muslim brother and opined that most of her brother's marital problems would likely be prevented by following the Islamic rules, especially gender separation. Alya stated:

When I look at my brother's relationship, a lot [of] where their problems come in are things that are solved by our religion. You are not allowed to be with "non-*mahrims*" [any man other than father, brother, husband, son, grandfather, grandson, uncle, and father-in-law] in one room without someone else. [In my brother's world] there is drinking and acting in certain ways. When women are modestly covered, it fixes a lot of

MEANINGS OF THE HIJAB

problems that affect other marriages. [This is] how it is in Islam. . . . [When you mix too much with the other gender] there is infidelity [in thought], even if you are not cheating [in action]. In our religion, it's cut off. . . . A man and woman who are not *mahram* or who are not family [are not allowed] to be just chit-chatting and just seeing each other [without the woman modestly] covered. So you are supposed to lower your gaze, so you are not staring or making the connection. So I think it kind of corrects that situation because it . . . takes a lot of the opportunities [to form opposite-sex relationships] away.

The majority of the wives in the study explicitly stated that their husbands' opinions and comments about their hijab and the way they dress in public do not bother them or make them feel oppressed. Some even reported feeling cared about when their husbands support them in their efforts to dress more modestly. The following excerpts illustrate this notion:

Horyiah (Shia wife): When my husband asks me to dress up modestly, I feel that he wants to protect me. When sometimes my hair is showing and he tells me it is showing, I appreciate it. I like it. I ask him, "You are a man and you can see me from a man's perspective, so please tell me," and if he does not tell me, I will be sad.

Entisar (Shia wife): Hijab is part of our faith. So, if he asks me to wear hijab or to wear more modest clothes, that makes me happier because he wants to protect me more, he loves me more. I feel I like that.

Another woman named Kalthoom expressed her frustration with her husband, who (initially, after immigration), asked her not to cover her face in America. She reported that by convincing him of the importance of the face covering, she achieved a great deal of satisfaction. Kalthoom shared the following to demonstrate that her husband now reminds her.

MEANINGS OF THE HIJAB

I actually do not wear the *Niqab* (face cover) [when we are in our car traveling] on the road because . . . in America, nobody looks inside the car [when you are driving]. It is not like back home (in India). That is why if I go back home, I would wear it all the time [when I am outside the house, even in the car]. In America, when we go somewhere in car, I do not wear it. But when my husband is reaching a slow point, I usually wear it. Sometimes, I do not and my husband would say, “Do not you think you should wear it now?” For me, that is such a satisfying moment [when he reminds me to veil].

This idea also emerged with a converted Muslim woman, Alya. When she was asked, “How would you take your husband’s input and opinion on your hijab?” she answered:

When my husband gives his opinion of my hijab, it does make me feel more protected. . . I think it does make me feel like he cares. But then, on the other hand, because of the [Western] culture I grew up in and that I came from, and the way my mother is, [part of me feels oppositional]. The way I learned from her is: “I am going to dress the way I am going to dress! It is none of your business!” But the way in Islam, knowing why and the reason behind the hijab, I can take a step back and tell myself, “You know, you’ve been a little too reactionary.” So it does make me feel that he loves me more and he is trying to protect me. . . It really does. But, being raised by a feminist-type woman who is like, “Do not tell me what to wear,” [I still hear her voice]. But, as the rational woman I would hope I am . . . I can see that [hijab] has its place in society and in marriage.

Notice that Alya used the word “rational” while explaining her choice to wear the hijab. For her, this decision reportedly makes sense logically and is empowering—although she confesses occasional related struggles. Despite the agreement most participants had about the positive influence of the hijab on their marriages and relationships, the way they understood and

MEANINGS OF THE HIJAB

defined the hijab seemed to vary somewhat from person to person, even among our highly religious sample. At least two different prevailing views about the hijab and how it should be understood and applied in Muslims' lives emerged. The two views are presented next.

Theme 3. Two Different Views of Muslims' Reasoning Behind the *Hijab*

The data appeared to indicate agreement among participants about the hijab as a tool of protection, rather than oppression, however, differences emerged regarding individuals' understandings of the reasoning and purpose behind the hijab. A majority reportedly thought a primary reason behind the hijab was to protect women from being harassed or "hit on" by men. Many with this view expressed the belief that Muslim women with the hijab should be involved in society with relatively unlimited interaction with the opposite gender while deriving protection from the hijab. This idea was clearly illustrated by the following interview excerpts:

Ahmad (Shia husband): If a lady has hijab, that does not mean she does not go to school, or she can't go to work. [To think that way] is hurting you. If you have hijab, you have to go and get more education. Now you are protected. You have more duty.

