SURVIVING PREJUDICE: A FEMINIST ETHNOGRAPHY OF MUSLIM
WOMEN LIVING AND STUDYING
IN MIDDLE TOWN, INDIANA, UNITED STATES

A DISSERTATION
SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE
DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

BY
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Ball State University
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May 2009
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ABSTRACT

**DISSERTATION:** Surviving Prejudice: A Feminist Ethnography of Muslim Women Living and Studying in Middle Town, Indiana, United States

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**DEGREE:** Educational Doctor (Ed. D)

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This study described a subculture of Muslim women who live and study in Middle Town, Indiana and who actively participate in the religious and social activities conducted by the Middle Town Islamic Center. Acting in response to negative stereotyping of this population, this study shines a light on the lives and learning of female Muslim adults in a small Midwestern city. The results of this particular study promoted understanding about female Muslim learners in the United States.

Ethnographic techniques of in-depth, semi-structured interviews and participant observation techniques were used to gather the data, and member checking was also performed to ensure consistency. Doman analysis, as described by Spradley (1979), was the technique used to analyze the data.

The data and analysis suggested some fundamental characteristics of this subculture, *Middle Town Islamic Ladies*. One major finding that could be inferred was the inconsistency between the experiences of the participants with negative stereotyping propagated by some U.S. media and some people in general. Women in this study tended
to be very deliberate in defining their status as women and as learners by examining and referring to the most legitimate resources of Islam: The Qur’an and Hadith. The participants also understood that many interpretations of the Qur’an and Hadith about women are influenced by a patriarchal mindset to preserve cultural beliefs that men are superior to women. Such beliefs are inconsistent with what the Qur’an and Hadith prescribe.

As most of the informants came from different countries, they reported that their cultural expectations influenced their learning styles and their lives in this city. This expectation generated some problems with their comfort in living and studying. However, their faith, their association with the Middle Town Islamic community, especially the Muslim women, family support (especially from their husbands), and harmonious relationships with professors facilitated smooth adjustments to the challenges.

Finally, the findings in this study also introduced teaching strategies and training styles in higher education that would accommodate and emphasize students’ cross-cultural differences.
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All of my committee members have been magnificent. I was on the verge of giving up at a certain point during the process. However, they kept on pushing me to carry on and provided me with any necessary favors and advice to put myself on track again. My special thanks to my Chair, Dr. Michelle Glowacki-Dudka, who went above and beyond to ensure that I would achieve success. She is not only helpful in academic life in general, but she has always been my main cheerleader and a source of inspiration for assisting my future students. I am indebted to her. I thank also Dr. Thalia Mulvihill for her guidance in helping me find my spirit and self-confidence to excel in my thinking and writing. I always felt compelled to do my best work and to continuously improve because I knew that she believed in me and my ability. Thank you to Dr. W. Holmes Finch and Dr. Nazim Ahmed for their sincere understanding, time, and support; to Dr. Peter J. Murk for his constant prayers; to Julia Dotson for her willingness and time to be
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DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my late parents: H. Usman Udin and Hj. Nurma Djarat. I know you did not have the chance to see the fruit of your persistent guidance, love, prayers, and encouragement to help me succeed in all aspect of life here on earth. However, Mom and Dad, you are constantly in my thoughts and prayers. I hope in heaven you will be proud of me.
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CHAPTER I

Introduction


However, Anway (1996) said that regardless of the above statistics, most Americans know little about either the principles of Islam or its history. Badawi (1995) argued that diverse cultural practices among Muslims all around the world may instigate false perceptions about Islam. He stated, “These problems are enhanced by the tendency to treat some juristic interpretations as if they were identical with Islam” (p. ix). He further claimed many Westerners, such as Americans and Europeans, are quick to judge and generalize about the actions of some Islamic cultures, in regards to the treatment of women and Islamic dress. For example, Findley (2001) explained, when Americans and people from other faiths think about Muslim women, one of the first words that come to mind is victim. He further noted that the veil is perceived as a symbol of oppression under a male-dominated and patriarchal system; and the U.S. media consistently depicts Islam as a tool for oppression of women and an institution to be feared. While this may seem to be the reality in some contexts of Islam, it is not true across all cultures and segments of Islam. As Paul Findley, a non-Muslim scholar and a former U.S. congressman who now works on the front line to defend Islam stated:
When I told a Muslim audience in California in 1997 that most Americans believe Muslim women are treated like property and are subjected to discrimination and abuse because of their sex, the women in the audience, obviously scornful of that conclusion, burst into laughter before I finished the sentence. (Findley, 2001, p.151)

There is much research that counters the misconceptions and stigma surrounding Islam. These misconceptions are also addressed by many scholars who are Muslim feminists: (e.g. Amina Wadud, 1992; Azar Tabari, 1982; Mai Yamani, 1996; Ziba Mir-Hosseini, 2001) and by some non-Muslim scholars (e.g. Margot Badran, 1986; Paul Findley, 2001; and Miriam Cooke, 1990). These scholars teach other feminist scholars, in particular, and the public, in general, about the need to distinguish between what Islam really teaches concerning women and how cultural traditions sometimes negate or twist the true Islamic principles for the sake of influence or power.

Bullock (1999) shared the criticism made by many writers regarding the discrepancy between the teachings of Islam and its practice. She noted, “In Islam women have the right to own property, when in actual practice (in some contexts), women may not have the right to own property” (p. 9). Similarly, Keddie (1991) observed many feminists find it is difficult to deal with the veil, with Islam, and with the women who practice this religion. Bullock added:

One group denies that Muslim women are any more oppressed than non-Muslim women argue that in key aspects they have been less oppressed. A second says that oppression is real but extrinsic to Islam; the Qur’an, they say, intended
gender equality, but this was undermined by Arabian patriarchy and foreign importations. (p. 1-2)

Tabari (1982) criticized the fact that Western feminists argue that Islam, like any other patriarchal religion, subordinates women and that Islam does not allow liberation, despite their knowledge of Islamic history and the Qur’anic teachings. She continued by saying that Western feminists are inclined to see that Muslim women need to be liberated, and hence Islam is a threat to feminist movements. In addition, Bullock (1999) wrote “Some of them do not listen well to the voices of covered women…they remain convinced that a satisfying life in the veil is still an oppressed life” (p. 4). Therefore, as a Muslim woman, and a “feminist”, who used to live in Middle Town, Indiana, U.S.A, and working on my doctoral degree in Adult, Higher, and Community Education, I feel the need to address these stereotypes through the stories of Muslim women themselves. I positioned myself as a “learner” who would like to understand the culture of the informants I chose. Wolcott (1990) suggests that an ethnographer should regard his or herself as a participant in interpreting and constructing what he or she observes rather than acting as a recorder of verified data.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to understand the lives of adult women learners who practice Islam in Middle Town, Indiana, and to understand how Islam affects their identity as learners and members of a small predominantly Judeo-Christian community such as this town. The study was based on the experiences of six Muslim women who live and study in various educational institutions in Middle Town, Indiana, USA. There were two reasons to select six women:
1) To get diverse perspectives from adult women learners attending different programs, and

2) To find women who fit the criteria for my study after a preliminary assessment.

Purposive sampling was used to select the informants. Gay, Miller and Airasian (2006) defined that purposive sampling “is the process of selecting a sample that is believed to be representative of a given population” (p. 113). The informants had to be Muslim women who are attending an educational institution and are members of the Middle Town Muslim Center. Their ages range from 19 years old to 50 years old. The women selected for this study have different educational backgrounds; three are graduate students, two are undergraduate students, and one is still working on her two-year program at a community college in Indiana. The women also have different ethnic origins: Mexican, Afghanistani, Arab-Israelite, Palestinian, Iraqi, and American-born Filipino.

Research Questions

The study intended to address the following research questions:

(1) How do these six Muslim women perceive their experience living and studying in Middle Town Indiana, USA?

(2) How does Islam contribute to their sense of identity as learners and as women within a pre-dominantly Judeo-Christian culture?

(3) What are these learners interpretation of the status of women in the Qur’an?

(4) How does their cultural interpretation of Islam affect these women’s self-concept as adult learners?
(5) How do the educational experiences and achievement of these Muslim women impact their lives?

Conceptual Framework

*Islamic Feminism*

Islamic feminism was used as the conceptual framework in this study. I also used some cross-cultural-study principles to guide my interpretation and data analysis.

Rupp and Taylor (1999) asserted:

Feminism is a contested term even in the present, and historical literature is full of kinds of feminists who would surely have had a hard time finding common ground: Nazi feminists, and Jewish feminists, Catholic feminists, socialist feminists, and utopian feminists. (p. 363)

It is a commonly accepted stereotype that the term feminism does not go hand-in-hand with Islamic principles (Bullock, 1999). She noted that Muslim women who label themselves as feminists are seen by the non-Muslim Western people as the ‘liberated Muslims’ or those who have shifted away from following Qur’anic prescriptions about women. Yamani (1996) claimed that many scholars have posited some arguments regarding the ‘incompatibility’ of Islamic teachings with feminist ideology. Moghissi (1998) argued that the term *Islamic feminism* has been used to perpetuate fundamentalist agendas. She called those who identify themselves as Islamic feminists “neoconservative . . . clinging to the illusion of an Islamic path” (p. 121).

Shahidian (1994) opined that the emergence of Islamic feminism was a sign of a “deepening identity crisis” among secular feminists who fail to fight against the fundamentalism in Islam. He argued that the emergence of Islamic feminism is a “false
consciousness” and is an “oxymoron”. In short, he concluded that Islamic feminism has not served as a means to liberate women; it fails to influence the dominant Islamic discourse and practices that seem to oppress women. In addition, he believed that feminist activism among women in many Islamic contexts is inspired by Western feminism instead of the manifestation to implement true Islamic teachings concerning women’s worth.

Mojab (1999) similarly noted that changes the Islamic feminists expect will come from outside of the religious framework—in other words, Islam does not agree with the feminist ideology propagated by many women, and emancipation activists in general. Moghadam (2002) noted, “No reform is possible in an Islamic legal and political system where the very structure of power is male-dominated to an absolute degree” (p. 1151). Afkhami (1995), in addition, states that the epistemology of Islam is contrary to women’s rights.

In contrast, Badran (2002), a non-Muslim scholar, emphasized the need to understand that feminism is not Western. Instead she posited, “Feminisms are produced in particular places and are articulated in local terms” (p. 1). Therefore, she believed that the notion of viewing feminism as a static term that has one true interpretation is not appropriate. Badran (2002) stated, “Feminism is a plant that only grows in its own soil” (p. 2). She asserted that multiple truths that come from the conscience of people regarding the need to see the equal worth of both men and women in all social domains should be embraced and respected. As far as Islamic feminism is concerned, she noted that those who produce and use the term Islamic feminism “include so-called religious Muslims—religiously observant, secular Muslims—whose ways of being Muslim may be
Badran warned that some Muslims feel uncomfortable with the labels that depict the level of religious devotion; therefore, she advised to use the terms carefully by considering the historical and contextual components.

Badran (2000) further explained that Islamic feminists question women’s status in Muslim societies and provide an alternative concept of women’s rights in Islam based on a return to the original sources and their own reading and interpretation of the holy texts. She then claimed that this alternative concept would diminish the binary concept between “religious” and “secular” and between East and West. Badran also suggested that Islamic feminist discourse attempts to blur the gaps; it also emphasizes common goals to further extend the recognition of gender equality and social justice. She then argues that, “Islamic feminism advances women’s rights, gender equality, and social justice using Islamic discourse as its paramount discourse” (p. 4). Based on her opinion and observations as a non-Muslim scholar, she pointed out there are many ayaat (verses) of the Qur’an that seem to declare male/female equality. Badran provided one example such as surah Al-Hujurat that stated:

Oh humankind. We have created you from a single pair of a male and a female and made you into tribes and nations that you may know each other. The most honored of you in the sight of God is the most righteous of you [be it men or women]. (Qur’an, 49:13)

Badran (2002) concluded, “There is no contradiction between being a feminist and being a Muslim” (p. 6). In light of this understanding, according to Badran, the
Islamic feminists have taken three approaches to ensure a system that is more equitable or ensure fuller equality and justice in human interactions:

(1) Revisiting *ayaat* (verses) in the Qur’an to correct false stories in common circulation…

(2) Citing *ayaat* that unequivocally enunciate the equality of women and men

(3) Deconstructing *ayaat* attentive to male and female differences that have been commonly interpreted in ways that justify male domination. (Badran, 2002, p. 6)

Badran shared more examples of the inappropriate interpretation and implementation of the Qur’anic verses or *ayaat*. The Qur’an states at *surah* (chapter) four verses 34 that, “While fundamentally equal, humans have been created biologically different in order to perpetuate species” (Badran, 2002, p. 6). Men, according to the *ayaat* have the full responsibility to provide for the women during child bearing and rearing—the times when women need support the most—and because men are not given the capabilities to bear and nurse children. Thus, this verse does not indicate that women are not allowed to provide for themselves or work. The *ayaat* never emphasizes that males are superior simply because they are the provider of the family for all time.

The Qur’an then stated in *surah* (chapter) nine, verse 71, “The believers, male and female are protectors of one another”. Badran noted that women enjoy both the rights to be provided for and to provide as they wish. They are not obligated to provide for their families; however, should they choose to work or provide for their family, there is no single verse in the Qur’an that prohibits women to do so. Badran acknowledged that Muslim women are often the victims caused by the cultural practices using the banner of Islam that are in fact un-Islamic (2002).
Therefore, Badran (2002) summarized that the Islamic feminist movement attempts to help these women to start analyzing whether the current practices are congruent with what Islam truly prescribes concerning gender equality, social responsibilities, and furthering each gender’s potential. Thus, it benefits all, regardless of the fact that this feminist discourse is articulated within an Islamic paradigm, and is conducted in Islam’s name. She said:

The distinction between (secular) feminist discourse and Islamic feminist discourse is that the latter is a feminism that is articulated within a more exclusive Islamic paradigm. This is not to suggest a binary between secular feminist and Islamic feminist discourse but rather to point to the discursive categories mobilized (2002, p. 7)

In addition, Moghadam (2006) defined Islamic feminism as, “a reform movement that permitted dialogue between religious and secular feminists while also opening the door to new possibilities for gender equality and women’s involvement in religious doctrine and practice” (p. 4).

bell hooks (2000) claimed, “Feminism is a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression” (p. viii) She stated:

It (the definition) makes it clear that the problem is sexism…helps us remember that all of us female and male have been socialized from birth on to accept sexist thought and action. As a consequence, females can be just as sexist as men. (p. ix) hooks wanted people to know that feminism is not about a movement to hate men.

In relation to Islamic feminism, Badran claimed there is no contradiction between being a feminist and a Muslim. She concluded that all verses in the Qur’an that talk about
women may be interpreted to support the very mission of feminism that is eloquently defined by bell hooks: to end sexism, gender exploitation, and oppression (hooks, 2000).

In short, this study used Islamic feminism as the lens to view the informants and analyze their experiences. The lens provided the way of seeing them both as women and as followers of Islam.

Significance of the Study

Freire (1973) wrote that all healthy human beings “relate to their world in a critical way. They apprehend the objective data of their reality through reflection—not by reflex, as do animals” (p. 3). He theorized when a person loses his or her ability to make choices, he or she is no longer the actor who would intervene in reality to change it. This, in itself is unnatural because Freire believed, “The normal role of human beings in and with the world is not a passive one; because they are not limited to the natural sphere” (1973, p. 4). Thus, any act that suppresses, restricts, or limits the expression of thoughts is seen as dehumanization.

Many practices concerning women within Islam may be cultural interpretations of what the Qur’an really teaches and may stand in conflict with other interpretations. For example, according to Mernissi (1992) in some Muslim countries, women are restricted, or being dehumanized in their effort to exercise their rights for free expressions of thoughts and to be actively involved in all social and political aspects of life.

Brooks (1995) wrote very succinctly about her experiences dealing with women from different regions in the Middle East. She found many contradictions between what the Qur’an teaches concerning women and the treatment toward women in these places at that time. Banning women from becoming judges, restricting women’s desire to pursue
their careers, prohibiting women from driving, killing women for family honor, and so forth are some of the realities she observed during her journey. In Indonesia, as one of the countries with the largest Muslim populations, the definition of a successful married woman for instance, is still related to her ability to perfectly balance her duties as a good mother or wife with her career. According to DFID (Department For International Development) (2007) women are still underrepresented in leadership and executive positions due to people’s bias that women need to choose a career that will not contradict with their roles as care givers. It was further found that even though education and participation in all public spheres is strongly encouraged for both men and women, the society still values women who function well in the domestic sector more highly than those who are pursuing their personal interests or aspiration outside their homes. This condition causes friction among the Muslims themselves and promotes criticism from the non-Muslims. Marsot (1996) noted “Both devout Muslims and non-Muslims produce Qur’anic passages: either to show that Islam gave women certain rights or that it did not give women such rights” (p. 33). She further explains that it is clearly specified in the Qur’an that women are equal to men in religious duties and that the term, zawj (a pair), is used to express the equality of both genders.

Therefore, this particular study tried to expand the discussion around the issues of women in terms of how they experience life being a Muslim and a learner and how their religion affects their self-concept. It is important to conduct this study to avoid stereotyping. As asserted by Findley (2001), there is a tendency of Western people especially the ones in the United States to view Islam as a singular entity and as a “threat” to a democratic principle and women’s empowerment. Marsot (1996) warned
that religion is often used to bolster non-religious arguments and conflicts. Therefore, more serious efforts need to be done to prevent people from being unjust in their judgment about Islam in general, and Muslim women in particular. The study can serve as the means to shed light on Muslim women’s lives through their own voices and through an ethnographic understanding of the different perspectives encountered. This study may promote critical thinking about a topic that is controversial and misunderstood, even among the Muslim women themselves.

As was suggested by Halpern (1989):

Learning the skills of clear thinking can help everyone to recognize propaganda and thus not fall prey to it, to analyze the unstated assumptions in arguments, to realize when there is deliberate deception, to consider the credibility of an information source, and to think a problem or a decision through in the best way possible. (p. 7)

Operational Definitions

Although some of the terms used in this study may have many different definitions, I framed my study using the definitions described below:

Allah: Al Lah is the Arabic for the God (Brooks, 1995)

Critical thinking: an investigation whose purpose is to explore a situation, phenomenon, question, or problem, to arrive at a hypothesis or conclusion about it that integrates all available information and that can therefore be convincingly justified” (Kurfiss, 1988, p. 2). Brookfield (1987) asserted that critical thinking has an equivocal nature. It is open to many different interpretations including logical reasoning abilities,
reflective judgment, assumption hunting, the creation, and use and testing of meaning and so forth

Culture: “the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one group from another which is passed from generation to generation, it is changing all the time because each generation adds something of its own before passing it on” (Hofstede, 1980, p. 21-23).

Cultural Competencies: The skills one needs to have to avoid negative consequences caused by one’s encounters with people from different culture (Hofstede, 1980).

Domain analysis: The process of identifying, collecting, organizing, and representing the relevant information in a domain (Spradley 1979).

Ethnography: “Various ways people go about their lives and to the belief systems associated with that behavior” (Wolcott, 1999, p. 25).

Fatwa: A formal legal opinion or a decision by a religious leader on a matter of religious law (Brooks, 1995).

Feminism: Feminism is a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression (bell hooks, 2000).

Feminist ethnography: Research carried out by feminists who focus on gender issues in female-homogeneous traditional or nontraditional settings. In feminist ethnography, the researchers are women, the field sites are sometimes women’s settings, and the key informants are typically women (Reinharz, 1992, p. 55).
Fiqh: Is Islamic jurisprudence. It is an expansion of what is called the Divine Law (Arabic: Sharia), complemented by the rulings (Arabic: fatwa) of Islamic jurists (Arabic: Ulema) to direct the lives of Muslims.

Feast of the sacrifice (Eid-ul-Adha): The last day of the Hajj. All pilgrims, and other Muslims who can afford to, slaughter a sheep or a cow and distribute the meats to the poor (Brooks, 1995).

Hadith: A saying of the Prophet Muhammad; or a saying about him or his teachings by contemporaneous sources (Brooks, 1995).

Haram: Religiously forbidden (Brooks, 1995).

Hijab: Literally: a curtain. Generally, it refers to any women’s dress that follows Islamic principles (Brooks, 1995).

Islam: The religious faith of Muslims, literally, "submission" (to God) (Brooks, 1995).

Islamic feminism: A feminist discourse and practice articulated within an Islamic paradigm (Badran, 2002).

Masjid: A place of Muslim worship (Brooks, 1995).

Mujtahid: A religious scholar who is an authority on Islamic law and may advise others (Mernissi, 1992).

Muslim: Literally, one who submits to God’s will and laws (Brooks, 1995).

Patriarchy: The structuring of society on the basis of family units, in which fathers have primary responsibility for the welfare of their families (bell hooks, 2000).

Qur’an: Literally "the recitation". It is the central religious text of Islam. Muslims believe the Qur'an to be the book of divine guidance and direction for mankind, consider
the text in its original Arabic, to be the literal word of Allah revealed to the Prophet Muhammad over a period of twenty-three years, and view the Qur'an as God's final revelation to humanity (Findley, 2001).

Sharia: Islamic law. Literally, the road to the water hole (Mernissi, 1992).

Sunnah: The traditions of the Prophet Muhammad. Those things that he did himself or were approved of by him or that were done in his presence without earning his disapproval (Brooks, 1995).

Surah: chapter in the Qur’an (Brooks, 1995).

Ulema: A body of religious scholars who interpret Islamic law for the community (Mernissi, 1992).

Limitations of the Study

This study focused on the experience of six Muslim women in Middle Town, Indiana and how they live and learn differently from non-Muslim women. The results of this study are not intended to be generalized to all sub-populations of Muslim women in America. The Muslim population in Middle Town Indiana is small and diverse. Based on my association with the informants, I found out that these women have each come to embrace Islam in their own way with multiple cultures represented. This might impact the consistency and variety of responses about their approach to living and studying in Indiana. The community represented by the ethnographic research design is the existing community in Indiana. The community represents their previous cultures and experiences, but also a synthesis of their current acclimation to this Indiana community.
Furthermore, this study examined the lives of the research subjects through a feminist ethnographic lens. While conclusions drawn about their context and their experience cannot represent all Muslim women in the U.S. or even in Indiana.

Due to the fact that I am also a Muslim woman who used to live and study in the same small city with the informants, bias, inasmuch as my shared religion, may be visible and unavoidable in this research. However, therefore, to ensure believability, I completed six interview sessions with a non-Muslim partner to witness the activities and read my report.

Also, this research was not intended to provide an in-depth scholarly argument about Islamic laws (Sharia). Some portions of the research delved into parts of the Islamic laws; however, due to my limited scholarship in this area, the discussion was restricted to the boundaries set by the established literature review.

Personal Statement

Peshkin (1988) suggests that it is important to be aware of our subjective selves and the role that this subjective self plays in research, since being aware is better than assuming we can be rid of subjectivity. I was constantly reminded that my personal bias might influence or skew any data collection, interpretation, or analysis that I made. Even though subjectivity and researcher’s bias can never be entirely diminished or set aside, revealing the researcher’s philosophy and positionality helps the reader to give fairer judgment toward the message that this research will convey. Eisner (1998) recognized that each individual is different in the way that she or he interprets or responds to certain matters. He said:
The way in which we see and respond to a situation and how we interpret what we see will bear our own signature. This unique signature is not a liability, but a way of providing individual insight into a situation.” (Eisner (1998, p. 34)

Hence, this section described some background information of who I am and the underlying reason to conduct this study.

I am motivated to pursue this topic in order to give a more accurate picture of female Muslims’ lives and the role of Islam toward the formation of Muslim women’s self-identity as learners. This is an effort to counter biased and misleading information propagated by the U.S. media about Islamic teachings concerning women. In this study, a research partner participated in six interview sessions, read the transcripts, and coded a sampling of data looking for bias. She also read parts of my report to ensure consistency, trustworthiness, and credibility. The research partner was referred by my committee chair based on her knowledge about qualitative research. She is a graduate student who comes from different faith (Christian). This research partner helped to give another perspective and judgment for this study.

I positioned myself in this research as a Muslim international female student from Indonesia, who speaks English as a foreign language. Islam has shaped me in many important ways and has been a source of peace and comfort to deal with various problems in life. Being raised in a family who holds Islamic values very highly, I am grateful for my upbringing. Islam has been my way of life and the place where I can seek and understand the main purposes of life, as well as worship God through following His words in the Qur’an and to serve my community. This understanding gives me a sense of
security, optimism, and detailed knowledge to live my life safely and to establish a harmonious and quality relationship with other human beings or living things.

In brief, as far as I am concerned, being a Muslim woman for me does not make me ‘second’ class in the Islamic society. This may be different in other Islamic communities. However, religion can be influenced by many different cultures and climates. Hence, we will see how the informants in this study define their own identity based on their own understanding about Islam.

Theoretical Perspective

Utilizing feminist ethnographic methods as a research design, along with Islamic feminism as the conceptual framework, fits the way I would like to discuss the topic. The study did not lend itself to a full ethnography, since I did not examine the full culture of Muslims in Middle Town. I only looked at a subculture of Muslim women who attend the Middle Town Islamic Center, certain aspects of these women, and their learning within this culture.

This dissertation served as a means to instigate reflection and intellectual dialogue regarding women in Islam. By providing an insight from the point of view of the research participants, I am adding the voice of Muslim women in Indiana. It was expected that this study benefits my research participants by increasing their self-concept as Muslim women. It was also meant to improve understanding about Islam for the larger audience or readers. The current research was an emic piece given my position as a previous member of the subculture. Moreover, the reason I chose this first-person-narrative was part of my strategy of self-discovery. As a Muslim woman living and studying in the United States, I share some of the realities that my key informants experience. Hence,
this kind of research will help resolve problems that I encounter as a Muslim woman. I also hoped to improve the way I deal with the issue advised in the Qur’an, “Invite to the way of your Lord with wisdom (of the Quran) and fair preaching, and argue with them in a way that is better” (al-Nahl 6: 25).
CHAPTER II
Literature Review

Introduction

The literature review for this research examined related research regarding Muslim women as learners. The review provided a basis for understanding how Muslim women perceive their experience living and studying in Middle Town, East Central Indiana.

*Feminism and Islam*

Mai Yamani is one of the Muslim scholars who specifically studied how feminism is situated within an Islamic framework. In her edited book, *Feminism and Islam: Legal and Literary Perspectives* (1996), she shared her belief that there is a wide range of theories and expressions of behaviors related to feminism. She quoted Bouder’s (1993) statement, “Feminists (legal feminists, cultural feminists, liberal feminists and others) do not all think the same way or even about the same kind of problems” (as cited in Yamani, 1996, p. I). Yamani further explained that her book, “adds another layer by introducing a feminism which is Islamic in its form and content” (p. I).

Yamani (1996) further explained Islamic feminism stands its ground by the diversity it includes: “new feminist traditionalists, “pragmatists”, “secular feminists”, and “neo-Islamist”. However, she elaborated that for all this diversity, “there is a common concern with the empowerment of their gender within a retaught Islam” (1996, p. I). Yamani questioned what is considered intrinsically Islamic concerning women and gender. She sought to segregate cultural practices and true Islamic teachings in the
Qur’an. She said, “With respect to ideas about women and gender, they remain complicated by several clichés which have been confused with Islam” (Yamani, 1996, p. 1). Therefore, she suggested that it is important to return to history, reexamine religious texts and law documents in a more critical and objective manner to understand the foundation of Islamic discourse. Stowasser (1994) noted:

The Qur’an has been interpreted and reinterpreted from the time of revelation to the present including by women. Whilst most interpretations have been products of the discourse of male ulama (religious leaders), women’s Islamic discourses are starting to provide significant counterpoints, including the rereading of Islamic religious texts with attention given to the female figures of the early Islamic polity (as cited in Yamani, 1996, p. 2).

