
ABSTRACTS AND RESEARCH BRIEFINGS

Making Muslim Americans: Parenting Practices, Parochial Schools, and the Transmission of Faith Across Generations in Metropolitan Detroit

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This dissertation was completed in 2020 for the degree of PhD in Sociology at City University of New York. The full dissertation, of the same name, can be found online on the CUNY Academic Works site. A list of publications based on the research presented in this dissertation can be found at the end of this abstract.

At present, an estimated 3.45 million Muslims live in the United States, the vast majority of whom are immigrants and the children of immigrants. While religion has typically been found to foster assimilation, the current rampant Islamophobia threatens to challenge this process. This dissertation project intervenes in this empirical puzzle by asking the following research questions: How do we explain the conscious attempt by second-generation Muslim parents to foster a distinctly Muslim and American identity among their children? More specifically, how have the parenting decisions of upper-middle class, second-generation Muslim Americans primed their children for adult life as fully incorporated members of the American mainstream and as devoted members of a religious minority?

To answer these questions, I draw on qualitative data collected among this specific population living in suburban Metropolitan Detroit. During the 2016-2018 academic school years, I interviewed 57 second-generation Muslim parents about their school choice in addition to 15 after-school activity leaders, teachers, and school administrators. I also conducted ethnographic fieldwork by attending school activities, community fundraisers and banquets, and mosque events and holidays.

I found that instead of assimilating entirely after having achieved high levels of socioeconomic success, they worked hard to maintain their minority religious identity and practices even as they moved closer to the American mainstream, in contrast to their first-generation parents and peers, in a process called strategic assimilation. While they did so, the second-generation Muslim Americans in my study sought to shed ethnic attachments in line with their subjective sense of assimilation while giving cultural preference to a pan-ethnic, pan-racial, and decultured Islam (which they referred to as “pure Islam”). My data also revealed how second-generation Muslim parents temporarily created a sacred canopy

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from the religiously particularistic social world of Islamic schools, mosques, and the home (what they termed a “Muslim bubble”) to protect their young children from potentially morally compromising and religiously confusing outside social influences. After carefully creating the bubble, parents then consciously and slowly deflated it to prepare them for life as members of a minority group. Lastly, this project explored the lived experiences of Muslim American parents in the wake of Islamophobia, finding that members of this community simultaneously feared for their personal and community’s safety in the face of such hostility but were also empowered to combat it. Overall, this study contributes to the sociology of immigrant assimilation, the intergenerational transmission of religion, and Islamophobia by providing a detailed portrait of what the everyday lives of second-generation Muslim American families look like.

Publications

Karam, Rebecca A. (Forthcoming). *Making Muslim Americans*. Under contract with New York University Press.

Karam, Rebecca A. 2023. “Soccer Moms and Social Justice: Concerted Cultivation among Affluent Arab Muslim American Families.” in *Uncertain Refuge: Vitality and Vulnerability in Arab Detroit*, edited by A. Shryock, S. Howell, and Y. Hanoosh. Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press.

Karam, Rebecca A. 2021. “Meeting the Moral Markers of Success: Concerted Cultivation among Second-Generation Muslim Parents.” *Sociological Forum* 36, no. 4: 1071-94. doi: 10.1111/socf.12742.

Karam, Rebecca A. 2020. “Becoming American by Becoming Muslim: Strategic Assimilation among Second-Generation Muslim American Parents.” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 43, no. 2: 390-409. doi: 10.1080/01419870.2019.1578396.