Likewise, *Maryam* (a Shia wife) criticized the behavior of some Muslim men who show disapproval of their wives' interaction with non-kin males:

Some men like . . . their wives not to talk to any man. I do not agree with that. I believe [a Muslim] woman can talk with men and discuss with them and interact with them. A woman can talk to men with confidence to show who she is and [know] who they are. That can help and it is also part of hijab, for me. But I know lots of Muslim men [who] do not believe in that.

Alya (*Shia* wife) saw Muslim women's appropriate interactions with both genders as a way to project Islam in a positive light. She explained her perspective as follows:

MEANINGS OF THE HIJAB

I do go out a lot and I have cultivated friendships . . . [with] people who are in the store or cashiers, just people whom you see out regularly, teachers for the kids' school. So I see people and I guess because we are Muslim women, we have to project Islam. There is no way around it. By wearing the hijab, we are the flag bearer for the religion. So the way we act, the way we interact with people [is important]. So for my understanding, I can't cut myself off. I have to be out there, I have to be able to talk.

The above perspectives seem to be consistent with Mutahhari's (2007) view of the Muslim woman's hijab and how it should be applied in society. Specifically, Mutahhari emphasized the importance of a woman's participation and involvement in society:

In Islam, there is no question of the modest dress prohibiting a woman from participating in cultural, social, or economic activities. Islam neither says that a woman cannot leave her home nor does it say that she cannot seek knowledge and learning. Rather, men and women must both learn and seek knowledge. There is no objection to women's economic activities in Islam. Islam has never wanted women to be useless and unoccupied. It has never desired that women bring up useless and indifferent children. The covering of the body, except for the face and hands, is not to prevent any kind of cultural or social or economic activity. That which paralyses the working force is the corruption of the work environment by the element of seeking the satisfaction of sexual pleasures (p. 23).

Many of the participants, however, apparently held to a view of gender separation that was more rigidly defined than Mutahhari's position. Several participants talked about the hijab as a symbol of something deeper than just covering women's hair and bodies. They emphasized modesty and shyness as the "real" concepts that the hijab reflects and that the hijab is not exclusively for women—it is for men as well. This second set of participants emphasized

MEANINGS OF THE HIJAB

complete (or at least pronounced) gender separation as a major part of the hijab. They stressed that under the physical hijab there should be a spiritual shyness that prevents not only women, but also men, from being too open with the opposite gender, unless there is a real necessity. Moreover, when it is essential for a man and a woman to communicate, their interaction should be limited to what is important, without being distracted by superficial appearances or by the body itself. The following quotes demonstrated and reflected this separatist group's point of view.

Kalthoom, a Shia wife, similarly expanded upon her understanding of the purpose of the hijab as promoting a complete separation between both genders. She explained:

In my opinion, hijab is not just about clothes. It is a whole institution of separation [between men and women] that was made by the Creator of everything. God has set certain standards. According to my religious belief . . . one of the things is modesty at a level where you have to totally ignore the other gender. . . . That is a sacrifice, especially when you are a teenager.

Ali similarly explained:

We do not believe in the issue of hijab as [strictly an item of clothing as] a main thing. hijab is a [way of] dress [but] we believe in a more general concept of hijab, which is “*Hayaa*,” shyness. We believe that *Hayaa* is precedent over hijab. *Hayaa* is the [core] principle. Hijab is one of the implementations of this principle and we think that the concept of *Hayaa* has been misused. . . . A lot of people think that *Hayaa* does not exist and . . . (that) hijab where you dress in a certain fashion where you cover your hair and then you do whatever you want to do and then you go on and you violate a lot of the principles of modesty and principles of shyness and separation. We believe in the reverse.

MEANINGS OF THE HIJAB

We believe that *Hayaa* and shyness is the most prominent thing and hijab is one of the implementations that come under [*Hayaa*].

A husband named Maytham thought that viewing the hijab merely as a piece of cloth that covers the woman's body oversimplified the deeper meaning behind it. He said:

One thing that many other brothers and sisters may have talked about is how much you can extend the concept of hijab into other aspects of life. We all know what hijab means. It means covering up your body, basically if you want to simplify that . . . [but] is it only covering your body and then do whatever you want? Or is it something that needs to be extended and become a culture—how you behave and how you talk, how you think, and how you interact with other people in society?