*Critical thinking in Islam*

Fatima Mernissi (1992), for example, argued how current practices in many Islamic countries discourage what the Qur’an says about critical thinking and one’s need to master an art of controversy called *jadal* which literally means to contest; although the word is found throughout the Qur’an. Mernissi (1992) reported the words of Abdel Magid Turky, in his book, *The Art of the Techniques of Chaining the Arguments* (1978), “had been condemned by Arab despots and their in-house imams (religious leaders) since its initial publication…they considered it as the most dangerous of books” (p. xvi). According to Mernissi, the book encouraged people to celebrate democratic concepts. Yet Mernissi explained that this democratic concept is not the method that is propagated in many Islamic worlds. Women are the most vulnerable segment in many Islamic cultures. Mernissi (1992) theorized some religious leaders, and those in power, constantly
try to subjugate women’s voices for the sake of influence or to maintain their patriarchal mindset. In addition, Hosseini (2006) boldly wrote:

Muslim jurists claim, and all Muslims believe that justice and equality are intrinsic values and cardinal principles in Islam and the Sharia. If this is the case…Why do Islamic jurisprudential texts—which define the terms of the sharia. . . treat women as second-class citizens and place them under men’s domination? (p. 645)

Mernissi explained that she personally believed in the justice of Islam but she criticized that some of the interpretations of Islamic laws are used to strengthen male-dominated societies. She wrote, “There can be no justice for me, as a Muslim woman, as long as patriarchy is justified and upheld in the name of Islam” (1992, p. 629).

Muslim women learners in America

Carol L. Anway (1996) wrote Daughters of another path; Experiences of American women choosing Islam. Her research findings were based on the questionnaire responses she got from 53 Muslim women who shared their conversion stories. Anway (1996), whose daughter is also one of the converts, noted that 90 percent of the women in the study are married and reflect successful and happy marriages at the time of the survey. She further said that 12 percent of the respondents are working toward college degrees, and their responses represent extremely positive reactions to their chosen lifestyle by contrast to the more negative stories often heard in the media.

Anway (1996) found the reasons for conversion among American born converts are mostly related to the unanswered questions they had regarding religion and the concept of God. These learners by and large found Islam through studying the books, through their association with Muslim friends, and by living in Muslim countries and
college settings. They shared initial rejection from their parents due to the stereotypes that the media portrayed regarding the status of women in Islam. However, according to Anway (1996), the parents become more accepting and tolerant after seeing that Islam has had a positive influence on their daughters’ personalities and lives in general.

According to the Muslim learners in Anway’s (1996) study, Islam has helped them to be more grounded, more relaxed, and more focused in learning specifically and in facing life’s challenges in general. One learner said:

The most meaningful part of Islam for me is the internal process—the prayers and the other reading and spiritual work that is ongoing in my own life for my spiritual development. Being able to stop a few seconds and surrender everything that is going on to Allah for guidance is a major blessing (as cited in Anway, 1996, p. 69).

Anway (1996) found in her study that the extreme change in dress (wearing Hijab and modest dress) has been very difficult to do among some of the respondents. Anway (1996) wrote the reasons:

Many of the women described the discrimination that occurred in the workplace when interviewing for jobs. Some had difficulty dealing with the jeers and name calling experiences in various public places. (p. 76)

One woman wrote:

The only obstacles that have been placed in my way as a Muslim woman have not been from Muslims or Islam, but from the society in which we live. One often feels like a fish swimming upstream in America, like constantly explaining Hijab. I have been denied jobs because of my Hijab and have been otherwise
discriminated against. Nonetheless, I am truly grateful for Hijab. It is liberating in a sense that pro-ERA women will never know. I feel honored to represent Islam in such a powerful way as to be recognized as Muslim whenever I venture out. (as cited in Anway, 1996, p. 78)

Women in Anway’s study also talked about the stereotypes that give Islam a bad name. They shared that Islam is not a prison for women and that Muslim women are not second-class citizens. One woman said, “We do not walk behind our husbands, and we do have inalienable rights” (as cited in Anway, 1996, p. 168). Another woman explained that if Muslim women are oppressed it is because they forsake the true Islam and follow their country’s cultural practices. She suggested Islam should be judged on its own merits, not on the behavior of Muslims, which may be contaminated by their culture. These women (unanimously) believed Islam is a perfect system created by God that should be used to guide every aspect of Muslim life. They noted that Islam in many Muslim countries has sometimes been twisted to justify inappropriate cultural practices that have nothing to do with Islam, such as honor killing, female circumcision, neglecting women’s rights for education, and restrictions on political and social activity.

Asma Gull Hasan (2000), in her book, American Muslims: The new generation, shared her experience as an American Muslim learner. Whenever Islam was discussed in her class in college, she was always surprised by how little people knew about Islam. She wrote:

I remember a political science professor sheepishly confessing his ignorance of Islam. We were both a little disheartened by his admission. If he held a doctorate, shouldn’t he have a general knowledge of Islam? (Hasan, 2000, p. 11)
Hasan further said that Muslims, especially American Muslims, are victims of mistaken identity. She noted, “Our fellow citizens think all Muslims are terrorists and women oppressors, yet Muslims know we are actually much better people than the stereotypes make us out to be” (2000, p. 11). Hasan was also concerned about American perceptions regarding women wearing Hijab. She stated Americans and Westerners see Hijab as repressive and symbolic proof of the oppression of Muslim women. In fact, according to Hasan, the main point of Hijab is to preserve modesty as requested of both men and women in the Qur’an. She did not understand why women who wear Hijab are seen as second-class citizens, instead of being understood as people who are expressing their free choice.

Nevertheless, Hasan (2000) admitted that she benefits from American culture where women participate in church activities every Sunday, teaching and learning about religion. She said, “American ideals have influenced Islamic religious practices …Immigrant women’s participation in the mosque is definitely greater in the U.S. than in most countries of the Islamic world” (p. 118). Hasan then stated that Islam has been congruent with his feminist mind because this religion supports everything that feminism is trying to propagate, such as gender equality. She said:

Prophet Muhammad was one of the world’s first feminists and that Islam is a feminist’s religion. He banned female infanticide…it was a bold move in his time…Muhammad even said that any man who raises, provides for, and educates two daughters has a spot reserved for him in Heaven…Furthermore what we have learned about Muhammad is from the women in his life, his wives and daughters--who later became leaders of the faith and important sources of information on
his life…Can you see how easy it is for a Muslim woman to become a feminist now? (Hasan, 2000, p. 124)

Islam and methodology

Bullock (1999) observed that until very recently, the study of Muslim women has been Orientalist—a view that perceives Islam as a static, monolithic, backward doctrine that both explains and determines Muslim behavior— or neo-Orientalist—an approach that sees Western ways as superior to other life styles as opposed to Islamic ways. For example, according to Bullock, in colonial times, Muslim elites believed that the disappearance of the veil was important to the modernization of their countries. Bullock quoted the words of a Lebanese woman Nazira Zain al-Din who wrote:

I have noticed that the nations that have given up their veil are the nations that have advanced in intellectual and material life. The unveiled nations are the ones that have discovered through research and study the secrets of nature and have brought the physical elements under their control as you see and know. But the veiled nations have not unearthed any secret and have not put any of the physical elements under their control but only sing the songs of a glorious past and ancient tradition (as cited in Bullock, 1999, p. 272).

Bullock added, “Historians and anthropologists have challenged Orientalism and neo-Orientalism theory in relation to Muslim women” (1999, p. 6). Tucker (1983) suggested focusing on the specificity of Muslim women to better understand them, instead of relying on our own definitions of the best ways to live. Bullock further explained that the scholars have found in their studies that there are many institutions in society which impact women’s lives such as, “local customs, political, and economic
forces” (1999, p. 6). Marsot (1996) argued that religion has long been used to legitimate the preferred societal order within a society. She saw this tendency as universal and believed that this could be found in any context all over the world including America. Meriwether (1993) noted that European intervention in the Muslim world has demeaned women’s rights as granted in Islam. For example, she explained that because of British colonialization in the Ottoman Empire women’s seclusion was enforced. Women were seen as second-class human beings that were not capable of controlling their own property without their husband’s involvement. They were denied their right to inherit, and were perceived as weak and unintelligent creatures. Bullock elaborated that prior to British colonialization, “Elite and burgeois Muslim women have had the right under Islamic law to own and control their own property, without the husband’s involvement” (1999, p. 7). Meriwether recorded that in the Aleppo upper-class women were “property owners of some importance in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries…In 1770, 59 percent of all property sales involved women as either buyers or sellers; in 1800, 67 percent; and in 1840, 53 percent” (1993, p. 70).

In addition, Marsot asserted that only after Egypt gained its independence from British colonialization in the twentieth century have women, “recovered some of the activities they had in the eighteenth century” (1996, p. 47). Sonbol concluded that ‘modernization’ brought by the British colonialism in Egypt did improve health and education; however, she said, “in other areas women’s social maneuverability deteriorated” (1996, p. 7). Hence, according to Bullock, “Historical study of specific women in specific places is revealing that Westernization did not always equal advancement for Muslim women” (1999, p. 7). She challenged the notion of modernity as
liberating to women. Veiling, for example, in her perception, should not be seen as the opposite of modernity. She said:

Certainly while linked with particular practice in the past such as denying women education, and/or secluding them in the home, covering can be a symbol of oppression. I argue that covering can be de-linked from such practices, and that in and of itself it need not be oppressive. On the contrary, in urban capitalist society, many Muslim women experience covering as liberating. But these women have full access to the public sphere. (Bullock, 1999, p. 8)

She further argued that covering and being modern are not oxymoronic activities. Instead, this should be viewed as one’s personal right to express one’s liberation.

Qur’an and gender equality:

Badawi (1995) noted that according to the Quran (4:1), men and women have the same human spiritual natures. It stated:

O mankind! reverence your Guardian-Lord, who created you from a single nafs (soul), created, of like nature, His mate, and from them twain scattered (like seeds) countless men and women;—reverence God, through whom ye demand your mutual (rights), and (reverence) the wombs (That bore you): for God ever watches over you. (Qur’an 4:1)

Furthermore, Badawi believed that both men and women have the same religious and moral duties and responsibilities. It is stated in the Qur’an, “And their Lord has accepted of them and answered them, “Never I will suffer to be lost the work of any of you, be he or she male or female. You are members one of another” (3:195). Badawi noted:
Nowhere does the Qur’an state that one gender is superior to the other. Some interpreters of the Qur’an mistakenly translate the Arabic word *qiwamah* (responsibility for the family) with the English word “superiority”. The Qur’an makes it clear that the sole basis for the superiority of any person over another is piety and righteousness, not gender, color or nationality (1995, p. 13).

Badawi (1995) explained the reason why there is no female prophet in Islam by referring to the historical and social contexts during the prophecy times. He said, “The contexts made it difficult for women to bear the physical suffering associated with the role of messengers and prophets”. Hence, it has nothing to do with the inferiority of female spirituality. In brief, Badawi (1995) interprets that God rewards men and women for their piety rather than their gender.

*Right for employment*

Badawi (1995) emphasized that Islam perceives the role of women as mothers and wives as noble and sacred duties. However, he elaborated that there is “no decree in Islam that forbids women from seeking employment when there is a necessity for it. Especially in positions which fit her nature best…” (1995, p. 18).

*Rights as a daughter*

Badawi (1995) further noted how the Qur’an condemned the barbaric action of the pre-Islamic people toward their female children. Qur’an chapter 81 verses 8-9 indicated, “When the female infant buried alive, [the parent] is questioned for what crime she was killed”. It was a shame for the parents to raise a female child during that period. The Qur’an further noted:
When one of them gets a baby girl, his face becomes darkened with overwhelming grief ... Ashamed; he hides from the people, because of the bad news given to him. He even ponders: should he keep the baby grudgingly, or bury her in the dust. Miserable indeed is their judgment (16:58-59).

Regarding parental duty to daughters, Prophet Muhammad said, “Whosoever has a daughter and does not bury her alive, does not insult her, and does not favor his son over her, Allah will enter him into paradise” (narrated by Ahmad). Another saying from the Prophet narrated by Ahmad was, “Whosoever supports two daughters until they mature, he and I will come on the day of judgment as this” (and he pointed with his two fingers held together). (Hadith compiled by Bukhari & Muslim.)

*Rights as a mother*

Badawi stated, “The Qur’an elevates kindness to parents (especially mothers) to a status second only to the worship of Allah” (1995, p. 29). He explained that many verses in the Qur’an put a strong emphasis on being kind to women and the verses portray them as equal as men.

In general, Badawi concluded, the Qur’an, practices, and sayings of Prophet Muhammad promote, “kindness, care, and respect toward women in general” (1995, p. 31). From the compilation of *Hadith* narrated by Imam Al-Nawawi (n.d.) *riyad Al-Saliheen*, Prophet Muhammad said, “I command you to be kind to women”. According to Badawi, this statement was one of the final instructions given by the Prophet shortly before his death to remind his followers of the importance of treating women well.
The ideal and the current practices

Badawi said:

When writing or speaking about the Islamic position on any issue, one ought to clearly differentiate between the normative teachings of Islam and the diversity of cultural practices prevalent among its adherents that may or may not be consistent with those teachings. (1995, p. 1)

He argued that the ideal practices might contradict and offend Muslims who have practiced inappropriate interpretations of the Qur’an so far. He suggested one revisit and reevaluate the consistency between what the Qur’an really teaches, and how it is implemented in the present-day Muslim world. He said, “Islamic reformation and renewal should be directed, reformation of wrong practices and renewal of adherence to the Islamic ideal” (Badawi, 1995, p. 42).

As Hofstede and Hofstede wrote, “Every person carries with him or herself patterns of thinking, feeling, and potential acting that were learned throughout their lifetime” (2005, p. 2). The authors further explained that these patterns were usually developed in early childhood. Once the patterns are set in a person’s mind, it is not easy to ‘unlearn’ them to enable a person to learn something different. The authors called these patterns “mental programs or software of the mind” (2005, p. 3); others referred to this as culture. It is learned, not innate. Hofstede and Hofstede then defined, “Culture consists of the unwritten rules of the social game” (2005, p. 4). In short, it is a shared knowledge approved by the members of a cultural group.

In addition, Hofstede and Hofstede (2005) believed that family, neighborhoods, schools, youth groups, workplaces, and the larger community are the source of one’s
culture governing most of one’s conduct and judgment. Moreover, culture is contextual and should be seen as ‘amoral’ or cannot be judged as better or worse. Therefore, the authors suggested that when studying a culture different than one’s own one ought to suspend his or her judgment to avoid being biased.

When interpreting Islam through the actions of people from different Islamic worlds, it is appropriate to involve some cultural perspectives that underlie their behaviors to have a more trustworthy picture of the matter. This kind of understanding would allow critical analysis and a broader picture when the readers relate these practices to the primary source of Islamic teaching, the Qur’an, and to the earliest sources of Prophet Muhammad’s sayings (Hadith) and conducts (Sunnah).

Brooks (1992) expressed her frustration regarding the discrepancy between what the Qur’an prescribes and how it is interpreted and implemented in the Islamic world currently. She says in her book *Nine Parts of Desire*:

> Once I began working on this book, I looked everywhere for examples of women trying to reclaim Islam’s positive messages, trying to carry forward the twentieth century the reformist zeal with which Muhammad had remade the lives of many women in the first Muslim community in Medina. It turned out to be a frustrating search. In most places the direction of the debate seems to be exactly the reverse (1992, p. 232).

Brooks (1992) further concluded that in countries such as Palestine, Egypt, Algeria, and Afghanistan, women still have to struggle to get the rights that Islam grants them. Islamic leaders in their countries seem to support a notion of inequality of men and women by putting the women into the margins in most aspects of life.
Brooks (1992) further asserted that Mernissi’s precise research into the Hadith was underestimated and somehow silenced by the male-dominated Islamic establishment simply because she is not veiled-- hence, her piety is questionable. She suggested that the world should strive to ensure that women in these countries are safe from some cultural practices that use the banner of Islam to suppress and restrict women’s rights and freedom to perpetuate a male-dominated society.

In addition, Findley (2001) argued that in the beginning of Islam women had been very active in all aspects of life. He provided examples where Prophet Muhammad’s wives took part in the battle to take care of the wounded. Aisha, the Prophet’s young wife had been a well-known scholar and respected leader during her lifetime. Khadija, the prophet’s first wife was a very successful international merchant and freely dealt with both male and female traders. Brooks added, “Sawda, his second wife, had been a famous leather artist, and his daughter Fatima had labored at spinning until her hands bled, alternating days at work and at study” (1995, p. 168). Findley said, “They were neither sheltered nor shunned” (2001, p. 102). He further noted:

Much of the blame must be placed on certain Muslims: those who create inaccurate and unsettling visions of the type of government and society Muslims want to establish; those who commit acts of religious intolerance and other un-Islamic misdeeds in the name of their religion; and those who hear or see reports of such misbehavior by professed Muslims without speaking out in protest (Findley, 2001, p. 110).

Badawi (1995) proposed two extremes that should be avoided in the effort to assess the realities of Muslims. They are:
1. Justifying injustices done to Muslim women by religiously flavored cultural arguments. Most problematic in that extreme is the subtle assumption of the correctness of traditional cultural practices and attitudes, followed by a selective search for endorsement in the primary source of Islam.

2. Failing to see numerous positive aspects in Muslim societies, such as family stability and cohesiveness, the respect and adoration of mothers, and the sense of self-fulfillment of women who are not seen frequently in public; in the meantime, painting a stereotypical picture of Muslim women as ignorant, submissive, oppressed and almost totally enslaved by women-hating chauvinist men. (p. 43-44)

*Cultural differences and treatment of women across the Islamic world*

Brooks (1995) noted that based on her experiences visiting, living, and dealing with people in the Middle Eastern countries, she observed there are some cultural differences in the treatment of women across the Islamic nations. Women in Saudi Arabia, for example, are not allowed to drive. Women can have the highest degree of education they desire, however, access to the job market is restricted because many husbands or male relatives do not approve of their work in a field that might ‘lower their dignity’. According to Brooks (1995), the male-dominated atmosphere is very prevalent in this context. She also learned that women in Saudi Arabia are not allowed to leave the house without their husband’s, father’s, or male relatives’ permission. In terms of women’s rights to employment, the Saudi government bans women from assuming a position as a judge. In the case of divorce, a child’s custody is always granted to his or
her father regardless of the message given in the Qur’an that before a child reaches the age of puberty and is able to decide for himself or herself, the custody should fall to his or her mother. Moreover, the existence of Mutawain (Saudi Arabia’s religious police) to make sure that women wear their Abaya (a black cloak with arm slits that falls from the top of the head to the ankles), or the requirement that women bring written permission from their male relatives to leave the house further explain how this society infantilizes women, and views them as weak creations.

In Egypt, which is significantly different from Saudi Arabia, Brooks found that women are everywhere in the work force. She said, “Egyptian women are doctors, filmmakers, politicians, economists, academics, engineers” (1992, p. 178). However, she also found that the society, by and large, still underestimates women’s roles outside the home. The ideal women are still those who maintain excellent an performance in the domestic sectors. Brooks asserted,

While women now share the economic burden of their families, very few Egyptian men are prepared to share the housework…they are used to a household where shirts are ironed, the floors swept, the food elaborately prepared, and always ready (1992, p. 179).

Brooks further described, “When home life with a working wife turns out to be less salubrious than with the non-working women of his youth, he doesn’t think of lending a hand with the chores, for he has never seen a man do such a thing” (1992, p. 180). Instead, according to Brooks, these men would blame the government for the bad economy that forces their wives to work. Many men in Egypt are motivated to discourage their wives from working due to the Imam or sheik preaching of a ‘woman’s place in
Islam’ in addition to the ‘domestic chaos’ these men have to deal with because of their wives’ lack of energy to handle both professional workload and household responsibilities.

Findley (2001) offered a more generalizable point of view regarding how women are treated all over the world. He said, “Notwithstanding the principles and requirements of Islam and other faiths that honor and protect the rights and dignity of all women, their abuse seems to flourish worldwide in everyday society” (2001, p. 125). He mentioned a report released in January 2000 by the John Hopkins School of Public Health in Baltimore, Maryland. The report stated, “One of every three women worldwide has been beaten, raped, or somehow mistreated” (AP 1-21-2000). Findley further explained the report’s conclusion that is based on studies conducted in more than twenty countries including the United States. He notes, “the document reports that as many as 70 percent of the women had never told anyone about the abuse prior to their interview” (Findley, 2001, p. 127).

In the case of the inappropriate treatment of women in some Islamic countries, Findley argued:

Americans want to cite severe discrimination in some Muslim countries as evidence that Islam condones mistreatment of women. Such discrimination—often harsh—exists, but Islamic leaders insist that any form of female oppression violates the doctrines and rules of Islam. Most discrimination arises from brutish customs and male chauvinism, not from the Qur’an or the Sunnah (2001, p. 127).

According to Findley (2001), history has proven that Islam has been the most liberating influence on the status of women greater than Christianity and Judaism. In
support of his opinion, Thomas W. Lippman—a Jewish journalist from *The Washington Post* bureau in Cairo (1990) stated:

> In a society in which women were possessions, taken and put aside like trinkets, often held in conditions approaching bondage, the Qur’an imposed rules and prohibitions that curbed the worst abuses, ensured women’s property rights, and encouraged men to treat women with kindness and generosity…The Qur’an dictates on women’s legal status were quite advanced for their time, and Islamic law gives women some rights more liberating than those found in Western legal codes…The Qur’an and the Hadith (saying of the Prophet Muhammad) lay down rules ensuring for women the respectable and dignified status that had been denied them (in pre-Islamic society) and emphasizes the stability of the family (1990, p. 128).

Similarly, William Baker, a Christian leader and famous Bible scholar wrote:

> When we consider the statue of women in the pre-Islamic societies, we learned that two-thirds were in some form of slavery…Women were nearly invisible in a male-dominated world in nearly every religion and every culture of the world (Baker, 1998, p. 62-63).

Findley (2001) assumed very few Americans read the messages conveyed by Lippman and Baker. He stated, “When I address a general audience, I often begin my remarks by asking this question: In Islam, are women treated as being inferior to men? It always elicit a resounding affirmative” (2001, p. 128). He noted that after so many question and answer sessions with both Muslims and general audiences, he came to two conclusions that, “First, most Americans believe that Islam is biased, sometimes cruelly,
against women, and second, U.S. Muslim women strongly disagree” (Findley, 2001, p. 128).

In terms of how Muslim women are treated differently across Islamic nations, Findley observed that the achievement of women in the political realm “should be the envy of U.S. female politicians” (Findley, 2001, p. 148). He stated every U.S. president and vice president have been male, but in the Islamic countries such as Pakistan, Bangladesh, Turkey, and Indonesia, women have enjoyed the right to serve in the highest elected offices in their countries. Findley further asserted in 1999, “A Muslim woman, Megawati Soekarno Putri, was elected vice president of Indonesia, and in 2000 was accorded substantial authority by the man who was elected to the Presidency” (2001, p. 148). He argued it took one hundred and thirty-two years for U.S. women to be granted their right to vote. While their sisters in most Muslim countries, he continued “where the democratic process exists, women achieve the right to vote simultaneously with men” (Findley, 2001, p. 148). Findley further looked at other aspects of life where non-Muslim women are trying to retain their maiden names in marriage, “A practice almost unknown a generation ago” (2001, p. 149). In Islam, according to Findley, this tradition has been practiced and protected by Islamic law for centuries. Salam Al-Marayati (1996) explained that Islam advocates for equality, compassion, and harmony between a husband and wife. He noted, “According to the Qur’an, Eve was not the one who was approached by the devil in trapping Adam into sinning, but the two fell together” (Al-Marayati, 1996, p. 3). He then described that God forgave both Adam and Eve after they repented. Al-Marayati further elaborated about some very significant benefits that Islam grant women--the inheritance, the personal income of a woman that cannot be spent by her husband without
her consent, and the husband’s help with household chores—are sometimes underestimated and ignored by some societies. He said, “Many of these ideals fall short in the reality of our world today” (1996, p. 8).

Islam and education

Zaimeche (n.d.) stated that the Quran urges the faithful to, think, ponder, reflect, and acquire knowledge that would bring them closer to God and to His creation.

He mentioned that there are some verses or ayaat in the Qur’an that indicate that education and other efforts to seek knowledge are important duties among Muslims, both women and men. For example, “....Are those equal, those who know and those who do not know? It is those who are endued with understanding that receive admonition” (Quran, 39:9). Another verse that describes the importance of educating oneself says, “...Those truly fear God, among His Servants, who have knowledge: for God is Exalted in Might, Oft-Forgiving” (Quran, 35:28). Zaimeche further explained that there are three examples of how Prophet Muhammad implemented the Qur’anic messages regarding education, such as the following Hadith:

He who has a slave-girl and teaches her good manners and improves her education and then manumits and marries her, will get a double reward; and any slave who observes Allah's right and his master's right will get a double reward (Translation of Sahih Bukhari, Manumission of Slaves, Volume 3, Book 46, Number 723).

If anyone travels on a road in search of knowledge, Allah will cause him to travel on one of the roads of Paradise. The angels will lower their wings in their great pleasure with one who seeks knowledge, the inhabitants of the heavens and the
Earth and the fish in the deep waters will ask forgiveness for the learned man. The superiority of the learned man over the devout is like that of the moon, on the night when it is full, over the rest of the stars. The learned are the heirs of the Prophets, and the Prophets leave neither dinar nor dirham, leaving only knowledge, and he who takes it takes in abundant portion (Translation of Sunan Abu-Dawud, Knowledge (Kitab Al-Ilm), Book 25, Number 3634).

If anyone acquires knowledge of things by which Allah's good pleasure is sought, but acquires it only to get some worldly advantage, he will not experience the arf, i.e. the odor, of Paradise (Translation of Sunan Abu-Dawud, Knowledge (Kitab Al-Ilm), Book 25, Number 3656).

In brief, Zaimeche (n.d.) concluded that based on the above Qur’anic verses and sayings of Prophet Muhammad, the pursuit of knowledge as far as one can reach is strongly encouraged. A study completed by Haleh Afshar in 1989 regarding education, hopes, and achievement of Muslim women in West Yorkshire seem to support Zaimeche’s conclusion. The study found that women of all backgrounds regardless of their own level of educational achievement seek to promote their children within the school and further educational systems and are increasingly doing so for their daughters as well as their sons. All women studied stated that their commitment to the education of their children was based on their understanding that education is valued very highly in Islam for both men and women.

Hasan (2000) stated the debate over the status of women in Islam is probably the best example of how culture affects interpretation of faith. Congruent with the above scholar’s opinions, the Qur’an requires both men and women to seek knowledge and both
are rewarded for doing so. She believed that men in some cultures have taken a few Qur’anic passages and coupled them with patriarchal cultures, and they have interpreted them in the most literal and self-serving way. She said, “There is no Islamic basis for demeaning women or oppressing them. Culture is the culprit here, and no one really is immune from that” (Hasan, 2000, p. 109). She further noted, “Realizing that a male perception of Islam has been used and accepted for centuries, Muslim women are taking back their right to Qur’anic education and interpretation” (Hasan, 2000, p. 117).

**Cultural competencies and expectations about education across the Islamic world**

Geert Hofstede (1980), Stella Ting-Toomey (1988), Stanley Hall (1979) are some of the most famous pioneers in the cross-cultural-studies arena. Their work has been widely used to illuminate the word culture and how cultural differences frame people’s minds and behaviors. Hofstede suggested that the encounters of people from different cultures are more likely to bring about conflict than harmony (Hofstede, 1980). Ting-Toomey (1988) developed *face negotiation theory* to explain how people’s behaviors can be the results of saving face to maintain harmony and preferred social order. In addition, Hall (1979) proposed the concept of *low context and high context mode* to explain why people from certain cultures communicate differently to different kinds of people.

Learning from the key informants in this study, who are women practicing Islam from many different cultures, the discussion about how culture influences their perspectives in terms of understanding Islam is very significant. Reviewing cross-cultural studies also benefits our understanding of the key informants’ predisposition toward learning and their values. It is understood that generalization is not the intention of qualitative research. However, the shared meanings among the group of people, their cultural
competency, could help us see patterns in the thoughts of people who belong to a certain group.

*Politeness theory, high context and low context culture, and learning style*

Politeness theory coined by Brown and Levinson (1987), and High context and Low context theory from Hall (1976) also contribute to the influence of culture on one’s thoughts and behaviors. These theories are concerned with the idea that direct, honest, and appropriate expression of feelings, thoughts, and opinions can be a face-threatening act for the people from collectivist cultures who highly value the principle of harmony and conformity among people. When we relate politeness and power distance theory to the interaction between teacher and student in class, students from collectivist and high power distance culture such as Indonesian will think several times before challenging the teacher or questioning him or her because they really concern about the appropriateness of the question to ask, the choice of language used, and the teacher’s expectation from the students. This condition can also apply to the interaction between the students with older peers, peers from a different social status, etc. There are also prescribed social values stating that those who talk too much usually are those who know little, or silence is golden. In this culture, instead of asking silly questions or making comments in class, one is encouraged to be silent.

In short, in cultures like the one in Indonesia, specifically, no matter how close you are to your in-laws for example, certain standards of politeness are still expected. Similar manners are expected in terms of one’s relationship with other authority figures such as teachers, government officers, parents, older peers, employers, etc.
It is further explained that the greater the level of indirectness, the greater the degree of politeness. In fact, polite behavior has something to do with power and social distance. People who come from cultures that care a great deal about social behavior or the criticism of audiences, do not value explicit communicative styles in logical forms in class because it has a high potential to disrupt harmony or interpersonal relationships. In turn, this propensity prevents critical thinking tendencies (Benedict, 1946; Brown & Levinson, 1987; Hall, 1976; and Kitayama & Markus, 1994). Hence, understanding that culture has a very powerful influence to one’s predisposition and overt behavior, it will be counterproductive to single out culture from the discussion about how Islam is interpreted by people from different prescribed social mores. As Hofstede previously notes, a most complicated task for a person is to unlearn one’s accepted and shared social norms. Utilizing cultural competencies to analyze the life of Muslim women in the USA enriches one’s awareness about how lives are interpreted.

**Hofstede components of culture and learning style**

Hofstede’s (1980) developed four components of culture: Power Distance, Individualism, Masculinity, and Uncertainty Avoidance. These components may affect learning styles among people from different cultures. This section describes each.

According to Hofstede (1980), power distance theory concerns with the degree of equality, or inequality, between people in the country's society. A High Power Distance ranking indicates that inequalities of power and wealth have been allowed to grow within the society. These societies are more likely to follow a caste system that does not allow significant upward mobility of its citizens. Also, people in high power distance cultures recognize and accept hierarchy based on factors such as age, gender, and family
background. Authority figures, such as teachers, are seen as highly respected figures that one should really mind their action in order not to challenge, demean, or embarrass this person. Most Southeast Asian countries including Indonesia fall into the category of the countries that have very high power distance. In fact, based on Hofstede’s study in 1973, he found out that Indonesia ranks the highest across the world in the power distance dimension. Inequality is seen as part of the culture and well accepted by the citizens.

A Low Power Distance ranking indicates that the society de-emphasizes the differences between citizen's power and wealth. In these societies, equality and opportunity for all are stressed. Most North American and European countries are considered as Low Power Distance countries. I observed that high power distance countries are also classified as the members of collectivist and masculine countries; and most individualist countries also have the characteristics of feminine and low power distance countries (Hofstede, 1980).

In terms of learning styles or learning preferences for the people from the high power distance culture, equal power sharing between learner and teacher is generally not preferred. The prescribed expectation from the larger society is that the teacher should be the one who knows the most, and teachers are not equal with the learners. Also, the learners expect clear structure from the teacher as the manifestation of this hegemony, so they will be able to behave according to teacher’s expectations or satisfy the teacher’s requirements.

Hofstede (1980) explained that the dimension of Individualism vs. Collectivism focuses on the degree the society reinforces individual or collective achievement and interpersonal relationships. A High Individualism ranking indicates that individuality and
Individual rights are paramount within the society. Individuals in these societies may tend to form a large number of looser relationships. A Low Individualism ranking typifies societies of a more collectivist nature with close bonds between individuals. These cultures reinforce extended families and collectives where everyone takes responsibility for fellow members of their group. In my family, for example, we believe that female members of the family and our aging parents should be guaranteed their welfare and safety. Male children are more likely to earn better treatment compared to their female siblings, due to their future responsibilities to take care of their own families, their female siblings and female relatives, as well as their aging parents. Maintaining harmony, solidarity, interdependency, interconnectedness, and a sense of being in the group within our big family as well as with friends is considered very important in our culture. We could simply say, when one family member gets hurt, everyone hurts.

Individualist countries, such as Austria, Belgium, Netherlands, USA, Canada, and Great Britain, value independence, achievement, equality, human’s ability to influence the environment instead of letting the environment control one’s actions and decisions. The huge differences between the values held between the individualist and collectivist cultures in terms of learning success would cause substantial strains to any individual who happens to study in the setting where the gap between what is good and bad in his or her respective country is too large.

Hofstede (1980) then notes that the binary concepts of Masculinity vs. Femininity focuses on the degree the society reinforces, or does not reinforce, the traditional masculine work role model of male achievement, control, and power. A High Masculinity ranking indicates the country experiences a high degree of gender
differentiation. In these cultures, males dominate a significant portion of the society and power structure, with females being controlled by male domination. A Low Masculinity ranking indicates the country has a low level of differentiation and discrimination between genders. In these cultures, females are treated equally to males in all aspects of the society.

In relation with one’s learning style as the member of masculine or feminine countries, the learners are more prone to subscribe themselves to the values they uphold. For example, female learners from masculine countries are more predisposed to view themselves as having lower capabilities to achieve or succeed compared to their male counterparts. They often sell themselves short by saying that they are not as smart or as creative as the male learners. This is more a distorted self-concept matter instead of the true fact, because they are conditioned or made to believe this ridiculous assumption by society. It is understood that male learners in a masculine society benefit psychologically from social gender discrimination. Men are expected to be smarter, more creative, and given vast amount of positive feedback, encouragement as well as opportunity to reach the highest of their potential; while women are not given the same treatment and positive reinforcement. It is true that sometimes one has to believe what the society has made him or her to believe. As the result, gender difference as the result of one’s prescribed culture in viewing learning and success could influence significantly toward learner’s learning style.

This dimension of Uncertainty Avoidance Index (UAI) focuses on the level of tolerance for uncertainty and ambiguity within the society - i.e. unstructured situations (Hofstede, 1980). A High Uncertainty Avoidance ranking indicates the country has a low
tolerance for uncertainty and ambiguity. This creates a rule-oriented society that institutes laws, rules, regulations, and controls in order to reduce the amount of uncertainty. A Low Uncertainty Avoidance ranking indicates the country has less concern about ambiguity and uncertainty and has more tolerance for a variety of opinions. This is reflected in a society that is less rule-oriented, more readily accepts change, and takes more and greater risks. Indonesia and many other predominately Muslim nations have high UAI. The ultimate goal of this population is to control everything in order to eliminate or avoid the unexpected. As a result of this high Uncertainty Avoidance characteristic, the society does not readily accept change and is very risk adverse.

In my own case for example, due to the fact that I had been trained to be a person who has high UAI, I would feel more comfortable with a relatively structured learning design. I follow the syllabus religiously, and try to do only what my professor expects me to do for one reason and that is to avoid problems.

Moreover, Hofstede (1980) also points out that, as compared to Western students, Arab students appear to be resistant because they seem to be dependent, indecisive, or nonverbal emotionally. Due to the role of fate in the teachings of Islam, they are thought to be survival-oriented, rather than insight-oriented. He also stated that Asian and Arab students require more structure than Western students. They may seek more definitive instruction and judgment of their work. They also may prefer to be considered one of a group, and they will not as readily push themselves forward to seek information, as will Western students.
Critical thinking and reflective practice

One of the reasons for conducting this study is to enhance readers’ critical thinking in judging Muslim women. Brookfield (1995) proposed that one needs to actively reexamine his or her assumptions to think and behave responsibly and justly. In his article, *The Getting of Wisdom: What Critically Reflective Teaching is and Why It’s Important* (n.d.), he noted that there are three broad categories of assumptions—paradigmatic, prescriptive, and causal. He says, *paradigmatic assumptions* are, “the structuring assumptions we use to order the world into fundamental categories” (1995, p. 2). He shared, regarding the belief that adults are self-directed learners, that education always has a political dimension (Brookfield, n.d., p.2). Furthermore, Brookfield defined *prescriptive assumptions* as, “assumptions about what we think ought to be happening in a particular situation” (n.d., p. 2). Examples for this category include examining how we think teachers should behave, what a good educational process should look like. The next category is *causal assumptions*. He defined this as, “assumptions about how different parts of the world work and about the conditions under which these can be changed” (n.d., p. 2). For this broad category, Brookfield explained that learning contracts will increase students’ self-directedness, and if a teacher makes mistakes in class, this will create a trusting environment (Brookfield, n.d., p. 2).

Brookfield argued that not all of the assumptions fit the realities, and hence need to be reevaluated and re-examined; he calls this activity as a critical thinking act. He says, “Critical thinking is an activity that can be observed in settings and domains very far removed from the school or college classroom” (Brookfield, 1987, p. 4).
Kurfiss (1988), for example, found in her study that only very few university students have the ability to think critically. She defines critical thinking as:

…an investigation whose purpose is to explore a situation, phenomenon, question, or problem, to arrive at a hypothesis or conclusion about it that integrates all available information and that can therefore be convincingly justified (Kurfiss, 1988, p. 2).

Moreover, Brookfield (1987) asserted that critical thinking has an equivocal nature. It is open to many different interpretations including logical reasoning abilities, reflective judgment, assumption hunting, the creation, and use and testing of meaning. In other words, one’s critical thinking ability cannot be measured from one single indicator; instead, the ability manifests in a variety of ways. Learning from his explanation, we began this study with no preconceived prejudice or assumptions. Understanding should be based solely on the informants’ thinking.

Halpern (1989) suggested that learning the skills of clear thinking can help everyone to recognize propaganda and thus not fall prey to it, to analyze the unstated assumptions in arguments, to realize when there is deliberate deception, to consider the credibility of an information source, and to think a problem or a decision through in the best way possible.

In order to understand and analyze issues concerning the lives of Muslim women in USA, Brookfield (1987, 1995) and Halpern (1989) seemed to agree with two notions. They recommended a constant reexamination and reevaluation of one’s assumptions in terms of judging these women’s life; and to seek various kinds of valid resources (such as the Qur’an and early sources of Hadith) to have a more accurate picture of what Islam
teaches concerning women. These attitudes have the potential to bring a person closer to the reality, and eliminate the power of outside influences, such as the media and those people with some hidden agendas to misguide and suppress one’s critical thinking ability.

*Ethnography as a research tool*

There are many significant reasons that make ethnography an effective research tool to understand a culture. Spradley (1979) suggested that ethnographic research plays an important role in social science research. He noted, “Ethnography can generate hypotheses for later testing by other research techniques” (p. 30). Spradley argued since the central task of ethnography is cultural description, he concluded that, “ethnography is the first step in understanding the human species” (1979, p.10). Wolcott stated, “The ethnographer seeks not merely to understand…but to understand what is wrong…and to link the problem to some greater wrong operating at some grander level” (1999, p.181). This implies that ethnography, besides teaching the ethnographer to see things from the informant’s lenses, is also aimed at detecting a problem or what is wrong with the social order within a specific culture or subculture, and providing theories grounded from the examination of the detected problem to cause positive change. Marx asked, “Why should we be contented to understand the world instead of trying to change it?” (1974, p.123). This suggests that once a problem is identified, it should inspire action. Similarly, Van Maanen stated that as a written representation of a culture, ethnography “Carries out serious intellectual and moral responsibilities” (1987, p. 1). He further explains that ethnographic writings, “Can and do inform human conduct and judgment in innumerable ways by pointing to the choices and restrictions that reside at the very heart of social life” (1987, p. 1).
However, utilizing ethnography as a research tool is not without challenges or ethical dilemmas. For example, there are two common misconceptions regarding the trustworthiness of the participant observation technique. First, the presence of the observer can cause ‘unnatural’ performance of certain behaviors. But Atkinson and Pugsley argued:

Ethnographers do not base their work on a one-off visits; nor do they present themselves as expert evaluators…it strains credulity and would strain social actors’ dramaturgical skills to suggest that actors are able to transform their ordinary behavior, over the period of weeks or months that ethnographer normally spend in the field (2005, p. 232).

Secondly, responding to the criticism that participant observation is very “subjective”, Atkinson & Pugsley (2005) said:

Ethnographers are not engaged in a vague and impressionistic accumulation of personal experience…they make careful documentary records of what they observe…analyze those data systematically…they only record and work with observable and recordable data… (p. 232)

In terms of the importance of key informants, Spradley (1980) noted that the perspective of the key informant (emic perspective) is the most important point to consider. He said, “Rather than studying people, ethnography means learning from people” (1980, p. 3). Boas reiterated that, “If it is our serious purpose to understand the thought of a people, the whole analysis of the experience must be based upon their concepts, not ours” (1943, p. 311). Atkinson & Pugsley added, “The ethnographer places him or herself in the position of the marginal person, the socially acceptable incompetent
in order to learn the cultural knowledge and everyday practice that constitute the culture in question” (2005, p. 230). Learning that the researcher does not characterize an ethnographer, defined by Atkinson and Pugsley (2005), I used ethnographic methods to inform this study while not completing a full ethnography. I also invited a partner to counter the possible bias that the researcher may have as the member of Muslim women community. Sharing how an ethnographer perceives the behaviors and phenomenon being studied (etic perspective) is also not a taboo in this research design. Wolcott noted, “We can voice enthusiasm for helping others tell their stories their own way, but it is difficult not to supply a logic of our own to insure that the reader does not get lost” (1999, p. 145).

Both etic and emic perspectives should work hand-in-hand to provide the closest possible description to the realities of the members lives. Geertz (1973) used the term ‘thick description’ to describe the nature of ethnographic writing or something that explains not only the human behavior but also its context. Geertz explained that if context changes then the meaning changes as well. Hence, it was important for me to have someone who did not share the characteristics of the Muslim women I studied to meet the requirement of being a person who has knowledge about the culture and at the same time has to play the role as someone who does not know the culture.

In terms of deciding whose interests an ethnographer considers the most, according to the Principles of Professional Responsibility:

In research, an anthropologist’s paramount responsibility is to those he studies. When there is a conflict of interest, these individuals must come first. Then anthropologist must do everything within his power to protect their physical,
social, and psychological welfare and to honor their dignity and privacy (1971, par. 1).

In summary, an ethnographer is responsible for ensuring that he or she safeguards the informants’ rights, interests, and sensitivities. Therefore, in this study, access to my field notes was not given to anyone and these notes were secured safely in my office drawer at home. At the same time, I made sure that, before submitting the final research document, I discussed the complete version of my manuscript with my informants and “negotiated” some sensitive aspects that caused discomfort.
CHAPTER III
Methodology

The purpose of this study was to understand the lives of adult women learners who practice Islam in Middle Town, Indiana, and to understand how Islam affects their identity as learners and members of a small predominantly Judeo-Christian community. This study intended to address the following research questions:

(1) How do these six Muslim women perceive their experience living and studying in Middle Town, Indiana, USA?

(2) How does Islam contribute to their sense of identity as learners and as women within a pre-dominantly Judeo-Christian culture?

(3) What are their interpretations of the status of women in the Qur’an?

(4) How does the cultural interpretation of Islam affect their self-concepts as adult learners?

(5) How do the educational experiences and achievements of these Muslim women impact their lives?

This study used Feminist Ethnography as the research design to demystify the subculture of Muslim women who live and study in Middle Town. Reinharz defined feminist ethnography as:

Research carried out by feminists who focus on gender issues in female-homogeneous traditional or nontraditional settings. In feminist ethnography, the researchers are women, the field sites are sometimes women’s settings, and the key informants are typically women (1992, p. 55).
Reinharz further explained that the goals of feminist ethnography are:

(1) To document the lives and activities of women, focusing on women as full members of their social, economical, and political worlds.

(2) To understand the experience of women from their own points of view rather than trivializing their activities or interpreting them from the standpoint of men in the society.

(3) To interpret women’s behavior as shaped by social context, such as their marital relations or the community values (as cited in Mertens, 1998, p. 165-166).

There were some controversies regarding whether exclusively female researchers must conduct the authorship of feminist ethnography. However, I believed that studying the lives of a group of women would be best carried out by a female for the sake of comfort on the part of the key informants. Based on my experience dealing with women from the Middle East, they were much more closed, and uncomfortable discussing their personal experiences with men.

Participants

The research informants for this study were six Muslim women who live and study in Middle Town, Indiana, U.S.A. According to Lankshear and Knobel “qualitative research does not presuppose large samples or, in many cases, samples at all- let alone samples designed to be representative of large populations” (2004, p.68).

The sample size for this study was six informants for in-depth, semi-structured interviews. Bogdan and Biklen noted that the in-depth, semi-structured interviews allow the “subjects to freely express their thoughts around particular topics” (1998, p. 3).
Furthermore, Patton stated, “depth interviewing involves asking open-ended questions, listening to and recording the answers, and then following up with additional relevant questions” (1987, p. 108). It was expected that the semi-structured interviews would help collect rich data from the informants as the researcher has the opportunity to probe for more information and clarifications.

One informant is a married woman from Afghanistan who came to the United States as an immigrant following her husband who works in the medical profession. She is attending a Bachelor’s degree program at a public university in Middle Town, Indiana. Another informant came from Iraq. She became a U.S. citizen after marrying an American Muslim man. She is currently attending a General Studies program at a community college in Indiana and working as a medical professional at a hospital in Middle Town, Indiana. The third informant is a married Palestinian student who came from Israel to earn a Doctoral degree. The fourth participant is a married American woman who is pursuing her Master’s degree. She also works as the director of a public Indiana agency. She and her husband converted to Islam together in 2002. The fifth informant is a married woman from Mexico who became a U.S. citizen through her marriage to an American. She converted to Islam in 2004. She is attending the public university in Middle Town, Indiana to become a medical professional. The last informant is a married Palestinian student who is working on her Master’s degree in TESOL. She came to Middle Town through a Fulbright scholarship, with her two small children, in the fall of 2008.
Sampling Method

Denzin and Lincoln (2000) suggested that ethnographic sampling is more akin to opportunistic or purposive sampling. They said:

The ethnographer will try to allocate periods of time for observation/participation on the basis of sampling key features of his or her research site. It is driven by the ethnographer’s developing analytic interests, or is often referred to as theoretical sampling. (2000, p. 231)

Moreover, according to Gay, Miller and Airasian, purposive sampling, “is the process of selecting a sample that is believed to be representative of a given population” (2006, p. 113). According to Ary, Jacobs, Razavieh, and Sorensen “the qualitative researchers tend to use purposive samples” because it is believed “to be sufficient to provide maximum insight and understanding of what they are studying” (2006, p. 472).

Congruent with the assertion of the above authors, I purposively selected my key informants because they matched the criteria for participation in this study - Muslim women who live and study in Middle Town, Indiana - to facilitate my efforts to answer the research questions.

Emic and Etic Status

Young said, “Emic and etic terms coined in 1967, correspond, but are not identical to contemporary understanding of the terms insider and outsider” (2005, p. 152). She defined emic as having, “personal experience of a culture/society,” while etic is described as, “the perspective of a person who has not had a personal or ‘lived’ experience of a particular culture/society” (Young, 2005, p. 152).
Moreover, Alcoff said, “Location and positionality should not be conceived as one-dimensional or static but as multiple and with varying degrees of mobility” (1995, p. 106). This entails that sharing some specific and important subject position with the other members of the culture does not guarantee an ethnographer an insider status. As Foucault noted, “Nothing in man—not even his body—is sufficiently stable to serve as the basis for self-recognition or for understanding other men. Ethnographers can only imagine the other—and that has to be enough” (1979, p. 105). In brief, the ethnographer’s emic and etic status, according to Eppley:

…are changeable and constructed simultaneously via their own notions of self and their participants’ view of them as researcher, friend, student, co-worker or group member. Neither insider nor outsider orientation is a taken-for-granted, fixed identity (2006, p. 4).

Thus, a researcher who has an emic status should be aware that he or she needs to have some level of “outsider-ness” in order to conduct the research. Eppley, quoting Kraybill and Olshan, said:

There is othering in the very act of studying, a necessary stepping back or distancing in varying degrees. There can be no interpreting without some degree of othering. Researchers, then, can be neither Insider nor Outsider; they are instead temporarily and precariously positioned within a continuum (1994, p. 5).

In this particular study, I handled this problem by constantly reminding myself about the fact that each sub-member of a culture has his or her own unique subjectivity. Each should be treated as the center of my attentions, instead of using my preconceived knowledge about the culture I share with my informants as the navigator to direct my
analysis. This provided another reason for me to have a research partner to counter-
balance and check my assumptions.

Data Gathering Techniques

According to Gay, Miller, and Airasian, “the strength of qualitative research lies
in the collecting information in many ways, rather than relying solely on one, and often
two or more methods can be used in such a way that the weakness of one is compensate
by the strength of another” (2006, p. 405). For this study, I used in-depth, semi-structured
interviews along with participant observations of the women in social settings. Drake
stated:

One reason why open-ended questions are helpful is that they convey a strong
interest in what the other person has say on the topic…use of open-ended
questions says to the interviewee, “I care about your ideas. I recognize that what
you think is important, and because of that I’m willing to give you the freedom to
flesh out your thought as you choose (1989, p. 2).

Furthermore, data was also collected through observation. According to Ary,
Jacobs, Razaveih, & Sorensen observer as participant “may interact with subjects
enough to establish rapport but do not really become involved in the behaviors, and
activities of the group” (2006, p. 475). In this study, I observed three monthly Muslim
dinners and special weekly women’s gatherings. I recorded each occasion and found out
how these women interact with each other to understand their ‘culture’ better. I also
made field notes as I observed the gatherings. According to Ary et al., “the researcher’s
field notes present the data that will later be analyzed to provide an understanding of the
research setting and the behavior of people within that setting” (2006, p. 477). I used
field note methods proposed by Spradley (1979): (1) the condensed account, and (2) the expanded account. Spradley wrote:

It is not humanly possible to write down everything that goes on or everything that informants say. Condensed accounts often include phrases, single words, and unconnected sentences (1979, p. 75).

The expanded account, according to Spradley is, “an expansion of the condensed account” (1979, p. 75). In this case, I, the researcher, filled in details and recalled things that were not recorded on the spot, as soon as possible after each field session.

In conclusion, using more than one method of data gathering helped me obtain a form of triangulation. Guba described triangulation as:

An ongoing means of verifying what one learns...as the study unfolds and particular pieces of information come to light, steps should be taken to validate each against at least one other source (for example, a second interview) and/or a second method (for example, an observation in addition to an interview). No single item of information... should ever be given serious consideration unless it can be triangulated (1989, p. 283).

Talburt summarized that “triangulation could be understood as a means of highlighting contradictions and puzzlements, attending to nuances in the multiple contexts that comprise the inquiry, and representing that which does and does not fit” (2004, p. 89).

Three interview sessions were conducted with each informant. Each informant was asked to refrain from discussing the interviews with the others until each round of interviews was completed. The reason to do three interviews was to provide the
researcher with an opportunity to confirm understanding and see the consistency of the answers given from the previous interviews.

Technically, each interview was built on the content of the previous one and was audio taped for transcription. Bogdan and Biklen (1998) suggested that the first interview should begin with “small talk”. Following their suggestion, for this particular study, the first interview was a light discussion of personal background in order to build trust and comfort with discussing these topics. Bogdan and Biklen said, “The purpose this chit-chat serves is to develop rapport: You search for common ground, for a topic that you have in common, for a place to begin building a relationship” (1998, p. 94). This first interview lasted from 30 minutes to 60 minutes. The second interview lasted 60 to 90 minutes and I asked for direct details about their lives and learning experiences as Muslims. Examples were solicited and probed. The third interview was a deeper examination of the questions from the second interview after the previous discussion was transcribed and reviewed. This provided an opportunity for clarification and further reflection from the informant. This interview also lasted from 60 to 90 minutes. This kind of interview technique is similar to what Robinson (1951) called analytic induction in which a researcher modifies the data gathering modes to clarify the areas that he or she wants to better understand.

The informants determined the locations of the interviews to ensure comfort and privacy. In terms of the participant observation technique, I attended three Muslim community monthly dinner gatherings from October-December 2008 as well as other informal women’s gatherings during this three-month-period. Their familiarity with me in larger social group was expected to help tackle the possible negative impact of playing
the role of a researcher within the group. My role was as a friend who was interested in observing their activities, and my research partner later verified my notes.

Hill (1993) observed that triangulating different kinds of data gathering techniques has been useful to ensure trustworthiness of the research. Yet, he personally thinks that, “Participant observation provides the basis for every move that makes us a researcher” (1993, p. 59). The interview questions were as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>First Interview (30-60 minutes) – Light</th>
<th>Second Interview (60-90 minutes) – Full</th>
<th>Third Interview (60-90 minutes) – Probing Deeper</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Describe how you came to this city.</td>
<td>1. How do you define Islam?</td>
<td>Questions consistent with Interview 2, but</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Describe your life here.</td>
<td>2. How do you define yourself?</td>
<td>going deeper. Review the transcript from</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Describe your study here</td>
<td>3. How do you define your role as a</td>
<td>previous interviews for points to ask for</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. What do you like the most about</td>
<td>woman?/What does being a woman mean to</td>
<td>stories and examples or clarification.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>most about being Muslim?</td>
<td>you?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Please tell me how you became a</td>
<td>4. How do you perceive yourself as a</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muslim (for converts)</td>
<td>Muslim woman?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. What does your faith mean to you?</td>
<td>5. Are there any Qur’anic verses that</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Why did you convert to Islam?</td>
<td>support your faith?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(for the converts)</td>
<td>6. How do you view education for</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. What changed in your life after</td>
<td>Muslim women?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>becoming a Muslim (for the converts)</td>
<td>7. Do you know of any Qur’anic verses</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Did you have a religious</td>
<td>that speak to education?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>experience that affirms your faith?</td>
<td>8. Describe your life here in Indiana?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Please describe it.</td>
<td>9. Do you face stereotypes because you</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. What do you like the most about</td>
<td>are a Muslim in Indiana? Give examples.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>being Muslim?</td>
<td>10. How do you deal with the stereotypes about Islam in Indiana?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. How do you think your life would</td>
<td>11. Has being a Muslim affected your</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>be different if you were not a Muslim?</td>
<td>social life in Indiana?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>How?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>12. Has being a Muslim</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The questions were pre-tested by means of conducting a pilot study. For this purpose, I interviewed two Muslim students (one international and one American). Pre-testing results gave me an feedback on whether or not the questions were relevant and clear. This pilot study also allowed an analysis of how people interpreted my questions.

The pilot study involved a co-researcher as my partner, someone who is not Muslim. This co-researcher participated in six interview sessions with me, as well as reading the transcripts. It was important to have a research partner from a different faith because I share the culture that my informants have. Being a female Muslim learner who used to live in Middle Town, Indiana can put the result of the study at risk, with respect to my preconceived knowledge. Much important information could be taken for granted and be missed because of my shared knowledge with my informants. Therefore, by having a research partner, I could be more focused in my role as an “ignorant learner”.

Consistency and trustworthiness of the collected data was verified by doing member checking. Talburt stated that “member check can allow for clarification, explanation, or extension of questions and ideas... offer important insight into participants understanding of self and context” (2004, p. 88). In addition, Wolcott (1990) explains that validity is not the term that an ethnographer uses. His or her job is to understand culture, and member checking can be one of the methods to ensure consistency and believability of the data gathered. To avoid the most common problem of this methodology, where the informants change their answers in fear of consequences, I
asked my informants to review the transcripts and offer modifications, as well as ensuring that their answers will not be used against them.

Member checking was completed after the report was ready. However, should the informants decide not to include certain information in the report, I respected their privacy in accordance with the Principles of Professional Responsibility that stated:

In research, an anthropologist’s paramount responsibility is to those he studies. When there is conflict of interest, these individuals must come first. The anthropologist must do everything within his power to protect their physical, social, and psychological welfare and to honor their dignity and privacy (1971, par. 1).

Coding

Emerson suggested:

Qualitative analytic coding usually proceeds in two different phases. In open coding, ethnographer reads fieldnotes line-by-line to identify and formulate any and all ideas, themes, or issues they suggest, no matter how varied and disparate. In focused coding the fieldworker subjects fieldnotes to fine-grained, line-by-line analysis on the basis of topics that have been identified as of particular interest. Here the ethnographer uses a smaller set of promising ideas and categories to provide the major topic and themes for the final ethnography (1995, p. 20).

Furthermore, Bogdan and Biklen suggested that coding categories are developed by means of two major steps:

1. Searching through the data for regularities and patterns as well as for topics the data cover, and
2. Writing down words and phrases to represent these topics and patterns (1998, p. 171).

Insights, ideas, and connections found in the above process were elaborated by writing theoretical memos. Later on, these memos were linked to the separate pieces of data and clarified the themes and categories.

The coding process began by rereading the field notes accounts and transcriptions to identify threads that could be linked together to tell a story about the observed culture. Both the researcher and my co-researcher completed this process together. After the interview and observations, I transcribed all of the audiotapes. I also typed all of the memos and observational comments noted when interviewing the participants. My co-researcher and I read the transcripts over and over to become familiar with the data. Ary et al. stated that it is paramount that that one should “not change words or phrases to make them grammatically correct as it may inadvertently change the sense of meaning of what was said” (2006, p. 490).