Maytham further illustrated his view that the hijab is more than “covering up your body” by sharing some details of meeting and interacting with the woman who would become his wife:

When we first met, we had some common project [at school]. And we had a really good time talking to each other and discussing things and working together. But that was quite pure, like two people working. There were no extra feelings involved and we both [made] lots of observations of each other, being quite careful and quite distant and sticking to the topic. . . . We were . . . cautious . . . whatever we talked about was what we are supposed to do [in] that environment. Nothing more than that. No joking, no extra talk, no personal talk, nothing about ourselves or about our families . . . no looking, nothing. So I think if I want to answer your question, I think that God has guided me to the right point and then has made everything work out really fine. The . . . life we have is really good. I would say that God has favored us . . . with this marriage.

MEANINGS OF THE HIJAB

Like Maytham, some participants believed the hijab to be fundamentally a matter of behavior, rather than a way of dressing. A husband named Hassan presented this view:

I do not think that hijab is just covering the head and your body; it is part of it. Hijab is a behavior. So, covering is part of it, [but] not all of it. It should come with suitable behavior that matches with hijab. And as [my wife] said, makeup is part of that. [Also], you can't have a good hijab and go with men and say things and laugh with them . . . that is not hijab. Hijab must come with behaviors that match with it. . . . To have hijab, women should stay as far as possible from men unless they have something very necessary that causes them to be together.

As we conclude the findings section, it is important to note that commitment to the hijab came at a price—including social and physical costs. Covering the head and whole body outside their homes is uncomfortable for many women who wear the hijab, especially during the hot summer months. More significantly, covering her head distinguishes a practicing Muslim woman as being different from other women in American society and opens her to anti-Muslim stigma and bigotry. This study's participants, however, were rather minimalist when talking about these social and physical costs and discomforts. On the other hand, when framing the perceived benefits they received from being committed to the hijab and modesty, their words seem to reflect pride and devotion. Noted benefits included creating a tangible barrier between themselves and what one participant (Maytham) called “the dark side of the society”—and the benefit that, for women, the hijab protects them from being sexually harassed when engaging with male society.

Despite the difficulties of covering up the whole body, especially in the summer, and in spite of dressing differently than the majority of U.S. residents, Muslim women in this study

MEANINGS OF THE HIJAB

nevertheless reportedly viewed the hijab as possessing both a symbolic element and a functional element, as the hijab reportedly promoted protection for their marital relationships. Many female participants seemed not to be merely “compliant” but were instead assertive and deeply persuaded in abiding by the principle of the hijab. Indeed, for both women and men, the hijab symbolized commitment to Islam itself.

DISCUSSION

In the current study we attempted to investigate the relationship between Muslim women’s hijab, marriage, and family among an under-researched population—Muslim families who live in the United States. Specifically, the study explored the influence of the Islamic dress code of hijab in the lives of highly religious, married Muslim couples from a close-at-hand perspective. The present sample was a purposive (religiously involved) one, as opposed to a representative or generalizable sample, so caution is needed in transferring findings. With respect to transferability, this study’s participants were living in the United States and had the attendant freedoms of religion and religious expression and apparently *chose* to wear the hijab. The choice to not veil was unavailable in some of the participants’ nations of origin. Given the wide array of global contexts in which Islam is practiced, special care should be taken not to inappropriately generalize or transfer findings. With these limitations and contextualizing points in mind, the present participants did not report a view that the hijab was oppressive to women or that it limited their freedom; rather, participants, both female and male, seem to have respect for the hijab as both a concept and as a practice. Indeed, most reported that the hijab added value and benefit to their marital relationships when the concept was applied appropriately. However, in spite of a shared commencement point (i.e., religious Muslim families in which the women wore the hijab) and a common context (i.e., the United States), there was still a divergence of views.

MEANINGS OF THE HIJAB

As detailed above, some women (and men) tended to be more permissive and perceived that the primary purpose and meaning behind the hijab was to protect women from being harassed and annoyed by men. By extension, many believed that women with the hijab should be able to interact with society, including males, with more comfort and ease than those without the protection of the hijab.

The second and more separatist-minded group extended and interpreted the concept of hijab and covering to significantly limit Muslim women's interaction with non-kin males in non-essential situations. It is interesting to note that this difference in view was not specific to either the Sunni or Shia branches, or to either female or male participants—it was seen within both groups of Islam and within both genders. For example, both Maryam and Kalthoom were Shia women, but each expressed very different stances on the proper application of the hijab. Maryam, who stressed the importance of Muslim women's engagement in society and confidence when dealing with the other gender, is sharply contrasted by Kalthoom, who emphasized the importance of the total separation between non-related men and women for the hijab to be considered proper and complete.