Spradley (1979) used the word *cover terms* to represent names for a category in the coding process. By means of this method, it was easier for a researcher to find themes and linkage between the themes. The next step is to insert *included terms* or what things that belong to the larger category (cover term). In other words, included terms mean instance of cover term. Once all cover terms and included terms are put together, I found linkages among the included terms. Elaborate discussion about this process can be found in my Data Analysis section.
Data Analysis

According to Spradley (1979), analysis of any kind involves a way of thinking. He noted, “It refers to systematic examination of something to determine its parts, the relationship among parts and the relationship to the whole” (Spradley, 1979, p. 92). This kind of method fits a holistic perspective shared by feminist methodology and allows better interpretation of the data. Bogdan and Biklen similarly noted that:

“Analysis involves working with data, organizing them, breaking them into manageable units, synthesizing them, searching for patterns, discovering what is important and what is to be learned, and deciding what you will tell others” (1998, p. 157).

For this particular study, I utilized the Domain Analysis Method (the process of identifying, collecting, organizing, and representing the relevant information in a domain) proposed by Spradley (1979). According to Spradley, the first and second elements in the structure of a domain are cover terms (larger categories) and included terms (instances of the cover term). The next feature is semantic relationships. Spradley explains that, “When two included terms are linked together, we refer to this link as a semantic relationship” (1979, p. 100). Some of the most useful semantic relationships he proposes are:

1. Strict inclusion where X is a kind of Y.
2. Cause-effect where X is a result of Y.
3. Rationale where X is a reason for doing Y.
4. Location for action where X is the place for doing Y.
5. Sequence where X is a step stage in Y.
6. Attribution where $X$ is an attribute (characteristics) of $Y$.

7. Means-end where $X$ is a way to do $Y$.

8. Spatial where $X$ is a place in $Y$, $X$ is a part of $Y$.

9. Function where $X$ is used for $Y$. (Spradley, 1979, p. 111)

Spradley summarized that in general, the intention of doing ethnographic analyses is, “to find out how do words and behavior and objects become meaningful and how do we find out what things mean?” (1979, p. 95).

This type of analysis may include examples such as the following:

- Where $X$ is a kind of $Y$ – Fasting is a pillar of Islam; wearing the veil is a kind of submissive act to God.

- Cause-effect where $X$ is a result of $Y$ – Becoming a Muslim is a result of marriage to a Muslim; Becoming a Muslim is a result of reading a book or watching a film about Islam.

- Where $X$ is a reason for doing $Y$ – Studying Islam is a reason for reading the Qur’an; studying Islamic feminism is the reason for this dissertation research.

In brief, according to Spradley, domain analysis consists of six interrelated steps:

- Selecting a single semantic relationship.

- Preparing a domain analysis worksheet.

- Selecting a sample of informant statements.

- Searching for possible cover terms and included terms that appropriately fit the semantic relationship.

- Formulating structural questions for each domain. For example: “Are there different kinds of Muslims?”
• Making a list of all hypothesized domain. (Spradley, 1979, p. 117-118)

For example:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Domain</th>
<th>Semantic relations</th>
<th>Structural question</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kinds of Muslims</td>
<td>X is a kind of Y</td>
<td>Are there different kinds of Muslims?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parts of faith</td>
<td>X is part of Y</td>
<td>What are all the parts of faith? and so forth.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Writing the Results

This dissertation consists of five chapters. The first one is the introduction to the study. The second is the literature review. The third describes the methods used in this study. The fourth includes the data from the interviews and the coding process. Finally, the fifth chapter provides analysis, conclusions, and recommendations.
"The day will come when men will recognize woman as his peer, not only at the fireside, but in councils of the nation. Then, and not until then, will there be the perfect comradeship, the ideal union between the sexes that shall result in the highest development of the race." —Susan B. Anthony

Spradley and Mann wrote in their ethnography research titled, *The cocktail waitress; Woman’s work in the man’s world*, “The ethnography begins with people. Only individuals can open the door to their reality and allow us to see how they perceive and make sense out of experience” (1975, p.15). Instead of trying to describe the Muslim women who live and study in Middle Town, Indiana in my terms, I wanted them to describe their lives as residents of Middle Town and as learners. I became their student and they were my teachers. This task was especially difficult for me as I was one of the members of the Middle Town Islamic community from the years of 2000-2005. Although I did not associate with my informants on a regular basis, I am a Muslim learner myself and a person who sometimes attended the activities in the Middle Town Islamic Center. Therefore, I share some of the insider’s perspectives. To ensure trustworthiness or believability, I needed to juggle my insider role and my role as an objective “outsider” to this subculture under investigation. This ensures that the findings are merely based on my informants’ points of view. As another way to ensure some objectivity and clarify assumptions, I invited a graduate student who is not a Muslim and who has no knowledge about Islam to attend two of my interview sessions (with my informant’s consent). I tried to confirm that the data gathering process was consistent with my research questions and
that my role as an objective outsider is maintained. In other words, I focused on the data gathered and analyzed this data using my informants’ points of view, not mine.

Description of Informants

Barbara

Barbara is a 43-year-old lady from Afghanistan who is working on her B.A. at a public university in Middle Town, Indiana. At the age of 13, during the Soviet occupation in Afghanistan, Barbara and her family as well as many other Afghanistani families had to migrate to the neighboring country of Pakistan. Her father was a businessman and her mother was a stay-at-home mom. In the refugee camp, she used to help with the elderly and help her mother with various household chores. Because of safety concerns, Barbara’s parents did not allow their daughters to go to the school provided in the refugee camp in Pakistan. She lived in the refugee tent for about six years, met her future husband there, and got engaged. In 1986, she went to the U.S. as a refugee from Afghanistan and married her fiancé. Her husband became an Afghanistani medical professional who works at a hospital in Middle Town, Indiana. They have six children together. Both Barbara and her husband were born Muslims and consider themselves to be devoted practicing Muslims. After she was married, she attended classes at the Career Center for her GED program. It took her eight years to finish her GED program because, at the same time, she had to raise her four children and take care of her extended family. They have lived in Middle Town for almost 23 years now, and she described her life in Middle Town as a very rewarding one.

Barbara mentioned that she now has enough education and resources and she wants to give back to her people in Afghanistan by establishing a non-profit organization
to help women and children in Afghanistan to pursue their education and to have proper health care. She is very active in promoting her organization to the people in her town and across Indiana. She gives speeches and presentations in the churches and many other places on the status of women and children in her country and to support her organization. So far she has received a lot of support from many sources and she is well respected in the Middle Town Islamic community and by other non-Muslims as well. Barbara attributes her success in influencing people to help and her passion for learning to her faith (Islam). She believes that her personality is mainly shaped by her identity as a Muslim.

Barbara’s day starts at 6:30 a.m. every day. After offering her morning prayer, she fixes her children cereal and at 7:30 a.m. takes them all to school. She will then go back home to clean the house, make beds, then change clothes if she has an appointment or errands to do. She usually makes and receives many phone calls and emails every day. She works diligently to plan what needs to be done to maintain her non-profit organization. In the afternoon she sometimes takes her kids to sports activities. Sometimes she stays there with them or, if she needs to cook, she will leave them there and pick them up later. Her husband usually comes home at 6:30 p.m. They usually have dinner and perform evening prayer after dinner. During the summer Barbara always tries to walk with her husband before dinner. After dinner the older children usually stay in their rooms doing homework and, after her youngest daughter goes to sleep, Barbara has a nice and quiet time with her husband chatting about their days and enjoying a couple cups of hot tea; just relaxing. She sometimes uses that opportunity to discuss her homework with her husband because Barbara thinks her husband’s English is much better
than hers. Barbara said she is the kind of learner who learns best through discussion not through reading. She mentioned about her activities:

I sometimes give lectures at the church, or participate in the interfaith activities. I do not join any other organizations but the one I established. But I always make time to help with community activities for the good causes. When I am giving speech at the church or at the other community events, I always promote my organization and share information about Islam too. It comes automatically. My organization missions and Islam goes hand-in hand because my organization is the implementation of what my religion teaches me, to work in God’s cause to help people in need.

Christine

The second informant is Christine. She is a 36-year-old American-born Filipino woman who is working on her Master’s degree at Middle Town’s public university. This is going to be her last semester and she is hoping to earn her M.S. very soon. She was originally from Louisville, Kentucky. Her father is a Psychiatrist and her mother stayed at home during Christine’s youth. The couple came from the Philippines in the late 1960s. Christine and her other four siblings (three girls and one boy) were born and raised in the Midwest. When Christine graduated from high school she attended one public university in Middle Town in the early 1990s. She has not left since. Her parents intentionally raised their children to be “American”. The children were only taught English not Tagalog (the major language used in the Philippines), and they only ate American food. The key difference that Christine felt in her upbringing was the discipline that her parents imposed on their children to become successful academically; the professions of medical doctor
and engineer were the preferred professions in her family. Christine mentioned that both of her parents treated her and her other siblings the same and they expected all of their children would go to college. Christine attributed this tendency to part of the Filipino culture that everyone should excel academically. Christine’s parents finally got divorced due to her mother’s dissatisfaction with her inability to excel in her own career because of her mounting responsibilities to raise her five children. Christine is married to an American businessman in Middle Town, Indiana. They have two children together, a girl and a boy. Besides working on her Master’s degree in Public Health, Christine is currently also working for an organization which encourages smoking cessation. She was raised as a Catholic but she never practiced her religion or felt empowered by it. Christine converted to Islam after a long journey looking for information about this religion from books, discussions with her then-future husband, and her association with an American convert on her campus. She became a Muslim on the day she got married and declares herself and her husband to be devoted, practicing Muslims.

Christine’s day starts according to the time of Fajr prayer (Morning Prayer). When Fajr prayer is set at a prescribed time each day she has to find out for what time it is planned. That is the time when she is supposed to first get up in the morning. After offering her Fajr prayer she will get ready for work, get her kids up and ready. She then goes off to drop them at the day care or their school, and then she goes straight to work. Christine emphasized that her day revolves around the five prayers. She mentioned, “Um…when I come home I always make sure that I did my Ashr, Maghrib, and Isya and then get ready for bed”. Basically, Christine summarized that her routine is thinking about what prayers she has during a certain day, what activities she has during that day,
and how she can be able to work her schedule around her prayers. When she has to go to class in the evening, Christine will stay at her office studying until it is time to leave for her class. Her husband takes diligent care of the kids when she is in class, when she has to study alone at her office during the weekend, or when she has meetings or conferences out of town.

Sandra

The third informant is Sandra. She is a 41-year-old Mexican-American lady who is working on her degree to be a medical professional at a public university in Middle Town, Indiana. She was born and raised in the city of Torreon, Mexico. She has two brothers and they were raised in a very harmonious family. In Mexico, she studied at the university to become a veterinarian. After graduation, Sandra started working at a Mexican cattle ranch for very low pay. Her aunt, who lives in El Paso, Texas subsequently invited her to come to the U.S. and offered her a job as a medical professional. Sandra took that offer and left for Texas. She was taking care of the handicapped and enjoyed her job very much. One of her patients offered to take her with him to Virginia and promised her better pay. She accepted that invitation as her means to improve her English and learn about American culture because most people in El Paso, Texas speak Spanish, and she could barely speak any English. She met her American husband in Virginia and they had two children, a girl and a boy. Finally, her whole family from Mexico followed her to Virginia. They subsequently moved to Portland, Indiana when Sandra’s marriage was about to end due to her ex-husband’s alcohol problem. She got divorced and moved to Middle Town, Indiana with her whole extended family since one of her two brothers got a good job in this town. She attended some classes at a
community college and continued her education at a public university in Indiana to become a more skillful medical professional. This is her second year at this university. Sandra also works at a hospital as a medical professional. Sandra was raised as a Catholic and was very devoted to her religion. She converted to Islam after watching a soap opera depicting Islamic teachings and becoming interested in this religion. There were many similarities in the teachings of Islam and Catholicism, except regarding the concept of God. She started searching for information about Islam and finally decided to read a copy of the Qur’an. Sandra met an Iraqi woman who worked as a teacher at her children’s daycare. She borrowed the copy of the Qur’an from this teacher and Sandra was in tears while reading the book. She said she had found the answers to her questions about God and wanted to become a Muslim. She asked the Iraqi teacher to take her to the Middle Town Islamic Center. She described her first experience entering the mosque as a very peaceful moment and she came often thereafter. She declared her shahadah (the declaration that there is no God but one God and Muhammad is the messenger of God) during a community luncheon in 2004. Two years after her conversion Sandra married a Muslim man who has a transportation business based in Mauritania, Northwest Africa and she described her marriage as a most gratifying one. She said she could not ask for a better husband.

Every day before going to bed at night, Sandra usually discusses with her husband the kinds of activities she plans to do in the following day. As a transportation businessman, Sandra’s husband is not home most of the day; hence evening time is the perfect time for them to talk with each other. Sandra usually starts her day at 5:45 in the morning. Immediately after she wakes up, she performs her morning prayer. Sandra said,
“Before I leave for work, I perform my Fajr prayer (Morning Prayer), and I feel like I am in good hands after I do that prayer. I feel like I am taken care of, you know. And I feel comfortable”. If she has to work (she works three days a week usually during the weekend), Sandra leaves her house before 7 a.m. before John, her youngest son (9 years old), wakes up for school. Aleah, her 12-year-old daughter, usually takes care of John’s breakfast and accompanies him to his school bus before leaving on another bus for her school. Sandra works for 12 hours a day, and by the time she gets home she expects that the children have completed their homework. She fixes dinner for her kids, checks their homework, and asks them to sleep. During the days that she does not have to work, Sandra still wakes up at the same time to perform her morning prayer, fixes her children’s breakfast, takes them to school, comes back home and goes back to bed to continue her rest before doing other activities such as shopping, cooking, attending classes, or studying.

*Jackie*

Jackie is my fourth informant. She is a 38-year-old Palestinian working on her Ph.D. in Psychology at a public university in Middle Town, Indiana. Jackie has eight sisters and one brother. She is working on her dissertation, even though her assistantship ended last semester. To help support her family income, Jackie works for the university dining service. Jackie is my only informant who has decided not to wear *Hijab* (head cover). However, she admires those who choose to wear it in this predominantly Judeo-Christian community. Jackie first came to the U.S. in 2000 with a Fulbright scholarship to pursue her Master’s degree in Psychology. She is happily married to her husband; he is a Palestinian man who used to work as an attorney in Israel, where they both used to live.
Her husband decided to leave his job in Israel to accompany Jackie as a reflection of his support toward his wife’s passion for learning. They have two children (two girls) together. After finishing her Master’s degree, she decided to apply for a Doctorate degree in the same area at the same university, and was admitted.

Jackie’s alarm clock is set to wake her up at 6 a.m. every morning. She gets her children ready to school, fixes their breakfast, takes them to school, and goes straight to work at 9 a.m. till 2 or 3 p.m. “I work three days a week. And sometimes I have to work from 7 a.m. and I have to work every Sunday from 7 a.m. to 10 a.m.”. Jackie informed me, “I don’t have an assistantship anymore. Right now I work at the restaurant on campus for a semester. Then I work on my study at the library, and when I come back home I am a mother and a wife again”. Once she gets home, her routine will be cleaning the house, taking care of her children, helping her daughter with her homework, and finally putting her kids to bed. She usually reads a story to them before bed. “I work on my study again after my kids are in bed”, Jackie added. Sometimes during the week Susan (another informant) and Jackie meet and have their kids play together or she invites her daughter’s classmate come to her house to play.

Susan

Susan is a 35-year-old Iraqi woman who is taking classes at a community college for her General Studies degree. She plans to transfer to Middle Town public university to major in Radiology. Susan was born as the youngest of seven children (she has five elder brothers and one elder sister). Susan lost her father when she was 10 years old and was then raised by her single mother and older siblings. She said they were all well-educated. Susan was an elementary school teacher in Iraq but when she married her husband, an
American man who was born and raised in Iraq, and then came to the U.S., she could not teach because of her language barrier. Susan also mentioned that education is compulsory in Iraq and it is free from kindergarten to graduate school. Susan and her husband have two children, one girl and one boy. She described her life in Middle Town, Indiana as wonderful. Besides studying, Susan is also working as a medical professional at a hospital in Middle Town, and she enjoys her job a great deal. The first time she came to this town, Susan spoke very little English. She attended a special ESL program for adults at an elementary school in Middle Town, and learned so much about language and American culture there. After three months at the ESL program, Susan began attending classes at the Career Center to get her GED Diploma. She received her GED after a year and, as soon as she graduated, Susan attended the community college.

Susan’s day starts at 7 a.m. She prepares her daughter for school and then sends her to school. She explained, “On the day I have class, I have to take my son to the day care and I usually come back home around 2:30 p.m., and start my day at home. If I have food left over from the day before it’s okay, if not I will cook”. They have dinner together when her daughter, her husband, and her son are home at around 3 p.m. During weekdays both Susan and her husband help with the kids’ homework. She said her husband helps her with everything. “At home, he is with me every time and helps me with everything. I mean everything; with the cleaning, with the cooking, we take turn taking kids to school back and forth, we share everything, “Alhamdulillah” (praised be to God).” Susan continued, after helping the kids with their homework, they give them baths. Usually Susan will ask her daughter to read the Qur’an while her husband guides her son to do the same thing before putting them to bed. Susan does her homework after
the kids are in bed at 8.30 p.m. Sometimes she just drops them in the day care and studies at home by herself.

**Deedee**

My last informant is Deedee, a 27-year-old-Palestinian pursuing her Master’s degree in TESOL at a public university in Middle Town, Indiana. She is the fourth of eight children. She has three sisters and four brothers and they are all well educated. Her two sisters have good careers and her youngest sister is still working on her college degree. Deedee mentioned that all of the children in her family were treated equally and, in fact, she said their parents are more lenient and kind toward their daughters. Deedee came to Middle Town as a Fulbright scholar in the fall of 2008. She has two small sons (three and four years old). The Fulbright administrators chose the university for her. Deedee’s husband is also a Palestinian and he could not come with her to Middle Town because he must complete his degree. As soon as he completes his degree he will leave his job in Palestine and follow Deedee to the U.S. Deedee described herself as an immensely serious learner and devoted practicing Muslim.

Deedee gets up at 6 a.m. each day, then offers her morning prayer. Her next tasks are to wake her children and get them ready for school. A Muslim friend assists Deedee by taking Deedee’s children to preschool every day. It happens that their children go to the same preschool and this lady offered to help. As soon as her boys leave, Deedee goes to the university library and studies for her class or does her assignments. Then she has to catch the bus to pick up her kids at noon, and then feeds them. During the weekend she usually does not go outside unless she is invited by friends to have lunch or dinner at
their houses. If there is no invitation, she prefers to stay home with her kids and watches cartoons with them. Deedee rarely studies at home. Sometimes she talks to her family back home in Palestine. Deedee said, “I wake up early and sleep early. Sometimes I have class in the evening. But fortunately my kids are looked after by a Muslim friend who lives in the university apartment complex.” That service is free of charge, once a week for three hours. After class ends at 9 p.m., Deedee picks up her kids from her friend’s house, asks her boys to drink milk, and tugs them to bed. No more studying for Deedee; as soon as she is at home she usually feels very tired. She will instead watch cartoons, the only program that her kids allow her to watch.

Living as a Member of the Middle Town Community

As I have previously mentioned, all of the informants are female Muslim learners who participate in the Middle Town Islamic Center religious and social activities. In this study they are known as Middle Town Islamic Ladies. Barbara, my Afghanistani-born informant is one of the most enthusiastic members of the Middle Town Islamic community, advocating a return to the real teachings of Islam. She encourages religious understanding with non-Muslims. She described the town as a place where she can freely express herself as a real Muslim and she considered her experiences living and studying in this town as most rewarding because of the respect and kindness she received from Middle Town Islamic community members and members of the larger community.

Barbara shared her story of life before coming to Middle Town and the bitterness she had living in her country under a culture that devalues women. This situation made her aware of the need for a woman to be well educated. She understood the most valid resources of Islamic teachings, the Qur’an and Hadith, and how to live her life in
accordance with those teachings rather than follow cultural practices that are accepted as a norm. She is also committed to using her knowledge and resources here in the U.S. to help women and children in her country who are suffering because of the war, poverty, low-level of education, and the patriarchal mindset that views women as second class citizens. She listed four main goals of her organization. They are:

- Education, health care, vocational center for women, and for emergency assistance. For women and children I have more desire to assist them because they have suffered the most during the Soviet invasion. And those are the main goals. We built up… we just take care of one village at a time. We build a school in this one specific village, we built a clinic; we built it, equipped it, and staffed it for orphans and serving the community; Over 100 families.

   Barbara is very active in promoting her organization to the people in Middle
   Town and even the people around Indiana. She gives a lot of speeches and presentations
   in churches and many other places about women and children in her country, seeking
   support for her organization. So far, she has gotten a lot of assistance from many sources
   and she is well respected in the Middle Town Islamic community and among the non-
   Muslims with whom she associates. Barbara attributes her success influencing people to
   help and her passion for learning to her faith (Islam). She believes that her personality is
   mainly shaped by her identity as a Muslim. Barbara said:

   The teachings of Islam really impress me. It comes in a whole package you know.
   I enjoy the convenience that the faith and teachings give me…Thank God I never
   have problems living here. As far as my personality is concerned, I respect people
   the way they are. And that could be due to my personality that people respect me
and always show their appreciation and always go above and beyond to help me
and I do the same for them. It is a blessing from God to create this kind of
personality and let me have that kind of experience.

Barbara thinks her life in this town has been a joyful and enriching one. She said,
“The quality of life I have here is very satisfying personally. It’s beautiful. Middle Town
community has been very, very nice. I am so impressed by the people here in the U.S. in
general. But Middle Town people or the town community impresses me the most”.

Barbara then listed some very important factors that help smooth her adjustment
to living and studying in Middle Town; her faith, her husband/family support, her friends,
and her helpful professors. Barbara’s faith is her way of life; her faith gives her direction
and a sense of purpose in life. Through her belief in the supreme power, she feels a sense
of comfort and a clear sense of identity. She shared that there are many religious
experiences that affirm her faith but she considered her children’s exemplary behaviors as
the most outstanding one. She said:

I think my kids are my best rewards. They are very important to me. God has
blessed me with wonderful kids. I used to hear many horrible stories about
teenagers here. Thank God I have not experienced that. They are great kids, I
don’t have to tell them to pray; I don’t have to tell them to fast; I don’t have to be
struggling with many negative things that many teenagers here deal with. And in
my belief, this is the result of being a good person and following what God has
prescribed for me, so God blesses me with good kids.

Barbara shared her “recipe” of how to raise her kids. She used a reverse

*psychology* method to train them and at the same time tried to be a role model for her
children. For example, she will set certain standards for her children to excel academically or spiritually. Then she lets her children to find ways to reach those standards. When I asked her to elaborate with an example, Barbara explained that she expects her children to get all A’s at school. She simply tells them that she wants to see all A’s on their report cards. She never forces them to do homework. She knows by setting that bar, her children will strive to reach it, and they do. In passing religious knowledge, Barbara does the same thing. She and her husband expressed their expectation to see the children be good Muslims and they set an example as role models. She is so thankful that her children simply follow without questioning. Her husband always reminds her of the best blessing that God have given them, their well-behaved children. Barbara noted:

Every time I see my kids are praying when they were still little. They came back from school and went straight to the praying room and prayed, I cried, literally. My husband sometimes tells me, “when you get frustrated by certain people, remember how much blessings God has given you. Look at the kids that Allah has given us.” Because so many people are struggling. I have many friends who are constantly calling me asking me how to handle their misbehaving kids. They came and asked me, “how do you raise your kids?” The school principal, the teachers, they asked me the same questions. I said it’s not from me but from Allah. My kids have always been well behaved. My husband asked, “See, what else do you want?”

Barbara also said she cannot imagine her life without being a Muslim. She thinks Islam has given her the pleasure of life. She said:
I don’t think that the culture in Afghanistan gives me that. It is the Islam. If I go to Afghanistan I will not be able to practice my religion and do what I have been able to do here in the U.S. I am not gonna be able to drive, I am not gonna be able to do one-fourth of what I have been doing here. Here I have all the choices that my religion has given us the women too. But what they did in Afghanistan, they have enforced things that are against Islam.

When it comes to her adjustment to learning in the U.S., Barbara mentioned that her most devastating disadvantage is her language. Fortunately, she always has helpful professors to accommodate her needs as a married international student who speaks English as a foreign language. She asserted:

They always accommodate me, whether I have holidays (Muslim holidays), whether I am sick, whether I have death in the family they will accommodate my needs. Language is the main barrier, and of course the time and the family situations like this semester I am not taking classes because my sister is sick, she has cancer, and last semester my mother died. I mean those family situations affected my learning but definitely, language will be the main thing that bogs me down outside the family issues.

Like Barbara, Sandra loves her life in Middle Town. She considers this town as her second hometown. She said, “Middle Town, I found it as a nice little town. I don’t see crime; you don’t see many bad things happened in this town. Actually it’s a quiet town and I have a nice Muslim community that I love very much. This is my home. This is home for me.” After she got married, she decided to wear Hijab by her own choice regardless of her husband’s concern. She described that this decision has brought about
many problems at her workplace. She feels that she has to deal with two kinds of
discrimination, because she is Mexican and because she is a Muslim woman with Hijab
at work. Her coworkers often make fun of her unique Mexican accent, and many of her
patients think she is an Arab, and refuse to receive treatment from her because of the bad
stereotyping concerning the Arabs in the U.S. She shared one example that happened to
her:

Like yesterday for example, I came and tried to take care of one of my patients.
He was so mean and rude. And he told the other nurse that he didn’t want me in
his room because he thought I was Arab. And I am like… what? The nurse told
him, “no she is not Arab she is Mexican”. He said, “I don’t care, she is covering
her head, I don’t want her in my room. She will kill me.

Sandra blames the media for instigating such negative stereotyping. However, she
tried her best to use this barrier as the means to deepen her knowledge about her religion
so she could explain her decision and her religion better. She also mentioned that she has
always loved learning but, after she became a Muslim, she became more persistent in
seeking knowledge because Islam encourages its followers to never stop learning. Sandra
also quoted some Qur’anic verses and Hadith to support lifelong learning and how God
gives higher status and better reward to those who never stop learning. She said she wants
that status and special reward by being more disciplined in her learning endeavor. Sandra
admitted language has been the main barrier since the beginning. She said, “The
challenge in learning is the English part. Yes, because English is my second language. It
has been hard to express myself the way I want to”. She also said she always needs more
time to process a question in a test or read twice before she can fully understand the
materials she is reading. Luckily she has good relationships with her professors and classmates. She does not have any problem to speak with her classmates and her professors in class regardless of her limited English. She also found that all of the professors are accommodating. In terms of educational systems, Sandra noticed two main differences between the one in her country and the one in her department concerning the type of tests given and collaboration among the students:

In Mexico we have to explain chapters. In the test you have to explain explicitly to answer the questions. But here it’s only ABC (multiple choice). And is kind of easier but at the same time it’s kind of different. All the tests I took here in the U.S. are multiple-choice tests. In Mexico we worked in groups. Here in America, sometimes in the lab you work as a group but that’s it. In Mexico you worked as a team, resources and ideas they are very supportive when you study in groups sometimes they tell you don’t learn this right, this is...not right, for me it’s easier to work in groups. It’s more helpful. Everybody contributes and you learn from the classmates.

Sandra repeatedly mentioned that her faith means everything to her. She stated that her reasons to convert were to find the right path and to know the purpose of life. She found Islam through a very long process of searching. She said:

I was born Catholic but I had always been trying to find the right path. I went to Methodist church, I went to Baptist church, even I went to Jehovah Witness church. The only denomination in Christianity the Jehovah Witnesses they believe in one God…I think that Jehovah Witnesses makes me really affirm that there is only one God…The Jehovah Witnesses was the bridge for me to Islam. It was so
hard before to understand the trinity. When I start reading about Islam and learning about Islam I feel like God guides me to the right path.

Sandra mentioned Islam is her way of life, and she always tries her best to follow the teachings prescribed in the Qur’an and Hadith. According to Sandra, Islam has changed her life in many ways, such as praying five times a day, fasting, giving annual charity, feeling more conscious about everything she does, and feeling closer to God. She thinks she has been a good person all her life. Nonetheless, after her conversion she feels she has more knowledge about God. She explained:

I think that’s reflected in the way I deal with my children. I am more patient with my children and with my husband. We try to solve problems in different way, now I thank God for everything. Before I convert, when bad things happened to me I kept on asking why this things happened? …Islam changes the way to see life. The way to see our creator, the way to be closer to Him.

As a Muslim, Sandra feels God is watching her all the time, and it gives her a sense of comfort and peace. She is always grateful for every single thing that happens in her life now. As soon as she is done with her Fajr or Morning Prayer before going to work, she feels that she is always in good hands. Sandra said Islam completes her. Part of her life had always been looking for something that made her sad and incomplete. Now she realizes that her heart has found what it was looking for: Islam. In general, Sandra is content with her life in Middle Town, and does not feel lesser or superior to the other people around her. She said, “I have the peace of mind, a good family, a good life, and I cannot be happier”.
Susan shared what Barbara and Sandra thought about Middle Town as a nice and comfortable place to live and study. She reported that, in the beginning before attending an ESL course, the Career Center to learn English, and finishing her GED, she felt “dead” because she had no friends and spoke minimal English. As a born Muslim, Susan described her religion as her way of life. She started wearing Hijab in Middle Town by her own choice. She reported that she does not have significant problems because of the way she dresses and her identity as a Muslim.

Being a social person, Susan treasures the opportunity to be friends with anyone and especially with the Middle Town Islamic community. She mentioned that her association with these people, especially with the Muslim women, has helped to better her English because this community is an incredibly diverse one. Muslims from all over the world such as those from Afghanistan, Pakistan, Kenya, Indonesia, Bangladesh, Mexico, Palestine, Israel, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, etc. come and gather in the Center to worship God or to celebrate Islamic religious holidays and attend monthly dinners. Because of this diversity, the only way to communicate is by speaking English. It also gives her a pleasant feeling that she is around people who share the same belief system.

However, as a born Arab Muslim with Hijab, she is aware of the possibility for people to be curious and sometimes think negatively about her because of the stereotyping messages given by some U.S. media about the Arabs. Many people asked her questions that portrayed prejudice but some simply stared at her. Instead of blaming the media or people’s ignorant attitudes, Susan accepts this problem in a positive light. She said, “It’s okay because I came to their country and they got curious. I might behave
the same if there is a foreigner comes to my country”. So far Susan has never had any large arguments or “attacks” from people she has encountered in Middle Town. In fact, Susan feels better if people ask so she can educate them about Islam, and in turn she can help correct the misconception that people tend to have about her faith. Susan said that she did not feel offended by people’s reactions and perceptions about her identity. She explained:

They ask because they have some kind of wrong ideas about Muslim women. Especially women in Arab countries, that they don’t get education, and they don’t have rights; and especially in Saudi Arabia they have to cover their faces, or they are not allowed to drive, and they know about these so that’s why they asked me. They see that I work, I am getting along with the people, talking to everybody, I am driving to any places I want, I have good education, you know…and they got surprised, they are like…wait a minute, how come this woman, she is from the Middle East, she is Muslim, why does she behave like that? Why is she not covering her face and so forth? And I tried to explain to them that their ideas about Muslim women so far were more cultural than what Islam really is. Saudi Arabia or Arab or Afghanistan is not Islam and Islam is not Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan, or whatever countries they mentioned to identify how Islam sees the status of women.

The tendency of the people to stereotype Muslim people, especially Muslim women, in a negative light boosts Susan’s passion to learn more about her faith. The more she learns, the more she understands the beauty of her religion and the better she is able to explain about her religion to others. Susan said her faith is her way of life. Every
step she is planning to take has to be consistent with what the Qur’an prescribes. She consults the Qur’an constantly in terms of how to deal with her family and other people or how to act in many situations. She said her religion formed her personality. She mentioned, “I manage myself, and my life and my dreams and my need with my religion; to not make a mistake”. Susan shared that her religious experience strengthens her faith. She described:

Whenever we have difficult time and hard situation and something is out of our hand, we said we have the faith God knows and watches us, and God will find the solution for us. He does guide us. It’s not like he’s gonna bring the miracles to get us out of the hard situation but he will put way to get us out of this hard situation.

Susan feels lucky that, because Islam forbids paying and receiving interest, in this economy she does not have problems with credit cards or situations that have anything to do with usury. She said, “We said Alhamdulillah, when we have money we spend it. If we don’t have money, we never force ourselves to buy something using credit card or borrowing money from the bank”. She quoted one verse (ayaat) in the Qur’an that helps improve her optimism in life. The verse stated that God only gives a test that one can handle and whenever one makes a mistake, He will forgive him or her; and God is always with the believer. She mentioned that the verse soothes her heart. She said, “That encourages me, that makes me…does not matter what happen to me in this life, God is watching and He will help me. But I need to do good things. I can’t do whatever I want that contradicts Islamic teachings. And that gives me more patience, more vigilance to continue this life”.

Deedee is also impressed by her experiences living and studying in Middle Town. She described this town as a relatively safe place to live and study. She enjoys the hospitality and respect that the people show her in public places and in class, and she especially treasures her association with her fellow Muslim friends that she met at the Middle Town Islamic Center. The trepidation she felt when she arrived in the foreign country finally dissipated by means of the favors and friendship that these friends provided. She said:

At the first month it was very difficult. Especially here everything is so different, the language is different, the culture is different, I do not know too many friends, and life is very expensive too. Then I started searching for Middle Town Islamic Center because as long as there is an Islamic Center then I should be fine. The Muslim Ladies help me a lot or should I say so much.

When it comes to learning in the U.S., Deedee said that it was difficult in the beginning because in her country the whole educational system is based on tests. She explained, “You study the whole book and then sit for a test. Here I am asked to do assignments, do projects with partners. These are something new for me. So it was difficult for the first time, but then I am used to the system and I find it to be interesting”. She said testing does make her learn but, in her opinion, it is going to be more useful if it is combined with research. She said research is useful because one will discover knowledge in another way. “So I think both are important. To combine them not only to depend on test or memorizing. Now I like the U.S. educational system too much”, Deedee concluded with a smile on her face.
Deedee then asserted that her faith is the most important factor that helps her feel safe and optimistic in facing any challenge in life. She noted:

I feel that my religion Islam gives the best to the human beings, gives the best to women, and it is the core principle in our religion that each Muslim should help other Muslim. For example, when I came here, there are many Muslims here who make my life less difficult because they keep asking about me, keep asking if I want something. They are helpful because it is the heart or the core principle in our religion that you should help others. If you are a Muslim you should help others, also the other people who are not Muslims… I thank God that I am a Muslim. Because it gives me a sense of security that Allah is with me and I am sure that Allah will not leave me alone and also mm….gives me confidence that there will also be good people who can help me.

Deedee said she could not imagine how her life would be if she was not a Muslim, because she is content with her religion. She elaborated, “I don’t know much about the other religions. My religion asks us to respect all other religions and we should appreciate each one of them. I am happy with what Islam has given me so I cannot see myself without being a Muslim. I don’t know how it feels to be in the other religion or how our principles are different.”

Unlike the other four informants, Christine did not specifically mention whether she likes living in Middle Town, Indiana or not, but she enjoys her beautiful relationship with her fellow Muslims in this town. She shared her story about how she lost lots of good friends when she was still a non-Muslim after she declared her shahadah (the declaration that there is no God but one God and Muhammad is the messenger of God).
but she learned that the amount of friends one has does not guarantee the quality of the relationship. She said she has found better friends now and lives a happy life with her husband and children. She mentioned that her faith is her way of life and she calls herself a God-fearing-person. She told me:

Islam is the way I live; everything that I do. When I get up in the morning I know that I have to pray to God, praise God. When I leave the house you know that I’d be thankful and hopefully I get to my destination safely. When I am at work I focus on how often I am thinking of making way that everything I do is for the sake of Allah (God). You know that I am being honest, that I am doing good work, that I am being dependable, that I have integrity, that people can rely on me, that I am the good person that I am trying to strive to be, and the people can see that too so they know that they can depend on me as a good employee and then also I live my life around my faith. I don’t think I could stay in my job if I was not able to do my five prayers a day.

Christine declared herself and her husband to be two devoted practicing Muslims. She said Islam has given her life a purpose and affected her learning immensely. She used to learn for the sake of making her parents happy and to pursue material gains through having a good job but now she is learning “to please God” and to take advantage of her knowledge to help as many people as possible. Christine sees learning as a personal responsibility since she became a Muslim and is more disciplined in her endeavor to seek more knowledge. She also mentioned that Islam gives her an answer to why one exists in this world and hence, provides her with rules for living. She saw Islam as the reason behind her own choices and conduct, since one will be held accountable on
the Day of Judgment. Christine is committed to following the real teachings of Islam by practicing what God has prescribed in the Quran and what Prophet Muhammad suggested in the Hadith. She is hoping that by being a good God fearing person she can help people see what Islam really is, and use the beauty of this religion to influence one’s personality toward better directions. She noted how her family members see the difference in her personality in terms of respect to her parents and older siblings. She said she also became more dependable and trustworthy because she is aware that God is watching her all the time. When she finally decided to wear Hijab, Christine reported that she experienced a lot of stares in public places rather than from the people she works with or from her classmates and professors. In general, she does not have many problems because of the way she dresses and by being a practicing Muslim. She said part of the reason was because most people in her workplace and on campus have known her as Christine before and after she became a Muslim. She did mention one incident in her workplace where a woman who works in the other building asked Christine’s coworker if Christine feels that her religion (Islam) hates America. Christine’s coworker defended her, and said that Christine is a very good person. She then said it was a misconception and Christine’s coworker taught the woman about Islam, even though she is not a Muslim and Christine was not present during the incident. For Christine, her coworker’s attitude to defend her is an accomplishment that she has given the correct message about her religion.

Jackie gave a slightly different response in terms of how she views her life in Middle Town. During our interview sessions, Jackie described that life has not always been easy in this town for her. A lack of financial resources has been the root of many other problems in her life in addition to the responsibilities she has to handle as a student,
mother, wife, and employee. She said, “Um, actually (living in Middle Town) is a big challenge to juggle a lot of job I have to work I have to study I have to be a mom, a wife; I have to be a manager because I take care of everything, I take care of bills, I take care of everything, literally everything.”

She also senses some kind of discrimination, not because she is a Muslim but more because she is not a white Caucasian American and she speaks English as a foreign language. People stare at her or show an impatient expression whenever she asks them to repeat what they were saying and they treat her as if she was “dumb”. As was previously mentioned, Jackie does not wear the Hijab. However, she has so much respect for her fellow Muslims who decide to wear it. She believes once people see a woman wearing the Hijab in the U.S., people will start profiling or stereotyping them negatively because of the bias message sent by some U.S. media concerning Muslim women.

In terms of her learning in the U.S., Jackie admitted it was hard in the beginning. Language and the individualistic nature of her classmates frustrated her a lot. She said:

Back home umm… I studied with both Arab students and Jewish students and the Arab students always worked together, read together you know, always asked each other you know like what did you study what did you do and yeah..but here I found that you’re not really supposed to um… ask your classmates a lot of questions. Like we really have to do stuff individually …very much so. Even if somebody finds an article, umm.. you still need to go the library and get the article and photocopy it instead of just photocopying it from a classmate who has already photocopied it. They expect you to do the same thing to go and look it up and photocopy it yourself. Back home we would give each other tips for example
before the test like I studied this and this is very important umm… go over this make sure you know this and that and so on. But here if somebody knows anything about the test they didn’t necessarily share it with you ..yeah they won’t share.

However, she found that most of her professors were helpful. She only had bad experiences with two of her professors. In one instance, she sent an email to one of her professors very early in the morning, and this professor talked about this in class in a negative light. Another professor made her struggle to understand the materials in an advanced class. This professor taught basic courses during her Master’s program, but never taught the basic foundation which is very important to understanding advanced courses in her Ph.D. program. Instead of giving tips to be a good Psychologist, this professor simply talked about her experiences dealing with her patients at her clinic.

Jackie then shared her feelings about her religion and how her faith has helped her to become a very optimistic person in all areas of life. For example, she said, “Islam always says to you (she recited a Qur’anic verse in Arabic) it means…if you find yourself in um a miserable situation you need to know that after the misery comes um… luxury or comfort. So it is comforting. You need to believe that God is there for you and with you and God will help you get out of the misery.” She said she is proud of being a Muslim. She noted, “I like all the teachings of the Islam because I think if they are interpreted correctly they are great and um they um…they call people to be moral, they call on people to be…ethical…yeah.”
However, in her opinion, every religion is aimed at the same thing; to bring peace and harmony in life. She also thinks that believing in God is an essential factor to ensure one’s mental health, regardless of his or her choice of religion.

Jackie then shared one experience that really affirms her faith. She remembered at a certain point of time during her first year in her Ph.D. program she thought that her financial resources would not allow her to continue her study and she planned to go back home. During that difficult time, she found out that she had received an assistantship and her parents came to the rescue by sending her some money. She said, “And it’s… it all worked out Alhamdulillah. Yes, I attributed this to Allah. Like to be patience and believing that God is there for you and will help you”.

*The Monthly Dinners*

Participant observation was one of the methods used to gather data from the culture I was studying. In this case, I was learning about Muslim women who live and study in Middle Town, Indiana and actively participate in the Islamic Center’s activities such as the monthly dinner, Islamic holiday celebrations, fasting month events, etc. As mentioned in chapter III, I observed three monthly dinners at the Center and collected as much data as possible from what I had observed during the events. The first monthly dinner was held on October 11, 2008. It was 6:45 p.m. when I arrived at Middle Town Islamic Center with my husband and two children. It was not cold yet, so I could wear my favorite black long dress with nice and colorful golden threaded and embroidered flowers in the middle of my one piece gown. I matched it with my orange Hijab. It was quiet when I entered the ladies’ room. When I still lived in Middle Town, attendance was higher. Perhaps I was too early. I met two sisters when I was walking to the room and
they both welcomed me to the event. They expressed their condolence over the death of my beloved mother on September 17, 2008, and gave me firm hugs. I thanked them and was so touched by their concern. They said one of the sisters told the President of Middle Town Islamic community about that sad news and they held a special prayer for my late mother and my family at the Masjid (Mosque) after one Friday prayer. Susan, as the women’s representative, keeps the email address and phone numbers of anyone who has attended the Center and constantly spreads important news to the members of the community. Hence, one feels that he or she is always part of the community.

Later in the evening, Jackie arrived with her daughter. She kissed and hugged the other sisters and had pleasant conversations with them. I was approached by two teenagers who asked me how I had been doing. I was astonished by how fast both girls had grown (one of them was Barbara’s daughter). When I still lived in this town about three years ago, they were still very little. I suddenly felt old. Luckily I remembered their names, gave them firm hugs, and chatted a little with both girls. More ladies came and I greeted them. The Masjid still had Eid celebration (the festival to mark the end of Muslim fasting month) decorations here and there, even though the event was held a week before. Jackie was still busy chatting with one woman when the call for prayer (adzan) was summoned. I decided to offer my evening prayer before continuing the data-gathering activity. I saw one woman breaking her fast (Syawal fasting) while the call for prayer was being summoned. In the Islamic calendar, the month after Ramadan (fasting month) is called Syawal. It is advisable for the Muslims to fast another six days after Eid. It is stated in the Hadith (the words and deeds of the Islamic Prophet Muhammad) that the reward is equal to fasting the whole year.
More kids were flooding into the ladies room and more sisters arrived with food to share. One woman said, “I cooked beef today” and the other responded, “I cooked rice. I hope it will be enough for everybody”. (It was a potluck dinner as always). I finished my *Maghrib* (evening) prayer and saw that my other informant, Susan, had arrived. We embraced and I kissed her daughter. One sister from Bangladesh kindly asked me to start eating and I said I would. Susan and Jackie were then chatting in Arabic. Susan was wearing a beautiful black and white flowery skirt. Jackie had taken off her black blazer and only wore a red-sleeveless shirt. All of a sudden, Jackie’s kids were fighting and screaming loudly. Calmly, Jackie tried to resolve the problem. Susan then sat and chatted with another Arab woman. When she was in the middle of the conversation, she suddenly shouted at her son and tried to teach him some manners. I personally did not see what he did, but Susan took it very seriously. I wish I understood what she was saying to her son because she spoke in Arabic, but her expression showed that she was very upset. So I assumed he had done something bad for a 3-year-old boy.

The food was great. They served rice and lamb, pasta and chick-pea curry (garbanzo bean curry). The food was so good. With my mouth full of food, I asked Jackie about the food in Israel. She said that the Jewish took over everything including the culture of the Arabs/Palestinians. Her daughter interrupted us again. Jackie looked in her eyes and tried to teach her not to interrupt people while talking. It was unfortunate that we could not continue the discussion about how the Israelite “steals” the Arab’s culture because Jackie was still very busy with her “manner lecture” with her daughter. I left her for a while and saw that Susan was still preoccupied by the Arab woman she was talking to before her son’s “incident”. There were many Arab women at this monthly dinner. I
felt like I was in the Middle East somewhere. I chatted with one woman from Kuwait. She said people in the Middle East understand each other, but the accent is a little bit different. Our conversations were interrupted when a lady dropped her drink on the carpet. She said, “Thank God we are moving to the new Masjid, so if we drop something it will be easier to clean” (the new Masjid has tile floor, not carpet). Everybody laughed.

Susan then told me, “Yanti, don’t forget to mention that the Arab Ladies group in their own corner and ladies from the other countries group somewhere else”. She said it jokingly, but it was true. I did see that the women tend to group with the people from their ethnic origin. However, there were also times when they moved around and exchanged conversations with the women from the different “groups”. The room was getting too noisy as more ladies and children arrived. This was complete chaos.

My attention then switched to the arrival of more ladies to the room. Somehow, Susan was right. I did see that the ladies from similar languages and cultures tended to group together. Perhaps because of the language barriers it feels better to be with someone who shares a similar culture.

Sandra was not there. Susan informed me that she would probably not come because she had to work. Barbara was absent, too. I asked her daughter if her mom would come, but she said that her parents were in Ohio to meet a friend. Christine did not show up either.

Susan mingled with the ladies from the other group. I saw many Bangladeshi women in that group and two Pakistani ladies. Susan and Jackie asked one of the Pakistani ladies about the recipe for her delicious bread. With her very limited English, she tried to explain the recipe. Sometimes she used gestures or asked her son who was...
born and raised in the U.S. to translate for her; it was such an interesting scene. Jackie and Susan seemed to understand only some parts of what she had explained. So Jackie asked the lady if she would email the recipe to her. The Pakistani lady agreed. Jackie wrote her email address on a piece of paper and handed it to the lady. Maybe that way the Pakistani lady could ask her son to write the recipe in better English for Susan and Jackie.

I asked one Bangladeshi lady and Susan why so few Ladies had come. Both had similar answers. Perhaps the people were tired after Ramadan activities (they cooked and gathered every week during Ramadan to break their fast together and prayed in congregation right after that), and they had Eid a week before the October monthly dinner.

I jotted down notes about the exchange of recipes and the chatting that occurred within the groups that shared a similar language and culture. These seemed to be two very prominent activities during the monthly dinner gathering. Eventually, I also obtained a Kenyan sister’s recipe for the chick pea curry that I really liked. That is the beauty of this gathering. Sisters get to know each other from doing a simple thing such as exchanging a recipe, and then going deeper into a more personal relationship through the chit-chatting with each other. I stayed there for about 3 hours and left before the party was over because we needed to drive to Noblesville; it was too late for the kids to go to bed. It was quite an interesting experience. But I expected more ladies to come and saw more social dynamic during the gathering other than eating, exchanging recipes, and watching kids running around the room. I told myself that perhaps I would have better luck in the following monthly dinner.
Unfortunately, the second monthly dinner in November was not more populous than the one I attended in October. Fewer people came, and of course there was less food to eat. Importantly, most of my informants came and we used our time to clarify some aspects that were not so clear during the individual interview sessions. We chatted about the possible reasons why attendance was poor and why people are more prone to sit in groups. I left very early because most of the people went home right after they had dinner. I assumed it was not motivating to stay longer when one did not see many friends of the same culture to chat with.

Luckily, the third monthly dinner observation in December was a real joy. It was held on Saturday, December 3, 2008. As a Muslim, I was very excited about this third monthly dinner because it happened to be the Eid-ul-Adha celebration, too (The festival of sacrifice). I wanted to look nice during this celebration. I also dressed my children with their best clothes because they would appear before the audience to do something special later. There is a tradition in the Middle Town Islamic community to ask the parents to prepare presents for their children and the children can have their presents only if they can recite one short surah (chapter) from the Qur’an in front of the audience. So far, based on my experience attending Eid celebrations in the Middle Town Islamic Center, most of the kids did very well except for the very young kids who could not talk well yet. They were waived from the “obligation” to recite a short surah. The best thing of all, that particular day was the first day for the Middle Town Islamic community to enter their new Masjid. We were curious about how it would look. The community purchased the building because the old building needed repair and it was cold during the winter.
We got to the parking lot in front of the new building at around 5 p.m. and saw a couple of cars were parking near ours. Yes, we were early. However, in ten minutes more cars started to arrive. People came out from their cars with their best clothes and huge pots of food to share. I cooked beef and liver curry that day. One pot for the men’s side and one pot for the women’s side, as usual. I am not thrilled about the tradition to separate men and women in the Masjid (because, based on my knowledge, during Prophet Muhammad’s times it never happened). However, I respect the fact that some women from some countries feel much more comfortable with that separation. Moreover, sometimes when they hold an event such as the recitation of Qur’anic verses for the kids or listening to the lecture, men and women are usually mingled in the same room.

I got confused when I entered the building because it has many doors and rooms. Susan’s husband came to the rescue. While holding two big foil-covered containers, he directed me to the right room. My daughter and I entered the room for the women to arrange our food on the brand new kitchen island along with the other food that the women had brought. There was a special, spacious room where the women hung their jackets, and there was a huge mirror as tall as my husband. Next to that room there was one restroom for women and children. It is so convenient for the women and I admire the architect who suggested this idea. The building is not so big, but it has all the things people need for a community center. The kitchen is relatively small but big enough in which to put the food. It has some cabinets for the utensils, and two sinks for washing the dishes. From the kitchen we could see the small auditorium where the kids would recite their Qur’anic verses. It has a big squared hole to enable the women to receive the dirty
dishes from the men’s side for washing. There was also a door in the kitchen to directly enter the auditorium.

“Yanti! So glad you come. How are you?” One lady greeted me warmly. It was Mrs. Alim. She is the wife of my husband’s professor when he was still a student at a public university in Middle Town. We maintain a good relationship even though my husband graduated from the Mathematical Statistics Department in the year of 2005. I hugged her and praised her beautiful clothes. She has such an elegant taste in clothing. Besides her talent at cooking and fashion, she is a successful Psychologist, too. She asked how I had been doing and after exchanging news with her for a while I was greeted by many more sisters, and in an instant the kitchen was too crowded for us to stand. So we moved to the dining section for the ladies. Most of my informants were there, except Sandra and Deedee. Sandra had to work, but I had no idea where Deedee was. I asked Susan if she knew where Deedee was, because that night was a big celebration. Susan shrugged her shoulder. The party that evening, as always, was an international festival. My clothes looked so humble compared to the ones that the other ladies wore. I also looked at the elaborate food we had assembled on the kitchen island. Wow, I felt I was in heaven. I was having so much fun observing how everyone interacted with each other. They always hug and kiss each time they meet. Many of the families who already moved to different counties or cities in Indiana managed to come, and I could tell how much they enjoyed each other’s company.

After catching up with each other for about half an hour, people started getting hungry. Before eating, I performed my Maghrib prayer (evening prayer) with Christine on the second floor of the building. The praying room was divided into two sections: the
women’s section and men’s section. A big glass wall separated the two sections so even though men and women are not directly in the same room, both parties can see each other and when there was a Khutbah, or religious lecture, both men and women can see the preacher and hear what he says.

Here comes my favorite part: the food! It is a blessing that this community is an immensely diverse one. The members of the Middle Town Islamic Community are Muslims who came from many different countries in the world. Most of them are accomplished professionals who came with their families and got their citizenship because of their outstanding skills, or they were students who came to pursue graduate studies at the public university in this town. So imagine what kind of food these people would bring to the table. I meant to ask the name of each food but I had no idea who brought what. I did recognize Kuskus and Tahini, but I had no idea of the names of the rest of the food. There were many different kinds of curries (including my hot and spicy Indonesian curry of course), mouth-watering, baked chicken and lamb, many different kinds of rice, salads, Christine’s eggrolls, and Afghanistani breads. For the desserts, I saw an assortment of cookies from different countries, fruits in mango pulp and whipped cream sauce (this is my favorite dessert), many different kinds of Baklava, clear noodles with special sweet sauce, assorted fruits, pies, cakes, and candies. They also had special goodie bags for the kids after they recite their Qur’anic verses.

One great thing about this event is that I did not see kids running around the room as I observed in the previous ladies section at the old Masjid. They have special rooms for the kids to play together. Those rooms are going to be used as classrooms for Sunday school. So the women had some peace and quiet in the new building during the Eid that
day. I had to admit that I did not have much time to take lengthy notes during the event. I only took some condensed notes and did my extended notes later at home because there was always somebody asking me to chat. This was such a rare occasion and I could not refuse to participate in the conversations. We talked about many things: lives, schools, sadness, joys, children, economy, and so forth. Everybody seemed to be very interested in everybody else’s life. I was so immersed into the situation that I almost abandoned my notebook.

Finally, the event that the children had been waiting for: The Qur’anic surah recitation time. Some women went into the auditorium; some stayed in the kitchen and watched from the big squared hole with their cameras and camcorder ready to capture their kids’ performance. Some men were also standing near the “stage” getting ready to shoot the event. About fifty kids did the performance and my son Harits did very well. People shouted *Allahu Akbar* (God is great) instead of clapping their hands as each child finished reciting his or her surah. Lamis, my five-year-old daughter, was not ready to recite in front of that many people. She cried once the MC (Susan’s husband) handed the microphone to her. The audience still said ‘Allahu Akbar’ and they gave her the present and goodie bag right away to comfort her. Jackie told me that her daughter did the same when she was Lamis’ age. Harits recited the surah with very good pronunciation and accent. The other parents whose children did well seemed to be ecstatic. Barbara’s husband shouted ‘Allahu Akbar’ and his last name very loudly after each of his children recited the Surah. He could not hide his pride toward his children’s ability. These proud parents hugged their children and praised God several times. Those whose children did not do well were busy comforting and encouraging their children that the following year
would be better. What a sight. I wonder how this very simple and humble children’s event could bring so much emotion to the parents (including to me and my husband).

We stayed a little bit longer to clean up. Everybody picked her or his chores to keep the building clean and nice. I decided to do the dishes with Nadia, a lady who helped organized the event. Others were cleaning the tables, rearranging the furniture, putting out the trash, and so forth. The work seemed to be very enjoyable since it gave us an opportunity to communicate with each other while working. As soon as the kitchen and the dining room were spotless, we hugged each other good-bye and promised to keep in touch.

*The 3 F’s (Faith, Family, Friend) and Professor’s Roles*

Based on the responses from the informants in this study, their faith, family (extended and nuclear family members), friends, and professors seemed to be very crucial in determining their comfort in living and studying in Middle Town, Indiana. For Barbara, her faith is her way of life and it gives her direction and a sense of purpose in life. Through her belief in the supreme power, she feels a sense of comfort and a clear sense of identity. She shared that there were many religious experiences that affirmed her faith, but she considers her children’s exemplary behaviors as the most outstanding one.

Additionally, Barbara attributed her successful adjustment to her husband’s support and the examples that her parents gave her in terms of how to help people in need. Back in Afghanistan, before the Soviet Invasion, her parents used to care for the needy by building homeless shelters, and providing foods and clothing for them. Barbara believed that she inherited her parents’ strong compassion for people in need. As far as her husband’s role is concerned, Barbara described her husband as a rare kind of
individual who has always gone above and beyond to care for his wife and children as well as people in need. Barbara elaborated:

My husband is a unique individual, very rare. When it comes to respect for women, encourages other toward education, not only just me and his kids, but everybody he sees, even to the teenagers, he is always patient to everybody who comes to him and boosts them up. He just has such a patience and compassion.

He would do anything to help me and the kids.

Barbara further described her husband as always ready whenever she needs his help including lending a hand to do household chores. Now that her children have grown up and her husband’s job as a medical professional has become more demanding, Barbara has taken most of the load off her husband’s shoulders by asking her children to share the chores. As she has previously mentioned, Barbara considered her husband as her “study partner” whom she consults whenever she found it difficult to understand certain learning materials or finish her homework.

However, Barbara admitted that her husband’s exemplary treatment toward her and her kids is not a norm in Afghanistan. Barbara informed me that the typical husband there does not help take care of the children, and women are forced to wear the Hijab.