The disparity in views related to the application of the concept of hijab makes it clear that both researchers and clinicians must be certain of a subject/client's *personal* interpretation and not make a group-based assumptions or generalizations. Drawing on reports both within and outside the present study, the hijab may represent oppressive coercion to one Muslim, a mere piece of cultural cloth to a second, an important symbol of modesty and shyness to a third, or serve as nothing less than a symbol of commitment to one's God and religion for a fourth. Tendencies to attribute a single monolithic meaning to the hijab represent overgeneralizations and inaccuracies.

MEANINGS OF THE HIJAB

Despite the fact that the present study employed a strengths-focused approach (e.g., Defrain & Asay, 2007a, 2007b; Medora, 2006; Peterson, 2007), the intention was not to represent only the positive side of the hijab in the life of Muslim families while disregarding the challenges, conflicts, and difficulties it brings. A primary aim, rather, was to add the voices and perspectives of first-hand insiders to the available portrait that media and other researchers have drawn, so that a broader, more inclusive, and more accurate perspectives of the influence of the hijab on Muslim families and marital relationships are available. Further, we presented perspectives of both women and men, wives and husbands—something rarely done previously. In summary, the study revealed that participants, both wives and husbands, viewed the direction for women to wear the hijab not only as a sacred duty, but many reportedly perceived the hijab as a tool that facilitates the building of healthy individuals, marriages, families, and societies.

Although the sample of the study is not generalizable or sufficient for to draw an accurate, comprehensive picture of the impact the hijab has on Muslim family life, the hope is that the participants' stories, narratives, reflections, and opinions will offer a richer, broader portrait of some practicing Muslim families in the United States, thereby providing a useful and facilitative entree to clinicians, therapists, counselors, educators, and religious leaders of other faiths that will aid their efforts to respectfully interact with Muslim individuals and families.

Increased awareness can also aid researchers in identifying specific laws and customs (*Sharia*) practiced by Muslims and subsequently support an examination of how these laws and customs may influence marriage relationships, parent-child relationships, and parenting styles. Furthermore, the current study can add valuable information about family life, marital relationships, and parenting, as well as expand the family-related horizon of religious leaders

MEANINGS OF THE HIJAB

within Muslim communities, as these leaders are the main source of advice and consultation for many Muslim members (Abdullah, 2007).

Studies addressing the correlation between: (1) religious practices (including the hijab), and (2) family life and relationships are modestly increasing in quantity and quality, but the field is still developing. Thus far, data from available studies indicate that while some religious practices appear to have a modest positive influence on both the relational and individual levels, these studies tend to be based on only one or two indicators (Mahoney, Pargament, Tarakeshwar, & Swank, 2001; Mahoney, 2010). Unfortunately, deeper “mining” into the meanings, modes, and motives of this influence is often not a characteristic of most of the available research in this area (Dollahite et al., 2012; Marks & Dollahite, 2011). Thus, research that advances questions beyond the mechanisms driving these outcomes to investigate the processes behind these religious practices and family correlations is still needed (Burr, Marks, & Day, 2012). Although this study has attempted to uncover some of these deeper faith-family connections, important issues are still in need of extension, clarification, and better understanding. For instance, the sample of the current study included five converted individuals (all women) who reported that the hijab has added value, meaning, and freedom to their lives. Further research is needed to see whether studying larger samples of converted Muslims would reveal the same findings. Also, all the women that have been interviewed in this study are wearing the hijab. Thus, it would add a more complete understanding of the hijab in Muslim families to study Muslim women and wives who are not wearing the hijab to provide an opportunity for comparison and contrast.

On a national scale, previous research has noted that Arabs tend to experience acceptance and acculturation in the United States “to be more difficult than . . . other immigrants” and that acculturation tends to be especially difficult for “those affiliated with Islam” (Faragallah,

MEANINGS OF THE HIJAB

Schumm, & Webb, 1997, p. 182). We see the effort to “break down stereotypical perceptions among non-Muslim[s]” as a valuable one (Schumm & Kohler, 2006, p. 126)—and believe that a willingness to step onto the sacred ground of others with ears ready to listen to their lived experiences and their differing approaches to meaning making is an effective way of pursuing understanding with both validity and humanity.

MEANINGS OF THE HIJAB

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MEANINGS OF THE HIJAB

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