“But my husband he told me you don’t have to wear Hijab, many many times. That is my choice and my decision to wear Hijab”, Barbara told me proudly. She then added, “Men in my country do not support the wife to pursue education in general. They are rarely helping with the household”. I asked Barbara if what she has described is Islamic. She said:
No! That’s absolutely cultural. And they are not respecting women in general. They have this ego. Not only in Afghanistan but also in many other countries, even in this country, too. I have many friends here in the U.S. where their husbands do not respect them at all. I don’t think religion has anything to do with the treatment of men toward the women.

Besides men’s ego needs to feel superior in some societies, Barbara blames a lack of education and ignorance as the other two factors that contribute to the tendency of men to treat women badly. She hypothesized, “I think usually those who are educated are less ignorant and can be more critical in terms of their perception about their culture or tradition, that’s the rule of the thumb”.

In one of our interview sessions, I asked Sandra to talk about her husband. She described, “We are so close. We have a lot of communication. We talk to each other almost about every matter. We don’t take decision without discussing it first to get the best decision for all. And he is my friend and what else I can say”. I solicited her opinion concerning some negative stereotypes in respect of Muslim women, and asked if her realities are somehow similar. Sandra said, “No! Not at all! Alhamdulillah. I cannot ask for a better husband. We don’t always agree in all things. But if we don’t we try to solve the problem using the best peaceful way”. Sandra told me that they never fight and her husband never raises his voice to her. She added:

We respect each other a lot. Excuse me, in the opposite, with my ex- husband (her husband was an American. They were divorced because of his alcohol dependency and domestic violence.) He is an American, he…oh my
God…(Sandra laughed and did not continue her comment about her ex-husband).

With my husband now, no best words to say how much he respects me.

Sandra said that communication is very important between them. Both of them trust each other, and hence they never have problems if one of them forgets to inform the other of their whereabouts or what they are doing during the day. Sandra usually talks with her husband at night about what she is going to do the next day. Sandra attributed her husband’s good personality to the way he was raised and his piety. Both Sandra and her husband got married to complete their religion. She described her husband as a very religious person. Sandra told me, “He practices what his religion teaches him. I am telling you I married him not because of the passionate love”. Sandra thought that her husband married her for the same reason; not because of her beautiful face but to complete their religion. Sandra said that “marriage in Islam is half of the religion”. Sandra said after she became a Muslim, she just wanted to marry a person who fears God or who is devoted to God. She said:

In one of the Hadith I read, one of the Prophet companions asked Prophet Muhammad that he wanted to marry his daughter and asked the Prophet opinion whom should he marry his daughter to. The Prophet said: “Marry her to someone who fears Allah; Because if he doesn’t love her anymore, he will never harm her”. So she is gonna be safe. And so I tried to follow this Hadith and I was looking for someone who really fears Allah. And guess what, that what exactly what I get. He is the one I have always looking for.

According to Sandra, since both of them are God-fearing persons and practicing their religion none of them is worried about each other’s conduct. Sandra said her
husband teaches her many things and guides her to understand Islam better in a nice way.

I asked Sandra if the Mauritanian culture is similar to the cultures of people in some Middle East countries. Sandra said, “Could be in a way, but I don’t see him the way Saudi husbands treat their wives. I don’t know. I should not generalize. My husband knows that Islam is not Saudi and Saudi is not Islam”. I asked Sandra if her husband helps with the housework. Sandra said, “Whatever I ask my husband to do he will do it.”

She narrated to me a story about her husband’s helpful predisposition:

One day I was sweeping the leaves from the deck and he was driving home from work. He quickly got out of his car and took away the broom from my hands and swept the deck. I did not want him to do that. I felt bad. He just came back from work but he wanted to help me with the housework. But he insisted”. He is not a kind of person who uses to stay home and cleaning or do things like that. He works from morning till night. But if he sees that I am busy with housework, he will help me.

Concerning her husband’s characteristics, Sandra said her husband is the kind of Muslim who tries to follow Islam the way it is prescribed in the Qur’an and Hadith. Sometimes if he does not know some aspects of the religion, he usually asks his best friend who is an Imam or Sheikh who lives in Indianapolis. Sandra said her husband sometimes meets with him and discusses many different issues about which he is confused with the Qur’an and Hadith as their main resources. Sandra admitted that her husband and her extended family members have been playing very influential roles toward her sense of well being as a Muslim. Even though it was initially hard for her mother to accept the fact that Sandra changed her religious beliefs, her mother became an
enthusiastic supporter of her daughter’s life choice. Both her parents and her brothers dearly love her Muslim husband because of his good treatment toward Sandra and her children as well as his respect for his in-laws. For example, during Ramadan (fasting month), her mother insists that Sandra’s family break their fast (Iftar) at her house, and she does not serve pork or alcohol to Sandra and her family. Sandra’s husband also tries his best to have a good relationship with his in-laws. He sends his mother-in-law flowers for Mothers’ Day, even though it is not a custom in his own country of Mauritania. Sandra said, “He just wants to appreciate my Mom and my family, you know. He is like their son now”.

Similarly, Christine described that her husband is a perfect example of how religion can make him a better man and hence makes her life so easy to handle. She explained that her husband’s family is not Muslim and that he came from a broken (divorced) family. He was raised by his grandmother, who spoiled him. She gave him whatever he wanted without teaching him discipline, consequences, and encouragement because she knew that he had a rough childhood. But Christine’s husband always tells his wife, “Christine, if it was not because of Islam, I wouldn’t know what was right or wrong. How you should treat your woman, your neighbors, your parents, and be the best son for them”. Christine believed that her husband does all the good deeds for the sake of God. She said:

If he had not gone stronger in his *deen* (religion) after we got married, we might have ended up being divorced because we both came from divorced families. I think it’s our religion is what we based our marriage around to help us become successful.
Moreover, Christine also thinks that her husband would do anything to help her survive living and studying in Middle Town. She mentioned that whenever she needs help he picks up whenever necessary. She explained:

He is a great husband, a great father. When I need him to help me when it comes to my work and my school, and help with the children, he is there for me. When I am being in school for several years now, and he has no problem when I come from my evening class every Thursday from 6 to 9 p.m. I need him to pick up the kids and see them washed and put them in bed, no question asked. Anything scheduled around than that, no question asked, um if I have to go out of town for work-related such as a conference, or meeting that lasts toward evening or over night, he knows, O.K. I have the responsibilities, no question asked. We want to make it convenient for the kids’ sake. The kids are our first priority. But he is willing to pick up where he needs to, to help me move along with my education. And support me where I need to be for work.

Another example of her husband’s role to show his support toward Christine’s passion for learning is by accommodating her preference to study alone and away from home. She explained that she usually studies during her break. Either at her office during her lunch break or she stays after work to study. Christine said:

Usually on the day I have my class I stay here at my office until my class starts. So my office hours are 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Sometimes I just stay from 4.30 until it’s time for my class at 6:30 p.m., and do some work and then during the weekend I will tell my husband: “Honey, I need to work on the paper, I need to work on it without the kids, will you please take them somewhere and let me have
at least 4 hours to study. I had part of proposal research paper I had to work on”. So he took the kids on Sunday and was gone for hours and I came here at the office. I can’t really study well at home. I have got to be away; some place where only me and my studies.

When it comes to the topic about a husband’s roles toward success in learning and pursuing a career, Deedee said her husband is a very supportive man. She elaborated:

There were times when I was very busy at work and could not take care of the children and household work, he would take over everything and had never been angry. He helped me cooking, when I came home late from work. He appreciated that I must have been tired and unable to cook; so he would take care of everything even feeding the kids. He gave me psychological support by keeping telling me the importance of studying…we had a lot of discussions about many things and supported each other…if I had a test at school he always found time to ask me how I did during the exam.

Deedee did admit her husband is not perfect in all aspects, but in most areas he is an incredibly supportive and wonderful husband. She told me, “His negative personalities are very minimal compared to his positive ones, because nobody is perfect. The good things in him covered the bad things”.

Susan reported that her brothers and her husband ensure her ability to cope with many challenges in life. After losing her father at the age of ten, Susan was raised by her single mother and her elder brothers and sister. Her brothers treat her as a very special little sister even until she got married. She said:
So far my brothers have always been there to support the female members in our family anytime we need help. My Mom now lives in the house of one of my brothers. The other brothers and their wives bring food for her, they visit my Mom every day. And when I was getting married, they took care of me by giving me money to buy clothes and a lot of things for me. Even until now, even though I am already married, they keep on calling and sending gifts or money to me.

As Susan has described previously, her husband is always there to make her life easier by sharing the housework and child-rearing responsibilities, and by being financially responsible for his family. Susan believes that Islam influences her husband’s exemplary attitudes toward her and her children. She said:

I think Islam contributes to my husband very good treatment toward me. Because in Islam Allah tells that husband and wife should share everything and they have to be nice to each other. And between a husband and wife, the most important thing is the love. And the sharing as well as caring and try to create peace in the house…He is not very…very religious as much as he wants to, but he is trying to. In my opinion he is a good practicing Muslim, Alhamdulillah”.

Jackie gave a slightly different story concerning the role of her husband in her life in this town. She mentioned, “My husband is very sweet, social, loving...he loves people and he is very giving...umm has a big heart”. She also feels that they are partners and she appreciates that her husband abandoned his own career to follow his wife to the U.S. In Jackie’s opinion, none of them feels superior to the other in their marriage. However, Jackie perceived certain behaviors of her husband to bother her, such as her husband’s “messiness” and expectations for Jackie to handle most of the responsibilities to take care
of their kids, which is the ideal role of the wife expected in her culture back home. Jackie admitted that there were occasional confrontations in terms of the “division of labor” at home. For example, as Jackie asserted, “I do much, much more housework than him and I also do much more work with the kids than him”. Jackie related this tendency to the influence of her culture instead of the implementation of Islamic teachings. She said, “I think it is related to Arab’s culture. And also his personality but I think that it has something to do more with the way he was raised. He was raised not to share the housework at home. And I think this where he is coming from”. Answering my question if this condition was consistent with what Islam says concerning the division of labor between men and women, Jackie said, “No, no...I don’t think it’s consistent with Islam because Islam is all about being nice to each other, and I believe if the husband sees that his wife is doing a lot, and get tired he needs to do more. He needs to contribute more”.

Islam and women status; Islam vs. culture

The status of Muslim women, among many topics of interest to non-Muslims, seems to always evolve around the theme of their rights, or a lack of them. The media portrayal of Muslim women is usually along the lines of oppression and mystery. In response to this issue, all of the informants believed that Islam perceived women as the other half of men. They further explained that Islam considered the woman as a worthy human being with a share in humanity equal to that of the man. Their single origin, their general human traits, their responsibility for the observation of religious duties with the consequent reward or punishment, and the unity of their destiny all bear witness to their equality from the Islamic point of view. However, the informants refused to view that the word “equal” means “the same”. Most informants in this study believed that men and
women are created to complement each other instead of to compete because they have
different psychological and physical make ups. Sandra does not see being a Muslim as a
disadvantage for her. She is so impressed by how the Qur’an talks about women’s status.
They have many responsibilities like men but she likes the fact that Islam puts higher
level or status to mothers. They deserve special treatment because of the sufferings and
sacrifice they have to go through during childbearing and childrearing. She educated me:

In the Hadith Prophet Muhammad said that paradise is at the feet of mother. In
surah Al-Luqman verse 14 suggests us to be kind to our parents especially
mother. Let me show you. (She found the Qur’an and recited the verse to me.)
She recited, “And we have enjoined on man to be dutiful and good to his parents.
His mother bore him in weakness and hardship upon weakness and hardship…”

However, according to Sandra, women in some parts of the world have been
singled out for the utmost respect and devotion, even in the countries that call themselves
Islamic countries. “What a shame”. Sandra shook her head in disappointment. She turned
some pages of the Qur’an looking for something and when she found what she was
looking for she pointed the verses to me. She said, “Look, in the Qur’an surah Maryam
(Mary) verses 30-32 Jesus described himself when he was still a baby that he was the
slave of God and was ordered to be good to his mother”. Sandra also found in the same
chapter verses 12-14 God reminds people that Prophet John (John the Baptist) was dutiful
to his parents. Sandra recited, “O John Hold fast the scripture. And We gave him wisdom
while yet a child. And made him sympathetic to men as a mercy from Us, and pure from
sins and he was righteous. And dutiful toward his parents, and he was neither arrogant
nor disobedient to God or to his parents”.

In terms of the treatment toward women in general, Sandra specifically explained to me that in the Qur’an, it is said women came from the rib of men, which is very close to their hearts. But the rib is curved. Some men try to straighten the rib (by being mean and harsh to the women). As the result, it breaks the rib. That is the analogy given in the Qur’an to explain how delicate and sensitive the women are. Men need to treat them in the gentlest manners in order not to “break” them. Sandra told me she is happy with her roles and responsibilities as a Muslim woman and thanks God for her joyful life.

Sandra also shared her perspective regarding bad and unfair treatment that many women have to endure in some Islamic countries. In her country, Mexico, Machismo (the culture that perceives men are superior or better than women) is very prevalent. However, she felt so lucky that her family does not have that Machis predisposition. She said:

My family is different. But you can tell in a lower class family, they tend to be more Machis. The men think they are better than women, they hit them, they do many things bad to women. I don’t know if this is something to do with their level of education too. I don’t know the exact statistics but in general I can say 60%-70% of the people in Mexico are Machis. But in my opinion, the economy has a lot to do with this condition.

Based on Sandra’s opinion, in Mexico, a third-world country, people do not see many middle class segments of the population. She said, “We see very poor and very rich people. The gap is very wide”. She also believes that religion has nothing to do with the tendency to treat women badly in her country. She informed me that 99% of the people in Mexico are Catholic. But according to Sandra, one cannot stigmatize that Catholicism causes people to be Machis simply because the majority of the people embrace that
religion. This also happens in some countries where people profess to be Muslims or Jewish yet treat their women badly. For Sandra, one needs to learn about the religion to better understand the teachings rather than learn from the behavior of the people who sometimes use their religions as an excuse to justify their inappropriate cultural practices including harsh and sexist personality predispositions.

Barbara, Christine, Jacky, Deedee, and Susan gave similar opinions concerning how they interpret the status of women in Islam and the tendency of many people in different parts of the world to perpetuate a patriarchal agenda under the banner of religions to demean women’s status and mitigate their rights in many different aspects. Christine berated people who deviate from Islamic teachings by treating women unfairly in some Islamic cultures. Based on her knowledge obtained through her effort to read the Qur’an and Hadith, instead of from the people who profess to be Muslims, Islam dictates men to treat women with high respect and compassion. She said:

I have been born and raised in the Western world. And being a Muslim in the Western world allows me to see the discrepancies. The more knowledge I get about Islam the more I am like what’s wrong with these people? Why are these countries acting like that? I don’t think that there are many different kinds of Muslim all over the world. But I think It is the cultural that has really influenced how Islam is portrayed in Western countries. And many people won’t see the difference, just can’t see the difference between the two (cultural and religious).

What is more, Barbara and Jacky believed that unfair treatment is endured by many women in all parts of the world including in the advanced countries such as the U.S. Jacky learned that the U.S. history recorded that women in the U.S. were not
allowed to vote until very recently, and there are still “subtle” discrimination in many
different areas as well as physical violence toward women. Barbara added that she has
many American friends who complained about their husband’s inappropriate treatment
toward them even though these women are not Muslims. Barbara also theorized that
besides men’s ego needs to feel superior in many societies, like Sandra, she blames the
lack of education and ignorance as the other two factors that contribute to the tendency
to treat women badly. She hypothesized, “I think usually those who are educated are less
ignorant and can be more critical in terms of their perception about their culture or
tradition, that’s the rule of the thumb”. Deedee was quite “careful” with the way she
voiced her opinion. She mentioned that since she never experienced bad treatment as a
woman in her own family and her society she cannot judge what other Muslims do in the
other Islamic countries. However, she was very firm in her opinion that Islam never
condones harsh and unfair treatment toward women; in fact, she said it elevates the
status of women. In brief, all informants refused to blame religion as the cause of
inappropriate and unfair attitudes toward women in general, and they were persistent in
their belief that Islam is the religion that perpetuates the idea that God sees men and
women as equals. The two very crucial things that differentiate their status in the eyes of
God are their piety and good deeds. These women also learned from the Qur’an and
Hadith that God grants higher status for men and women who are persistent in their
effort to seek knowledge.

Faith and self-identity as a learner and as a woman

Western media often depicts Muslim women as generally excluded from equal
agency, from full participation in Islamic society, and thus from full and equal Islamic
identity, primarily because of patriarchal readings of the Qur'an and the entire range of early Qur'anic literature. Based on the perspectives of the informants in this study, the above description is true in some Islamic societies. Therefore, these women argue that women have equal authority to participate in the interpretation of Islamic primary sources, and that women will realize their just role in society and their potential as human beings only when they are involved in the interpretation of the Qur'an. Consequently, a Muslim woman's relationship with God must not be dependent on her husband's or her father's moral agency. Sandra, Barbara, and Susan were very vocal in their opinion that Muslim women should not be passive and let the rights that Islam has granted them be dissipated by incorrect and sexist interpretations of the sacred texts, The Qur’an and Hadith. The women in this study unanimously declared that they are the ones who interpret Islam as a religion that encourages women to be actively involved in knowledge seeking and community building endeavors. Deedee said:

As a learner, I like knowledge because for me knowledge is power. To be highly educated is the most important thing for me. I don’t look for money, for the richness. Religion and knowledge, those are the two things that empower me and I want to be good at, more than anything. I don’t care too much about wealth. I really want to be a competent teacher. I need to learn more in order to be a good teacher.

Moreover, Sandra critically mentioned:

Islam is about helping the neighbor, help the poor; do charity, help the needy people. How are you going to do those if you are staying at home and doing
nothing. So in Islam we have to participate in the community, that’s what I learned from Islam.

Hence, according to the informants, their belief systems and self-identity as women and as learners are not mutually exclusive. They are predisposed to see that Islam, as their guidance in life, dictates how they define themselves in all aspects. Christine, for example asserted that she thinks she is obedient to God and follows the ways of His messenger. She further said everything she does every day should always be for the sake of Allah, first and foremost. Hence, her faith also dictates how she is supposed to behave as a woman and as a learner. Jackie reported her faith as her lens to see how she defines her roles as a woman and a learner. She gave an example; when she counsels a client in the clinic, she is more prone to process the client’s case using her Islamic mindset. Susan, Barbara, Sandra, Christine, and Jackie similarly stated that women are the other half of men and play significant roles in building a better nation through their active effort to seek education and educate their children. Barbara specifically said:

I feel the role of woman in the family is at most important role…oh how do you say…in family. God creates men and women with specific identity, but I feel women are amazing. Behind many successful men there are accommodating wives, willing to compromise. Also, when a woman is educated, the whole family is educated.

Christine mentioned:

Women are the other side to the men; to compensate for what the men needs. But they are obligated to compensate for what the women needs too… being married
and being other part of the men is considered as half of our deen (religion); being the companion to a Muslim man. So um…what we need to do as Muslim women we need to be the good strong half of the men, you know.

All informants in this study see themselves as committed learners and see their faith as the most essential “substance” to the formation of their self-identity. They also think that knowledge is “power” that can be used to alleviate one’s self-esteem and status as well as the means to give back to the community and counter negative stigmatism or stereotypes about Muslim women.

One unique characteristic of the informants in this study is their definition of feminism and how it relates to Islamic teachings. There are a lot of controversies pertaining to the compatibility between Islam and feminist ideology between non-Muslim Western feminists and Muslims who profess to be feminists, and even among the Muslims themselves. All the women in my study described themselves as feminists who do not want to divert from the boundaries set by the Qur’an and Hadith. They also proclaimed that Islam is a feminist religion and one can be a Muslim and a feminist at the same time. Barbara for example quoted:

Am I a feminist? maybe, but not one hundred percent. I like my identity, but if certain right of mine is taken away, I will fight for it. For example, if I am not able to drive, as a woman I will fight for it. If I am not allowed to pursue education, I will fight for it. If I cannot mingle with the other women for example. Maybe I don’t really understand what it means by the word feminism but I believe all people are equal and should be treated with respect. Is Islam a feminist
religion? that’s definitely yes. One can be a Muslim and a feminist at the same
time. It’s definitely yes.

Sandra mentioned that the way one defines the term feminism determines her
decision whether to call herself as a feminist or not. The kind of feminism she has in
mind is the one that ensures just and equal rights for everyone as well as respecting
unique psychological and physiological capabilities of each gender; in this case she
meant men and women, the way The Qur’an and Hadith prescribe. She said:

Some feminists are so liberal. In my language, Spanish, we say Libertina.
Liberation for what? To go to the bar like men and drink till they get drunk? To
have sex without marriage with anyone they want? To show of as much part of
their body to the people? Or you can smoke like a man? If men can do those
things why not me? Is that what we call feminism? In my opinion, that is not what
I call liberality.

She argued that feminism should be about the freedom to seek as much
knowledge as one wants, to pursue a career, and to be independent. She suggested that
women should not be too submissive and they need to be active in community building
activities. She said, “Women should also not take it for granted if people always tell us
what to do, you are not supposed to do this your are not supposed to do that without
valid reasons”. She continued:

Well, yes I am a feminist but I am not a liberal feminist as I describe to you
before. I am independent because I work and I bring money to the house, and I
have every right I deserve from my husband. If he forbids me from getting my
rights that Islam has given any woman, he is not following the religion.
With the above concept in mind, Sandra described that Islam is a feminist religion because it supports equal rights for both men and women to live harmoniously and to complement each other instead of competing with each other. She explained that Islam supports the right of women to pursue knowledge, to inherit, to choose if they want to pursue a career, to express their minds, and to be respected. Hence, Sandra once again emphasized that the way the word feminism is defined matters in determining her stance. In her opinion, Islam is a feminist religion when the term means to ensure the implementation of the rights that Islam prescribes; and hence, a Muslim is a feminist.

The other informants, Jackie, Christine, Deedee, and Susan had similar ways of defining the word feminism. All of them persisted in their stance that they are feminists who follow what their faith teaches, and that Islamic ideology is consistent with the core concept in feminism; to ensure equal rights for all people to be respected and to put an end to sexist thoughts; In other words, as was coined by bell hooks (2000), to void sexism, sexist exploitation and oppression.

Reasons to learn

The women in this study reported several underlying reasons to pursue education; to educate their children, to boost self-esteem or self-respect, to have a better career or to get a better job, to explain their faith, to motivate their children, and to give back to the community. Sandra, for example, said, “The main thing is to have better income, you know. I know I can do it. If other people can go to school and finish, why I can’t, you know”. She believes that by being highly educated she can influence her kids to have the spirit of lifelong learning, too. She shared, “I came to this country, not knowing English whatsoever, and I finish something, they will have the motivation to do it, you know."
This will make my kids proud of me”. Congruent with Sandra’s statement, Deedee mentioned that knowledge has multiple functions to a person. She said, “To have a good job, to have decent life and also I think knowledge is power, so you will be satisfied with our life, and also education can give you better ...give you social status and ability to give back to my people in the Palestine”. In addition, Susan concurred by saying, “To improve myself, to be stronger in this life; because education is power. You can defend yourself with your knowledge”. However, all informants declared that being highly educated is the fulfillment of their obligation as Muslims. All of them were very familiar with the Qur’anic messages and Hadith that speak about God’s preference toward those who constantly seek knowledge over those who are passive and have no intention to learn more.

*Barriers to learning and living*

Nevertheless, their undertakings are not without challenges. Given the fact that most of the informants came from different countries and cultural ground rules, learning and living in a completely different country such as the U.S. caused some discomfort and difficulties. Roles of friends, especially the ones from the Middle Town Islamic Center, were reported to be very crucial. The women in my study admitted life was easier with the knowledge that they can always rely on the Muslim Ladies’ support in the community. The activities such as the gatherings they have on a regular basis in the Islamic Center or in the other settings help mitigate problems they have to deal with while being away from their safe social network back home. Barbara said:

For me personally I think it is important to meet with the other Muslims. First of all we need each other and to communicate with each other. And it is good for the
children too to meet with the other Muslim children. I am such a community person. I feel great being with people. The gatherings (monthly dinner, social gathering, and halaqa) encourage my faith and my children’s faith; that there are other people out there share the same faith and the same principles about the existence of the one God as well as the good teachings that this religion (Islam) have.

Deedee admitted that it was very difficult in the beginning to adjust herself to the new sets of social and learning expectations in the U.S. However, once she got to know Muslim friends through the monthly dinners and other social gatherings, she felt life was so much easier because these friends were always available to lend a hand such as offering to take her kids to day care, providing free babysitting, inviting her to lunches or dinner at their houses, taking her to shop, etc. Meanwhile, as a convert, Christine’s association with her Muslim friends not only strengthens her faith and knowledge about Islam, but at the same time helps her learn the diversity of thoughts among the women she encountered inasmuch as their cultural beliefs. She said:

Yeah. I think there is a relationship between my good relationships with the other Muslim women to my coping to my new status as a Muslim in Middle town. Based on my personal opinion because that’s I think what helps me strengthen my faith. Helps me know that there is a support in the community that others do the same thing I do…With my Muslims friends we do Islamic activities with each other. We go to the mosque, we go to each other’s houses, we do things that social but yet we know that we are as Muslims need to do the prayer when it’s time to pray. Especially during Ramadan, we break our fast together, to recognize
our fast together. There is no level of closeness I have with these Ladies. We should all love each other for the sake of Allah.

Sandra shares Christine’s assertion and considers all of her Muslim friends as her source of inspiration to survive living and studying in this town. She said, “They are all my sisters. I love them all and enjoy our time together”. Especially when she sees other Muslim women who are successful in their education and career regardless of their status as a wife and a mother with children. Sandra told herself that if these women can do this, nothing should prevent her from doing the same. She elaborated further that a Muslim is obligated to associate with his or her fellow Muslims. According to Sandra, “if you choose not to go to any gathering, especially to the religious gatherings such as halaqa, Eid celebration, etc., you are considered to be dead. After I read that from the Qur’an, I told myself I need to be more active in the Muslim community. This means a lot to me”. She also mentioned that the religious gathering such as Eid prayers and parties, Ramadan, Iftar, and Ladies social gatherings give deep emotional meanings to her. She explained:

They are so powerful. Because when you fast in the month of Ramadan for a month, you learn self-control and better health and God promises to burn our sins in the previous year if we do that sincerely. During Iftar (break fasting) time, and you invite people who are fasting or you provide food for the people who are fasting, you get a half of the reward that God gives to the people who fast; just by feeding those who are fasting.

The activities mentioned above instigate Sandra’s awareness that being with people who will help one get closer to God will bring about a sense of comfort and safety because one knows that one is not alone and will be taken care of.
Jackie persistently said that limited financial resources have always been the stumbling block that prevented her from finishing her dissertation and enjoying her life in Middle Town. She complained:

I don’t have an assistantship right now because my committee thought that when I have an assistantship, that would leave me more time to work on my dissertation. And if they don’t give me an assistantship, I will be doing more progress with my dissertation. I told you they are sitting in an ivory tower. They think like maybe Jackie has $100,000 dollars in her bank account if she doesn’t get an assistantship she is sure can manage. She would be relaxed, and she would be working on her dissertation.

Jackie also thinks that the university does not pay as much attention as they should to make her tasks as a student parent easier. Baby-sitting is her main problem because she cannot afford to pay for a baby sitter, and without an assistantship it is impossible to send her kids to day care. Therefore, she needed to find ways to bring income to her household by working in the dining services that “drains” her energy and drives her attention further away from completing her dissertation. An assistantship, in her opinion, helps her tremendously to concentrate on her study and build curriculum vitae because she is dealing with the things that are related to her field. Therefore, taking away her assistantship is seen as a “punishment” rather than a “favor” to help her be focused.

Furthermore, according to Jackie, even the entertainment that is provided for Middle Town public university students is more geared toward fulfilling the needs of single students instead of parent students like herself. She suggested that the university
could provide free babysitting services and reduced prices for the student’s family members to attend entertainment events held by the university.

When it comes to adjusting themselves to the U.S. educational system, the informants seemed to differ in terms of their learning styles. Some of them are visual or auditory learners while others described themselves as eclectic ones. However, all of the informants treasure collaboration in learning to achieve collective success.

Moreover, because most of the informants came from different countries, language was reported as the main barrier to achieve their utmost potential. Jackie complained that she is not able to express her thoughts as fast as her American classmates during classroom discussion and in writing. She also criticized the individualistic nature of her classmates. Sandra and Barbara reported problems with professors speaking so fast in class and with tests that are timed. Christine has problems with professors who only lecture or talk about personal experiences without bringing theory into practice. Deedee was not happy with professors who are not sensitive to the nature of international students and also the ones who do not give good feedback. Interestingly, all of the informants think that classmates are not helpful to their success in learning. They are more prone to turn to their husbands, close Muslim friends, professors, or other international students to provide them with support. Susan, for example, has an American Muslim friend that she calls on a regular basis to explain subject matters that she does not really understand. Deedee has an Egyptian study partner and Barbara relies on discussions with her husband and professors. However, Sandra and Christine are more independent. They are more interested in learning about religion from their Muslim friends instead of discussing academic matters.
Impacts of educational achievement to their lives

Finally, as far as the impacts of the informants’ achievements on their lives, they can be inferred from the informants’ statements such as the one asserted by Barbara. She said that because of her passion to continue learning she earns more respect from her children compared to the respect that her sisters get from their children (none of her sisters went to school) as well as recognition from society. Susan and Jackie mentioned that knowledge may be used as a “weapon” to counter the stigmatism about Muslim woman propagated by the media. As Susan noted, she feels delighted to see the surprised look from people when they see her driving anywhere she wants, pursuing higher education, mingling with all different kinds of people, working outside the house as a professional, and so forth even though she is an Arab Muslim and wears Hijab. Christine experienced a sense of accomplishment by being a good example of a successful, trustworthy, and dependable learner and worker regardless of her faith and decision to cover herself. Deedee mentioned that by being highly educated she feels good about herself and expects to have a better future and greater ability to give back to her people in Palestine. Sandra is proud that she is able to bring income to her household and give the message to her children that learning can bring such positive impacts to one’s life financially and psychologically. In conclusion, all informants believe that they want to be the role models of Muslim women who have successfully and obediently exercised the teachings of their faith. They reported that their endeavors are expected to enhance critical thinking among people who are bombarded by the negative messages about Islam propagated by the media who only shows the ugliness of the faith and do not give the picture of the beauty of the faith. According to the informants, Islamic teachings have
been contaminated by cultural flavor in many different parts of the world to preserve power and influence. Hence, they are committed to practices that are based on the correct and non-biased interpretation of the Qur’an and Hadith.
CHAPTER V

Analysis and Conclusions

Introduction

As an aid to the reader, this final chapter of the dissertation restates the research purpose and reviews the major themes found during the data analysis process. The major sections of this chapter summarize the results and discuss their implications.

Purpose of the Research

The purpose of this research was to understand the lives of adult women learners who practice Islam in Middle Town, Indiana, and how Islam affects their identity as learners and members of a small predominantly Judeo-Christian community.

_Hurried ethnography for harried ethnographers_

Pertti J. Pelto (1992) in his book _Anthropological Research Methods and Applications_ said, “The demand for quick results from ethnographic work is one of the major influences current in the applied social sciences” (p. 264). In conducting this study, I found myself “trapped” in the situation where I needed to provide a quick result from my study. At the same time, I wanted to make the necessary commitment to ensure that my research qualifies as an ethnography by trying to ask as much information as possible during the data gathering process given a very short time period.

However, as Wolcott (1999) said, no matter how long an ethnographer takes to gather the data or stays in the fieldwork, he or she will always be dealing with the dilemma in terms of how much more data to gather and when to stop. Hence, following what Wolcott suggested in his book, _Ethnography: A Way of Seeing_ (1999), I started
writing up what I already knew as soon as possible, as well as trying my best to take advantage of whatever I had to present a meaningful picture of the culture I studied: the lives of adult women learners who practice Islam in Middle Town, Indiana, and how Islam affects their identity as learners and members of a small predominantly Judeo-Christian community. Spradley (1979) concurred that the best way to conduct ethnographic research is to start analyzing and writing right away instead of banking the data and writing later. He also noted that writing ethnography has always been an incomplete task; there are too many things to learn and to explore about certain cultures; hence, further research is constantly needed.

I listened to my informants during the interview sessions and observed them in three monthly dinners from October 2008 until December 2008. Hence, by means of the Domain Analysis method proposed by Spradley (1979), I tried to analyze the information gathered to see common patterns of thought and behavior of my informants. I wanted to use them as my way to describe their culture or to help the informants tell their stories. As Wolcott said, “We can voice enthusiasm for helping others tell their stories their own way, but it is difficult not to want to supply a logic of our own to ensure that the reader does not get lost – as we ourselves may have done in the original telling” (1999, p. 145).

Seven themes emerged as I read and analyzed the data and in this chapter I will discuss the themes by means of relating the experiences of my informants with the already existing research concerning the lives of Muslim women, especially those who live and study in the U.S. The discussion is also aimed at answering my research questions and providing some suggested implications for future research as well as recommendations for educators.
Summary of the Findings

To summarize the results, the themes below will give clearer pictures in terms of how the informants attached meanings to their experiences. The themes derived from the data analysis process are:

- Living as a member of Middle Town community
- The 3 F’s (faith, family, friends) and professors’ roles
- Islam and women’s status; Islam vs. culture
- Faith and self-identity as a learner and as a woman
- Reasons to learn and adjustment to American educational system
- Barriers to learn and live
- Impacts of educational achievement on their lives

Living as a member of Middle Town community

Based on the data I gathered, most of my informants perceive Middle Town as a good place to live and study. Barbara even expressed her experience living in this town as the most rewarding one. Sandra also mentioned that the town is almost like her second hometown because of the joy and comfort she experienced by being a member of the Middle Town Islamic Center and larger community.

In general, my informants attributed their comfortable living in this town to their attachment to the Middle Town Islamic community through some activities they attended in the Middle Town Islamic Center. Most of my informants are immigrants who came from many different countries including Iraq, Afghanistan, Israel, Palestine, and Mexico. According to Haddad & Smith (1994), “Living in America has brought many changes to immigrant groups. Some of those changes occur through the involvement of women in
they further explained that in the Middle East women from other Islamic countries seldom attend the mosque, let alone take a prominent role in its activities. In support of Haddad’s and Smith’s point of view (1994), Hofstede defined that, “culture is learned…it is always a collective phenomenon, because it is at least partly shared with people who live or lived within the same social environment” (1997, p. 5). According to Hofstede this shared knowledge is not genetic and can be ‘unlearned’ depending on the context. Barbara, for instance, mentioned that if she was still in her country in Afghanistan, she would not have achieved even one-fourth of what she has achieved in the U.S. in terms of exercising what Islam teaches in the Qur’an to continue learning and to be active in the community building efforts. Barbara was able to “enculturate” herself to the new ‘collective minds’ shared by the members of Middle Town Islamic Center in particular and to some part of the norms shared by the town community in general.

All of the informants stated that their involvement with the Middle Town Islamic Center’s activities is one of the most important factors that bring a sense of “security” and smooth adjustment to living and learning as Muslims in town. By meeting the people who share the same faith and belief system, they feel that they become stronger in faith and in turn this commonality becomes their “glue” to establish a solid networking system or a sense of togetherness to help and support each other in many different aspects regardless of their different cultural backgrounds. In other words, the Muslim people in this community, especially those who are actively involved in the Middle Town Islamic Center, formed their own subculture that may distinguish them from the rest of the people back in their home countries and the people in Middle Town, Indiana.
The 3 F’s (faith, family, friends) and professors’ roles

It was also found that there are four important elements that determine the success of these informants to adjust and cope with the social and educational aspects to live as female Muslim learners in Middle Town Indiana: their Islamic faith; their family support (mostly from husbands); their friends; and their professors’ help.

All of the informants reported that Islam is their way of life or the guidance to live their life in all sectors. I was informed that their faith helps boost their spirits and discipline to learn as well as their sense of optimism and perseverance. The awareness that God will always be there to watch, help, and provide for them instigates certain kind of “immunization” toward the temptation to give up when they are faced with challenges in either social or educational niches. All of the informants informed me that reading certain Qur’anic verses as well as having religious experiences help affirm their faith and make them persist in their undertakings to pursue knowledge and to be patient with whatever happens in their lives. They are aware that, according to the Qur’an and Hadith, seeking knowledge is an obligation for all Muslim men and women.

Family, either their extended families back home or their nuclear family in the U.S. (especially their husbands), also plays a very significant role in building their sense of well being. All of the informants described their husbands as very supportive in terms of giving them so much freedom to pursue the highest education or career they desire. Most of the husbands provide support by being available to help their wives with various tasks anytime their wives need it such as babysitting, helping with the household chores, being their partners to discuss homework or other school matters, and being fully financially responsible for their wives educational expenses and household needs. Four
informants, Deedee, Jackie, Susan, and Sandra, mentioned that besides having very good husbands, the roles of their extended families are also incredible. Deedee, for example, described that her parents constantly reminded her about the importance of being educated to fulfill her responsibility as a good Muslim, to get a better status in the eyes of God and the people, and to give back to her country. In fact, according to Deedee, her parents are more kind toward their daughters as compared to their treatment toward her brothers. Similarly, Jackie has parents who perceive education as the means to get closer to God and to improve the quality of life. She has nine sisters and one brother, and she reported that her father, a very devoted and knowledgeable practicing Muslim, wants to make sure that his children go to college. He came to the rescue when Jackie was about to give up her study in the Doctoral program because of financial pressures by sending her some money to continue with her studies. Susan also mentioned how her brothers persistently show their support toward her by calling her, sending her money and gifts, as well as visiting her in the U.S. to make sure that she is fine even though the situation in Iraq is not currently conducive to travel. Finally, regardless of Sandra’s extended family’s initial disapproval toward her conversion to Islam, they made the transition easier for her by respecting her beliefs and trying to understand her new concept of God. Her mother helps with babysitting whenever Sandra needs it, often invites Sandra and her family to break their fasting at her house, and never serves pork products to Sandra and her family. Sandra’s mother has developed a deep sense of respect and affection toward Sandra’s husband who is a born Muslim.

Friends, especially close friends and Muslim friends, were reported as the other source of comfort and sense of security among the informants. For the converts such as
Christine and Sandra, their Muslim friends help them to significantly enhance their understanding about Islam and at the same time give them a whole new perspective about Muslim women’s lives from different parts of the world. Christine, for example, an American-born-convert, enjoyed learning that regardless of her international Muslim friends’ different cultural backgrounds they share many commonalities as far as faith is concerned. However, Christine also learned there are many practices embraced by these Muslim friends that are derived from cultural lenses instead of from the real teachings of Islam mentioned in the Qur’an and Hadith. Sandra described herself as a natural lifelong learner and said that academically her Muslim friends do not directly help her learning success. However, she mentioned that her association with other female Muslim learners who have families and successfully achieved great accomplishments in their learning endeavors and social life inspires her to do the same. For Susan, close friends have been helpful to her success academically and socially. Whenever she has problems understanding something in class because of her language barrier, she can always turn to her close friends to explain things to her. The gatherings she attends on a regular basis have also been a means to improve her English because many of the women attending the gatherings came from different countries and hence, they use English to communicate.

Finally, the role of professors has been essential to helping these participants succeed in learning. Most of the informants reported that they have very accommodating professors who are open-minded and have great understanding toward their situations and their identities as married, international, and female Muslim learners. Barbara, Susan, and Sandra mentioned that their professors always gave them more time to finish tests because they understand it takes time for these students to process the questions since
they speak English as a foreign language. Moreover, Deedee appreciated the fact that most of her professors give her good feedback to improve her work. She thinks most of them are very open-minded and accepting. These professors are always available for further discussion about certain subjects inside or outside their classrooms. All of my informants seemed to prefer professors who are sensitive toward their students needs, helpful, open-minded, accommodating, and organized. They also expected the professors to bring theory into practice instead of lecturing about the theories in the textbooks. Furthermore, I found that most of my informants are different in terms of their learning styles. Christine and Deedee are visual and auditory learners. Susan and Jackie consider themselves to be eclectic learners who integrate many other ways to learn to fully absorb the materials. Sandra is more of a visual learner and prefers to work in a team as well. Barbara learns best by means of lengthy discussion with her professors, classmates, and her husband. In general, most of my informants enjoy teamwork and collaboration in learning instead of competitiveness and individualism.

Islam and women status; Islam vs. culture

The interview results also suggested that all of the informants believe Islam perceives that the woman is as essential to life as man, and that she is not inferior to him nor is she one of the lower species. The informants unanimously think Islam has given women rights and privileges that they have never enjoyed under other religious or constitutional systems. This can be understood when the matter is studied as a whole in a comparative manner, rather than partially. The informants, however, elaborated that the rights and responsibilities of a woman are equal to those of a man but they are not necessarily identical to them. According to the informants, equality and sameness are two
quite different things. This difference is understandable because man and woman are not identical but they are created equals. With this distinction in mind, there is no problem. It is almost impossible to find even two identical men or women. All of my informants quoted Qur’anic verses and Hadith that support their point of view concerning this issue.

What is more, none of the informants perceived religion as the culprit as far as bad treatment toward women is concerned. Sandra, for example, mentioned that in her country, Mexico, 60-70% of the men are Machis (consider women as second-class creatures and treat them very badly). She explained that Catholicism is the dominant religion in Mexico (99% of the people are Catholics) and that men should not be blamed for their unfair treatment toward women. Similarly, according to Sandra, the Islamic countries that treat their women as second-class citizens with very limited rights are not practicing what Islam teaches. Hence, one cannot simply assume that Islam is responsible for these bad conditions. Sandra believed cultural beliefs, especially patriarchal concepts, as well as low levels of education and bad economies, are the main causes of such practices. Congruent with Sandra’s assertion, Barbara saw that low levels of education and a patriarchal mindset, as well as ignorance, are the key factors. Deedee, Jackie, Susan, and Christine perceived that women are discriminated against and suffer certain levels of maltreatment in almost all parts of the world including in the advanced countries such as in the U.S.A. However, according to the informants, Christianity, as the leading religion in the U.S., should not be blamed for this situation.

*Faith and self-identity as a learner and as a woman*

All of the participants shared the knowledge that their faith is part of their identity as a woman and as a learner. Hence, the way they define themselves will always be based
on what Islam has prescribed. They learned that Islam gives high status for women and that it does not restrict women who are actively involved in social and educational settings. The women also perceive themselves as team players, the other half of men or partners of men, holding key roles in family and society, and as mothers they are to educate their children about the faith. Most of the informants try to be a role model of religious principles and spirit for their children. All informants also quoted some Qur’anic verses and Hadith that depict Islamic encouragement of women to be smart, and this awareness boosts them up. In their belief, learned women will be more appreciated by their family members and the larger society. Deedee and Jackie especially stated that knowledge is power. Hence, it can be used as the strongest “weapon” to deal with many challenges in life. Barbara said when the mother is educated the whole family is educated. Sandra added that when a mother is well educated, she would inspire her children to be the same. In brief, all informants felt very comfortable as Muslim women and learners.

In addition, all the women defined themselves as feminists. However, they always added that their definitions of feminism would never deviate from the boundaries that the Qur’an and Hadith have prescribed. In this respect, according to the informants’ belief, Islam is a feminist religion and all Muslims are feminists because Islam always encourages respect, justice, and equality for all human beings.

Reasons to learn and adjustment to American educational system

There were many underlying reasons mentioned by my informants as far as pursuing knowledge is concerned: to find better jobs or careers, to feel good about oneself or to improve self-esteem, to give back to the country, to educate and motivate
their children, to earn better status and respect in the society, and so forth. However, the key point was that these ladies constantly stated that their main reason to learn was to fulfill the obligation as Muslims to seek knowledge. They provided me with some Qur’anic verses and surah to validate their points of view. All of the women seemed to be knowledgeable about one verse stated in the Qur’an that the status of men and women is the same in the eyes of God, except in their piety and their knowledge. One Hadith that was stated repeatedly by these ladies is the advice from Prophet Muhammad to seek knowledge wherever it resides.

In educational areas, most of the women found it was difficult to adjust to the learning expectations and educational system in the U.S. at the beginning, especially among my international informants. Jackie, for example, complained about the high level of individualistic nature and a sense of competitiveness among her classmates. She was used to a strong sense of togetherness and collaboration to learn with her classmates in Israel. It took her by surprise that the U.S. educational setting was so different. Jackie also expected the professors to be very organized and to explain what to expect from the students in their syllabus, hence, there are no surprises. Sandra shared a similar opinion as far as collaboration is concerned. She enjoyed the way she learned back home in Mexico where each and every student helped each other to succeed. Deedee admitted it was difficult in the beginning to learn to write research papers rather than memorizing the course book and sitting for a test, as she was used to doing in Palestine. However, she learned to like this new approach tremendously in a relatively short time.
Barriers to learn and live

For most of the international informants, language is the main barrier to fully reaching their highest potential in learning, especially in expressing freely and naturally what they have in mind. Interestingly, they are more prone to turn to close friends or their husbands to help them deal with this challenge rather than turning to classmates. Barbara takes advantage of her quiet time with her husband after dinner to discuss her homework because she believes that her husband speaks better English. Susan constantly calls her close friends to make sense of what she was trying to learn, and Deedee used to discuss topics from class with her close Egyptian friend. In addition, Jackie complained because it takes time for her to process information in English, and she thinks she is not able to put her ideas into words as fast as her fellow Americans do during class discussions. She also feels “inadequate” because she cannot speak and write as eloquently as her American classmates do, regardless of her outstanding achievement as an English teacher back in Israel. However, regardless of their problems with language, all the international informants feel that they can achieve their learning goals.

Other common problems that most informants reported was their limited time to study; their age; the possibility of obtaining better jobs in Middle Town; their ability to carry on with their mounting responsibilities as mothers, students, wives, employees, and active members of Middle Town larger community; and financial resources. Jackie and Susan expressed their worries that their degrees would take them forever to finish. For Jackie, losing an assistantship as her means to feel secure financially and to build good curriculum vitae was a huge challenge. To help bring income to her household, she had to work at the university dining service, and reported physical and mental exhaustion
inasmuch as her new duties had nothing to do with her studies. For Jackie, taking away her assistantship has dragged her further from finishing her dissertation because by the time she gets home she is already worn out. As soon as she gets home, she has to play her role as a mother and wife again and her time to study is getting smaller. Susan reported a similar problem. She was concerned about having enough financial resources and energy to carry on. Barbara thought that her activities to maintain her organization and build the community take so much of her time and energy. On top of the earlier factors, she believed her age makes her ability to retain information become less effective. She thinks she is not as sharp as she used to be in terms of learning. Finally, for Christine, she was more concerned about the fate of many female Muslim learners with Hijab to get employment in the U.S. after graduation. She also wonders how these Muslim learners are perceived by their classmates or professors in a course that talks about women and gender studies, given the negative stereotyping predisposition among the Americans about Muslim women.

Finally, the informants thought that some professors were not sensitive enough to their students’ needs. Some came to class with their textbooks, lectured, and left without giving any correlation between what they taught with real life situations or did not seem to care whether their students learned from what they had taught. Other professors gave too much attention to accommodate learners who did not do their assignments or who dominated class with too many questions and prevented the other learners from moving forward with their learning. Jackie complained about one professor who came to class only to tell stories about her practice as a counselor in her clinic and failed to give basic tips and steps necessary for Jackie to deal with her advanced class. Christine shared
similar resentments toward this kind of professor. She called them “narrative professors” who bore Christine to death, and she failed to learn from them. Deedee had problems with professors who do not give good feedback on her work and those who are not open-minded and accepting. Professors, in the eyes of my informants, can play double-edged-sword roles. They can be very important contributors to student success in learning and can also be the stumbling block toward student accomplishment. As was stated previously, most informants prefer professors who are sensitive toward their students’ needs, open-minded, accommodating, organized, have good cross-cultural understanding, and can relate theory into practice.

*Impacts of educational achievement to their lives*

One general pattern stands out in the findings: the informants developed a strong sense of satisfaction in fulfilling their obligation as good Muslims through their educational achievement. They also mentioned that their ability to deal with all barriers to study in the U.S., regardless of their status as Muslim women, brings about higher self-esteem or self-respect, possibly better careers or jobs, and better respect from their family members and people in general. However, my analysis always drove me to the awareness that these women felt that their education is more geared toward giving a better picture about what Islam really says about the status of women, as far as pursuing education is concerned, to the people who stereotype Muslim women as submissive, backward, and uneducated people. As Jackie said, being well educated and successful in pursuing a career will be the strongest weapon that Muslim women can use to counter biased messaging about Muslim women. While Susan mentioned she was content to observe people’s expressions regarding her presence in higher education, her work as a medical
professional, her ability to drive, and her free association with all kinds of people. She repeatedly mentioned that her success in learning and pursuing her career would give her better opportunities to explain about her religion to the people who tend to judge based on what they have seen in the media about women in some Islamic countries. Barbara also gave similar messages that her passion for learning is part of her commitment to practice what Islam really says about women and education. By being well-educated and actively involved in many kinds of community building efforts with her fellow Muslims and non-Muslims, she wanted to be the role model of a good practicing Muslim woman in a subtle way. She believes actions speak louder than words. Christine concurred with this opinion. She believed that by being a successful learner, a dependable and trustworthy employer, and a socially active person, people around her would start questioning their biases concerning Islam in general and Muslim women in particular.

Discussion of the Findings

Living and studying in Middle Town, Indiana

As is stated in the summary of the findings, most informants consider Middle Town, Indiana to be a good place to live and learn. This town is quite a small city and the informants knew from hearsay that the crime rate in the town is relatively low. However, as Jackie and Sandra mentioned, they have to face the reality that they are perceived as a minority within a minority. Besides people’s stigmatism about their ethnicities, they also have to deal with people’s negative stereotyping about their religion. Even Christine, an American-born Filipino, experienced a lot of stares because of her Asian look and the way she dresses (Hijab). Jackie, Sandra, and other informants are attempting to maintain their cultural, ethnic, and religious identity in the context of a society where such norms
of identification are often extremely embedded, and in which prejudice and misunderstanding in relation to Islam are longstanding and vibrant. In the educational setting, Jackie reported her concern regarding her inability to detach her identity as a Muslim and as an Arab to process her American clients’ problems. This kind of tendency often caused friction between Jackie and her supervisor who also processed with her own cultural and religious mindset as an American and as a Christian. This situation is one of several problematic incidents that she and some other informants reported.

Hofstede and Hofstede noted that:

In daily conversations, in political discourse, and in the media that feed them, alien cultures are often pictured in moral terms, as better or worse. Yet there are no scientific standards for considering the ways of thinking, feeling, and acting of one group as intrinsically superior or inferior to those. (2005, p. 5-6)

Moreover, they believed that the encounters of people from different cultures are more likely to bring about conflict than harmony (Hofstede, 1980). Therefore, to mitigate further conflict regarding different cultural and religious mindsets, my informants decided to initiate and foster interfaith communication and dialogue. Barbara is the most active key player in the community to encourage cultural and religious understanding and respect for each other’s beliefs. Besides trying to be a good practicing Muslim, during her speeches in churches to promote her organization or in some interfaith gatherings, she always tried to plant the seed of mutual understanding among the Muslims and non-Muslims. Jackie took advantage of her class projects to open people’s mind about diversity by organizing a workshop and doing a classroom presentation about Arab
culture and Islam. Deedee and Christine preferred to speak by action, by being good
learners and very dependable, trustworthy practicing Muslims.

It was also reported to be difficult to establish a deep relationship with the
Americans. Jackie described her relationship with her fellow Americans, especially
classmates, as very superficial. Barbara did mention that she loves to be friends with
anyone (Muslims and non-Muslims); however, almost all informants described deeper
and higher quality relationships with their fellow Muslim women. Christine reported
that she considers all of her Muslim friends as sisters and has no level of closeness with them
because she loves them all for the sake of God. Sandra, Deedee, Barbara, and Susan said
by hanging out with their fellow Muslims, they become stronger in faith and this
contributes a lot to their sense of comfort in Middle Town.

Furthermore, in the educational setting, I found that all of the informants enjoy
strong collaboration to achieve educational success in class. High levels of
competitiveness and individualism among classmates gave Jackie strong discomfort in
learning. Sandra also mentioned similar issues. Back in Mexico, the students used to help
each other and make sure that everybody was successful. Christine has no problem with
the U.S. learning expectations because she was born and raised in the U.S. However, she
still treasured the teamwork effort in class. Barbara preferred to discuss her homework
with her husband; Susan turned to her non-American close friend for help, and Deedee
considered her Egyptian friend as her partner in learning instead of her American
classmates.

When we referred to this tendency of Hofstede’s cultural dimension theory, the
conditions mentioned above seemed to have something to do with the individualistic vs.
collectivist dimension. As we have discussed in Chapter II, Hofstede (1980) explained that this dimension focuses on the degree the society reinforces individual or collective achievement and interpersonal relationships. A high individualism ranking indicates that individuality and individual rights are paramount within the society. Individuals in these societies may tend to form a larger number of looser relationships. A low individualism ranking typifies societies of a more collectivist nature with close bonds between individuals. These cultures reinforce extended families and collectives where everyone takes responsibility for fellow members of their group. I reviewed the individualistic vs. collectivist index provided by the two authors (Hofstede and Hofstede, 2005) and tried to see if the theory matches the reality of my informants’ situations. The authors wrote that the USA ranked 91, Mexico 30, Afghanistan 14, Israel 54, and Arab world 38. From this data we can see that the United States ranked the highest in terms of the individualistic nature, while Afghanistan scored the lowest. According to Hofstede & Hofstede (2005), consistent with what Sandra and Jackie explained, in their countries ―loyalty‖, interdependency and interconnectedness to the groups are highly celebrated as well as maintaining harmony. The authors wrote, “Confrontations and conflict should be avoided or at least formulated so as not to hurt anyone” (p. 98). While in an individualistic classroom, one values independence, achievement, equality, and the human’s ability to influence the environment instead of letting the environment control one’s actions and decisions. The authors noted, “Confrontations and open discussion of conflict are often considered salutary, and face consciousness as weak or nonexistent” (p. 98). Moreover, Hofstede’s (1980) also points out that based on the findings in one of his studies, compared to Western students, Arab students seemed to be resistant because they seem to
be dependent, indecisive, or nonverbal emotionally. They also may prefer to be considered one of a group, and they will not as readily push themselves forward to seek information, as will Western students.

Hofstede (1980) also stated that Asian and Arab students would require more structure than Western students. Consistent with what Jackie and Deedee mentioned earlier about their needs for clear structure and feedback, Hofsetede found in his study that Arab students were predisposed to seek more definitive instruction and judgment of their work.

The above explanation seemed to answer why it is not easy for most of the informants to establish close and deep relationships with their fellow Americana (especially with classmates) because most of the informants came from low individualistic index (IDV) countries. This theory can also be used to explain why these informants treasured their association with other Muslim ladies in the Middle Town Islamic Center because most of the members came from countries with low IDV indices aside from their same faith.

However, for Sandra’s, Deedee’s, and Christine’s cases, even though they came from a relatively low index of individualistic cultures, their countries scored higher in the Masculinity index created by Hofstede and Hofstede (2005). People who come from a high index of masculine nature such as Mexico (69), Palestine (53), and the Philippines (64) are more predisposed to value assertiveness, money, ambitious attitude, and brilliance. This explained why for these people, it was not so difficult to adjust to the U.S. culture, which happens to score high in masculinity index as well (62). Christine, despite the fact that she was born and raised in the U.S., had parents who still held their home
country’s mores that view material gain, high academic achievement, and assertiveness as very important. At least those are the things that Christine could recall from her time growing up in her parents’ house; yet, they are also predisposed to be very collective in terms of preserving loyalty and a sense of harmony and interconnectedness within their group, and especially hold a sense of kinship with their relatives back home. Similarly, for Sandra and Deedee, coping with high levels of competitiveness in the U.S. classrooms and voicing their thoughts in class freely were not seen as great challenges; however, they preferred team work and associating with people who value interdependence over individualism.

Women status in Islam vs. cultural beliefs

Hofstede & Hofstede stated that:

Every person carries with him or her patterns of thinking, feeling, and potential acting that were learned throughout their lifetime…As soon as certain patterns of thinking, feeling, and acting have established themselves within a person’s mind, he or she must unlearn this before being able to learn something different, and unlearning is more difficult than learning for the first time (2005, p. 2-3).

It was interesting to find that five of my informants came from different countries and each of them carry some kind of uniqueness because of their cultural makeup of their home countries, yet, when they started living in and associating themselves with the people of Middle Town, especially with the Middle Town Islamic community, they are able to feel comfortable with the new societal and educational expectations. Consistent with Hofstede’s and Hofstede’s (2005) assertion, these women did encounter many difficulties in the beginning when they had to “unlearn” what they have accepted as
preferred actions or thinking within the societies of their home countries. Nonetheless, these women are able to critically question the cultural beliefs that had been programmed in their minds and open themselves to the new culture of Muslim women who live and study in Middle Town, Indiana by returning to the most valid resources to learn Islam, The Qur’an and Hadith, to guide their conduct. The only American in this study is Christine and as a convert who studied Islam “from scratch” through her thorough examinations of what the Qur’an and Hadith say, she described how she learned so much from the diversity of thought among the Muslim Women she is associating with, and she is aware that culture can influence how the Qur’an and Hadith are interpreted. By means of the gatherings such as halaqa (Qur’anic and Hadith study), monthly dinner, women’s luncheon, Eid festivals, Ramadan activities, as well other formal and informal activities that they do as the members of the Middle Town Islamic community, these women are given the chance to discuss and challenge many assumptions regarding Islam and how the teachings are practiced. The association instigated awareness that many of the practices under the banner of Islam in their home countries are not necessarily the correct interpretation of Islamic teachings. Hence, it is not surprising that some of the informants in my study think and behave differently from the accepted norms in their own countries. Barbara stated that she can express her ambition, passion and commitment to practice Islam as is prescribed in the Qur’an and Hadith easily in the United States. In her country of Afghanistan, many women are not treated fairly the way Islam suggests in the Qur’an and Hadith. Similar conditions were reported by Jackie who admitted that her own husband used to hold the cultural expectations from their home country that dictate women be fully responsible for any single matter in the household, especially in raising
the children, even though they have careers outside the house. The man’s responsibility is mainly to provide for his family financially instead of sharing the household chores and parenting tasks with his wife. Brooks (1995) supported Jackie’s opinion by describing her observation about Egyptian men’s attitudes toward married career women. She noted, “When home life with a working wife turns out to be less salubrious than with the non-working women of his youth, he doesn’t think of lending a hand with the chores, for he has never seen a man do such a thing” (1992, p. 180).

Sandra, the convert from Mexico, also shared that as a once-devoted Catholic who read her Bible almost every day, the Machis tendency among the majority of the people in her country is not consistent with what the Bible said. Congruent with what Barbara and Jackie had stated, she believes there are three main factors that prevent women from exercising their rights freely regardless of what their religions have granted them: men’s desire to preserve their power over women that they have inherited from generation to generation; low levels of education; and low economic status.

Fatima Mernissi (1992) concurred with the perspectives opined by the above informants. She suggested that people celebrate democratic concepts. Yet Mernissi explained that this democratic concept is not the method that is propagated in many Islamic worlds. Women, in particular, are the most vulnerable segment. Mernissi theorized that some religious leaders and those who hold power constantly try to subjugate women’s voices for the sake of influence or maintaining their patriarchal mindset (1992). Hosseini (2006) concurred by stating her criticism about the double standards and perspectives as far as the status of women in Islam is concerned. According to Hosseini, regardless of some of the Islamic leaders’ knowledge of Islam, some Islamic
Sharia still treat women as second-class citizens and place them under men’s domination (2006). Similar to Hosseini’s sentiment, Mernissi (1992) explained that she personally believed in the justice of Islam but she criticized that some of the interpretations of Islamic laws are used to strengthen a male-dominated society.

Furthermore, based on the findings, most of the informants admitted that women are treated poorly in many Islamic countries and this provokes negative stereotyping about Muslim women and Islam. Brooks (1992) expressed her frustration regarding the discrepancy between what the Qur’an prescribes and how it is currently interpreted and implemented in the Islamic world. Her journey to countries such as Palestine, Egypt, Algeria, and Afghanistan gave her the message that women still have to struggle to get the rights that Islam grants them. Badawi (1995) also argued that diverse cultural practices among Muslims all around the world instigate false perceptions about Islam. He stated, “These problems are enhanced by the tendency to treat some juristic interpretations as if they were identical with Islam” (p. ix). Bullock (1999) shared the criticism made by many writers regarding the discrepancy between the teachings of Islam and its practice. For example, she noted, “In Islam women have the right to own property, when in actual practice (in some contexts), women may not have the right to own property” (1999, p. 9). However, the participants did not blame the media one-hundred percent. Barbara and Christine blamed the Muslims for hiding their identity and failing to be the role model of Muslims who follow the Qur’an and Sunnah obediently and properly. This perspective is congruent with Findley’s (2001) opinion. According to him, as far as the negative profiling of Islam is concerned:
Much of the blame must be placed on certain Muslims: those who create inaccurate and unsettling visions of the type of government and society Muslims want to establish; those who commit acts of religious intolerance and other un-Islamic misdeeds in the name of their religion; and those who hear or see reports of such misbehavior by professed Muslims without speaking out in protest. (2001, p. 110)

Moreover, according to most of the informants, this maltreatment is also experienced by many women across countries and religions including in the U.S. Susan and Barbara also shared that some of their America friends wished to marry Muslim men because they never get respect and the treatment they deserve from their American husbands. In agreement to my informants’ argument, Findley said that based on a report released in January 2000 by the John Hopkins School of Public Health in Baltimore, Maryland, “One of every three women worldwide has been beaten, raped, or somehow mistreated” (AP 1-21-2000). Findley (2001) further explained the conclusion made in the report, which is based on studies conducted in more than twenty countries, including the United States. He noted, “the document reports that as many as 70 percent of the women had never told anyone about the abuse prior to their interview” (2001, p. 127).

Additionally, in the political arena, Findley noted that, compared to the women in the U.S., many women in the Islamic countries were more advanced. He gave the examples of the late Benazir Bhutto who was the Prime Minister in Pakistan, Megawati Soekarno Putri who was the Vice President and later became the President of the Republic of Indonesia, and Khaleda Zia who served as Bangladesh Prime Minister. They came from
predominantly Muslim countries, but they were elected as the top leaders, an occurrence that has not yet happened in the U.S.

Moreover, my informants shared the same knowledge that Islam granted higher status for women compared to any other religion in the world. According to Findley (2001), history has proven that Islam has been a more liberating influence on the status of women than either Christianity or Judaism. In support of his opinion, Thomas W. Lippman—a Jewish journalist from *The Washington Post* bureau in Cairo (1990), supported by William Baker (1998), a Christian leader and famous Bible scholar, suggested that during the times when women were treated so badly and had no rights whatsoever, Islam came with messages to ensure women’s property rights, encouraged men to treat women with kindness and generosity, and emphasized stability in the family.

Similar to the informants’ statements regarding how Islam elevates the status of women and considers them as equal with men, Badawi (1995) jotted down several chapters and verses in the Qur’an in support of the informants’ stance. Some of them are Quran (4:1) which stated that men and women have the same human spiritual nature; Qur’an (3:195) that noted that both men and women have the same religious and moral duties and responsibilities; Qur’an (81:8-9) that indicated how the Qur’an condemned the barbaric action of the pre-Islamic people toward their female children; and finally Qur’an (17:23) as well as Qur’an (31:14) that elevated kindness to parents, especially mothers, to a status second only to the worship of Allah (God).

In conclusion, scholars such as Fatima Mernissi (1992), Ahmad Badawi (1995), Mai Yamani (1996), Katherine Helen Bullock (1999), Ziba Mir-Hosseini (2001), and Paul Findley (2001) seemed to share the perspective that there is a need to distinguish
between what Islam really teaches concerning women and how cultural traditions sometimes negate or twist the true Islamic principles for the sake of influence or power. They also believed that the interpretations of Qur’an and Hadith so far have been the means to preserve patriarchal belief instead of the undertakings to propagate the true messages of the two valid resources of Islam.

*Sense of identity as learners and women*

Each of my informants reported that they could not distinguish their identity as a Muslim from how they perceive themselves as a learner and a woman. Every one of them described Islam as central to their personalities and helped the formation of how they define themselves as well as how they see the purpose of life. All of the informants described their enjoyment of their roles as female Muslims learners and do not find that their situations fit the negative stereotyping about the lives of Muslim women in general. This finding is congruent with the study conducted by Carol L. Anway (1996), in her book *Daughters of another path; Experiences of American women choosing Islam* that contains her research findings based on the questionnaires responses she got from 53 Muslim women who shared their conversion stories. She found that ninety percent of the women in the study are married and reflect successful and happy marriages at the time of the survey. She also noted that the respondents, who were working toward college degrees, reported extremely positive reactions to their chosen lifestyle in contrast to the more negative stories often heard in the media.

Christine, my American convert informant, mentioned her faith is her guidance to live her life. Before she was a Muslim, she was constantly asking for the purpose of life. When she found Islam by means of her association with other American converts,
reading books about Islam, and attending some activities in Middle Town Islamic Center, she described that Islam makes perfect sense regarding why one is here in this world. Similarly, Sandra’s path to Islam was also caused by her constant dissatisfaction toward the concept of God in her previous religion (Catholic). Both converts believed Islam has answered their questions and hence, they would like to devote their life to be good Muslims by following every single command that Islam prescribes, especially to be the avid and disciplined seeker of knowledge as well as to be the active participant in building a peaceful community. These converts in particular could sense the change in terms of their respect for their parents, their elder siblings, their neighbors, and their attention to the needy. They mentioned that these positive changes impressed their non-Muslim family members, and in turn brought about acceptance for their daughters’ or sisters’ new belief. What is more, they reported that the consciousness that God is constantly watching them made them pay attention to their conduct in order not to make mistakes or cross the boundaries that God has set. The rest of the informants also shared this perspective.

Similar to what Christine and Sandra had described, according to Anway’s study (1996), the reasons for conversion among American born Muslim converts were mostly related to the unanswered questions they had regarding religion and the concept of God. These learners by and large found Islam by learning from books, association with Muslim friends, and by living in Muslim countries and college settings. They shared that rejection came initially from their parents because of the stereotypes the media portrayed regarding the status of women in Islam. However, according to Anway (1996), they become more accepting and tolerant after seeing that Islam has had a positive influence on their
daughters’ personalities and lives in general. Moreover, according to the Muslim learners in Anway’s study, Islam has helped them be more grounded, more relaxed, and more focused in learning specifically and in facing life in general.

All six informants unanimously felt their total submission to God’s command has given them high sense of optimism to live and study and they persistently mentioned that Islam and their self-identity are interrelated and inseparable. They also believed Islam to be a perfect system created by God that should be used to guide every aspect of Muslim life. However, their undertakings to be good Muslim women were not without challenges. Christine as an American, as we have mentioned earlier, experienced a lot of stares in public places. In her Department at the Middle Town public university, the condition was not as bad. Since she was known by many of the professors and friends before she became a Muslim, Christine did not find any significant problems dealing with these people in general. Even though she got dirty looks from new classmates in the beginning when she entered certain classes, she found that as soon as they got to know and interact with her, her classmates were usually able to get over their prejudiced feelings toward Muslim woman with Hijab. Aside from her learning achievements and her ability to be a “social chameleon”, Christine also sent the message that she was available to be questioned as far as her faith was concerned. In the workplace, the same thing happened with the people who did not directly associate with Christine. Through her achievement at work and her efforts to make herself open to any discussions about Islam, people learned to respect her as an individual rather than solely as a Muslim who covers herself and practices her religion obediently.
Christine was still concerned about her own and the other Muslim learners’ ability to put their feet in the job market when they graduate. As Anway (1996) found in her study, the extreme change in dress (wearing Hijab and modest dress) has been very difficult for some of the respondents. She said that, “Many of the women described the discrimination that occurred in the workplace when interviewing for jobs. Some had difficulty dealing with the jeers and name calling experiences in various public places” (Anway, 1996, p. 76).

Congruent with Anway’s (1996) finding, Sandra is one of the “victims” who experienced uncomfortable treatment because of her ethnic background, the choice of her religion, and her dress code, especially in the workplace at the hospital. As someone with a dark complexion, she was sometimes confused with an Arab and somehow “exiled” from the medical professionals’ social activities. She described her relationships with most of her coworkers as merely superficial and work-related rather than deep and personal ones. Aside from being ridiculed for her heavy Mexican accent, she was also forced to constantly explain why she is wearing Hijab and about the status of women in Islam. Asma Gull Hasan (2000) validated Sandra’s frustration by stating that Muslims, especially American Muslims, are the victims of mistaken identity. She noted that many Americans think all Muslims are terrorists and oppressors of women, yet Muslims know that they are actually much better people than the stereotypes make them out to be.

Regarding some American perceptions regarding women wearing Hijab. Hasan (2000) stated that Americans and Westerners see Hijab as repressive and symbolic proof of the oppression of Muslim women. In fact, the main point of Hijab is to preserve modesty as requested of both men and women in the Qur’an. Hasan (2000) complained that these
women are not seen as people who try to express their religious freedom and instead they are seen as second-class citizens.

When it comes to the question concerning feminism, all of the informants defined themselves as feminists who follow what the Qur’an and Hadith suggest. They argued that there is no discrepancy between the teachings of the Qur’an and feminist ideology; the goal is to put an end to sexism, gender exploitation, and oppression. This declaration does not seem to agree with Western feminist arguments that Islam subordinates women and that Islam does not allow liberation, as was reported by Tabari (1982) and Bullock (1999). These authors perceived that Western feminists are inclined to believe that Muslim women need to be liberated, and hence Islam is a threat to feminist movements. In addition, Bullock (1999) asserted that those Muslim women who label themselves as feminists are seen by non-Muslim Westerners as the “liberated Muslims” or those who have shifted away from following Qur’anic prescriptions about women. In brief, both scholars shared similar opinions that the non-Muslim feminists believe it is not possible to amalgamate Islam and feminism. Even among Muslim scholars themselves such as Shahidian (1994), Yamani (1996), Afkhami (1995), Moghissi (1998), Mojab (1999), and Moghadam (2002), there is a shared sentiment that it is naïve to believe that Islam advocates the same principles as feminists. They are more prone to see feminist activism among women in many Islamic contexts as inspired by Western feminism instead of the manifestation to implement true Islamic teachings concerning women’s worth.

On the other hand, the informants definition of feminism and their view of themselves as feminists are congruent with the definition of Islamic feminism coined by scholars such as Badran (2002) and Moghadam (2006). They perceived feminism as an
ideology that goes hand-in-hand with Islamic teachings and that they are compatible. Both scholars argued that feminism is not Western. As we have discussed in Chapter II, Badran stated that, “feminism is a plant that only grows in its own soil” (2002, p. 2). Therefore, she suggested that multiple truths come from the conscience of people regarding the need to see the equal worth of both men and women in all social domains. The participants’ insistence to view themselves as feminists who will not deviate from what Islam prescribed in respect to the status of women in the society and in the eyes of God is an example of what Badran has tried to say.

Moreover, consistent with the informants’ understanding about feminism, Badran (2000) further explained that Islamic feminists question women’s status in Muslim societies and provide an alternative concept of women’s rights in Islam based on a return to the original sources and their own reading and interpretation of the holy texts. The informants’ explanations also fit Badran’s opinion that “Islamic feminism advances women’s rights, gender equality, and social justice using Islamic discourse as its paramount discourse” (p. 4). In support of my informants’ perspective to see feminism as “Islamic” in nature, Badran stated that that kind of feminism attempts to encourage Muslim women to start analyzing whether the current practices are congruent with what Islam truly prescribes concerning gender equality, social responsibilities, and furthering each gender’s potential. Badawi (1995) concurred by suggesting that one revisit and reevaluate the consistency between what the Qur’an really teaches, and how it is implemented in the present-day Muslim world.
Finally, based on the stories shared by my six informants, they see knowledge as “power” that can be used as the strongest “ammunition” to counter many challenges in life. The six women felt their undertakings to educate themselves have brought about a tremendous amount of positive impact on how they see themselves as people. Barbara reported higher respect from her children because of her ability to relate to her children’s life experiences by means of her broader point of view and knowledge she learned at school. She also attributed her success to establish and maintain her non-profit organization to her education. Higher self-respect or self-esteem to improve career and status in the society was also reported. Deedee, for example, asserted that her knowledge is not only her means to improve herself. It is also something that she can use to give back to her people in Palestine. Susan and Sandra felt their educational success has brought forth a greater sense of confidence to both educate and motivate their children to learn as well as explain their religion to others. However, as it was previously mentioned, the most significant contribution that educational success has given the informants was a sense of satisfaction that they have fulfilled their obligation to be good Muslims by following what their faith (Islam) commands them; to seek knowledge and to use that knowledge to get closer to God.

As was noted by Zaimeche (n.d.) in Chapter II, the Quran urges the faithful to think, ponder, reflect and acquire knowledge that would bring them closer to God and to His creation. He cited some Qur’anic verses such as Qur’an (39:9) that questions the believer whether the one who knows is the same as the one who does not know; then Qur’an (35:28) that says that the true believers are those who have knowledge. Zaimeche
also quoted three Hadith that validate the message about God’s preference toward those who persistently seek knowledge. Sandra, Barbara, Christine, Deedee, Jackie, and Susan unanimously said that they wanted to be rewarded and obtain a higher status in the eyes of God as promised in the Qur’an and Hadith by being knowledgeable. Therefore, for these informants, knowledge is not simply a personal endeavor; it is a spiritual effort to ‘please God’.

Furthermore, in support of the informants’ description and Zaimeche’s explanation, Haleh Afshar (1989) completed a study regarding education, hopes, and achievement of Muslim women in West Yorkshire. The researcher found that women of all backgrounds regardless of their own level of educational achievement seek to promote their children within the educational systems and are increasingly doing so for their daughters as well as their sons. All women studied stated that their commitment to the education of their children was based on their understanding that education is valued very highly in Islam for both men and women.

In conclusion, the key factor in the lives of the six informants is their faith. When these women asserted that Islam was their way of life, it implied that their definition of self, their conduct, and their thoughts revolved around their religion; in this case Islam. However, according to the informants, not all Muslim women are fortunate enough to enjoy the rights that their religion has granted them in some contexts. Middle Town Islamic Center, according to these informants is their “safe haven” to find their true self-identity by means of their association with other Muslim women from different countries. The religious and social activities they do together in the center or in the other settings enabled them to see and learn that cultures can influence the interpretation of Islam and
hence, there is a need to return to the original sources of Islam; The Qur’an and Hadith. It can also be inferred that the American democracy that ensures human rights and freedom of speech causes the informants’ passion to practice Islam the way it is supposed to be practiced to flourish. The informants also admitted that living in the non-Muslim country increased their desire to learn more about their religion to be able to answer questions about Islam. They also learned to critically question the preconceived and taken-for-granted culturally-flavored notions about the status of women in Islam that was passed on in their home countries from generation to generation.

Description of Subculture

Through the interviews and observations of these informants and from my participation with them in Middle Town Islamic Center, the logical name for this subculture is *Middle Town Islamic Ladies*. Learning from the findings and specific discussion about what we have found in this study, we can infer there are certain characteristics that are shared by Middle Town Islamic Ladies who learn in several higher education institutions in Middle Town, Indiana. Some of the common patterns are:

- These ladies value education highly and see it as the fulfillment of their obligation to constantly seek knowledge as is prescribed in the Qur’an and Hadith.
- The members of this subculture are prone to practice their religion strictly.
- Their faith (Islam) guides their daily routine or, in other words, they see that their faith is their way of life that dictates every aspect of their lives.
- The strongest relationship comes from the group (outside of their own family members).
The reasons to be well educated are not merely aimed at celebrating individual success, instead it is also meant to educate their families and teach others about their faith.

The members are also predisposed to seek out opportunities to give back to the community.

Recommendation and Suggested Implications for Educators

Based on the findings and the discussion in this study, there are several important points that will benefit adult educators. First of all, as Spradley stated in his book *The cocktail waitress: Woman's work in a man's world*, “Every human group creates its own reality, a shared culture” (1975, p. 6). He further explained the male-female game in every culture also has a set of ground rules. Hence, culture should be seen as “amoral” instead of being judged as good or bad. When dealing with Muslim women in class, for example, it is a must for a professor to be genuinely sincere in efforts to understand his or her learner’s cultural make up as a Muslim. This is especially important if these learners come from different countries because this has a potential to create another layer of complexity. Special undertakings need to be done to know this kind of learner’s nature and “ground rules” as well as their needs to help them succeed. For example, as was mentioned by most informants in this study, language is their main barrier to learn, hence, accommodation needs to be made to ensure that this obstacle will not prevent them from reaching their utmost potential in class. Some of the ideas taken from the informants were to give more time for these learners to finish their tests, to be available to discuss the materials learned inside and outside the classroom, and to make special efforts to know the learners’ preferred method to learn. For the non-international Muslim
learners, the professors can facilitate their needs to be understood as far as their faith is concerned. Perhaps the professors can explain to their students during the first meeting that they have a Muslim student in class. The professors can give a brief explanation about Islam and encourage the students to ask the Muslim student respectfully and in person should they have any questions regarding her faith. The professors can also invite the Muslim learner to give a presentation about her faith or “culture” as a Muslim to enhance religious understanding and prevent stigmatism in class.

Secondly, Spradley noted, “Everyone takes their culture for granted” (1975, p. 7). He explained that people hardly realize that other people have a different reality than the one they are living in. Hence, it will take great endeavors to learn how to see from other’s lenses when it comes to judging whether certain conduct is “good” or “bad”; “acceptable” or ‘not acceptable’. Professors, in this case, need to challenge their own assumptions about certain groups of people such as Muslim women learners and try to discover the tacit dimension of this type of learners. Borrowing Stephen Brookfield’s term prescriptive assumptions as, “assumptions about what we think ought to be happening in a particular situation” (1995, p. 2), a professor in higher education needs to examine how he or she thinks students should behave, and what a good educational process should look like to become an effective educator. In complex societies such as the U.S., the number of cultural perspectives for any situation increases tremendously. For example, knowing that the informants in my study prefer collaborative learning, the professors may facilitate this by reinforcing “we” attitudes instead of merely celebrating the “I” ones. It makes perfect sense to perceive that those who come should try to adapt. However, in my personal opinion, it will not be counterproductive to perpetuate the habit
to learn from each other given the fact that American higher education students have become more and more diverse. More students who come to study in the U.S. higher education institutions are from Collectivist cultures. According to the Institute of International Education statistics in 2004/2005, more than 565,000 International students were enrolled in U.S. institutions of higher education, and Asia continues to send the largest proportion.

Furthermore, international students brought $13.3 billion dollars to the U.S. economy in 2004 in money spent on tuition, living expenses, and related costs, according to the NAFSA (Association of International Educators, 2005). As the result, there is an emerging need to understand and address their cultural and psychological adjustment to this country to better accommodate their passion for learning in the more diverse classrooms in the U.S.A. In addition, Chen & Starosta acknowledged that, “As we move toward multiculturalism and globalization, it is not only the business world that must adapt to these changes; the academic sector must deal with the trend as well” (1998, p. 235).

Hence, deliberate cross-cultural training in a Western higher education setting should be administered for either international students or students from different “cultures” and the native speakers of English-speaking countries (students and instructors) to ensure true understanding and effective collaboration in learning and constructing knowledge. Ignorance toward this issue may hinder interaction and instigate conflict and misunderstanding. Communication styles across cultures, traditional values, and types of culture or society that one belongs should be the main emphasis to be elaborated and discussed in the training. And, finally, a culturally sensitive syllabus
should be critically administered to ensure a democratic and inclusive classroom for diverse students.

Possible Future Research

Finally, repeating Spradley’s (1979) statement that an ethnographic research is always an incomplete task, further research should be conducted to fully understand the culture of female Muslim learners in the U.S., especially examining how their faith influences the way they live and learn. More studies that focus on the needs of married female Muslim international students who have small children is another possible topic to be cultivated and delved into. Based on the report from my informants who are married and have small children, baby-sitting is one of the biggest barriers to focusing on their studies. The tendency of the university to concentrate on creating services that are more geared toward meeting the needs of single students created learning discomfort among some of the informants. Giving more voice to this specific subculture is expected to inform the university to pay more attention to the needs of student parents. Conducting similar studies in different areas in the U.S. will also be needed to see how it is consistent or different from this study and to further contribute to knowledge construction.

There are more elements and layers that need to be discovered and uncovered. Meticulous inquiries to complement the findings in my current study will benefit, both the informants being studied, and the educators, as well as the larger public in the U.S. Ethnography is an arduous and formidable undertaking indeed because we are dealing with complex dimensions of human thinking. However, it is not an impossible thing to draw a pattern of thinking and behaving among people within a group of people by means of the help of many different techniques suggested in the literature. More studies
in this area will also inspire people from different segments of the U.S. society to deal
with this subpopulation better, and hence enhance uncanny peace and harmony.

Summary of the Chapter

Finally, we have pulled out the findings of this study, defined the subculture,
discussed themes derived from the data analysis process, provided some
recommendations, and suggested implications for educators as well as ideas for future
research. It is expected that this study is beneficial for all stakeholders; the informants,
the educators, higher education institutions, general public, and female Muslim learners
who share similar experiences and cultural knowledge with the informants in this
particular study. It is true that this study is not meant to draw generalizations, however,
by means of understanding a certain subculture in a specific setting, we can at least infer
what needs to be done in a grander scope to improve services for learners from different
socio-cultural backgrounds.
References


Syracuse


APPENDIX

Title of study: Surviving Prejudice: A Feminist Ethnography of Muslim Women Living and Studying in Middle Town Indiana United States.

These are the samples of the actual Domain analysis I did for this study.

Data Analysis

Semantic Relationship used:

1. Strict inclusion where X is a kind of Y
2. Cause-effect where X is a result of Y
3. Rationale where X is a reason for doing Y
4. Location is the place for doing Y
5. Means-end where X is a way to do Y

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Domain analysis</th>
<th>Semantic Relation</th>
<th>Structural Question</th>
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<tr>
<td>Strict inclusion</td>
<td>X is a kind of Y</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cause-effect</td>
<td>X is a result of Y</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rationale</td>
<td>X is a reason for doing Y</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Location</td>
<td>X is the place for doing Y</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Means-end</td>
<td>X is a way to do Y</td>
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Domain analysis Worksheet

I. Semantic relationship

Strict inclusion

Form: X is a kind of Y

Example: supportive is a kind of husband

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Semantic relationship</th>
<th>Cover term</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Not supportive husband</td>
<td>X is a kind of Y</td>
<td>Husband</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Messy husband</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• God-fearing husband</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Sensitive husband</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Helpful husband</td>
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<td>• Social husband</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Jealous husband</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Very religious husband</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Classmates</td>
<td>X is a kind of Y</td>
<td>Friends</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Closest friends</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Close friends</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Remote friends</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Business friends</td>
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</table>
- Deep friends
- Best friends
- Crazy friends
- Muslim Friends
- Non-Muslim friends

<table>
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<tr>
<td>Lecturing</td>
<td>X is kind of Y</td>
<td>Professors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Giving good feedback</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not giving feedback</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sensitive</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helpful</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Brings examples and research</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Follow textbook</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Bring theory into practice</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Narrative</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accommodating</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Open minded</td>
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<td>Monthly dinner</td>
<td>X is a kind of Y</td>
<td>Gathering</td>
</tr>
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<td>Social gatherings</td>
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- Halaqa
- Eid parties
- Iftar
- Ramadan
- Ladies luncheon
- Taking the kids to the park
- Shopping together

<table>
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<td>Late Nite</td>
<td>X is a kind of Y</td>
<td>Entertainments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Going to movie theater</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Watching kids</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Going to the zoo</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enjoying nature</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Watching concert</td>
<td></td>
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<td>Watching the movies</td>
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<tr>
<td>Watching cartoon with kids</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Going to the park</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Having quiet time with husband</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Watching sports with husband</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</table>
- Walking with kids

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<tr>
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<th>Cover term</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Visual</td>
<td>X is a kind of Y</td>
<td>Learning methods</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Auditory</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experiencing</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Watching videos</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Working in the labs</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussing with classmates</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Discussing with husband</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Having examples</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seeing relationship between theory and real-life situations</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Integrating all learning methods</td>
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<th>Cover term</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Liberal feminism</td>
<td>X is a kind of Y</td>
<td>Feminism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Islamic feminism</td>
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</table>

II. Semantic relationship:

Cause-effect
Form: where X is a result of Y

Example: More discipline in learning is the result of becoming a Muslim

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Semantic relationship</th>
<th>Cover term</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Higher respect to parents</td>
<td>X is a result of Y</td>
<td>Becoming a Muslim</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling complete</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Stronger sense of direction</td>
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<tr>
<td>Feeling closer to God</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>More dependable</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More trustworthy</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Peaceful mind</td>
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</table>

III. Semantic relationship:

Rationale

Form: X is a reason for doing Y

Example: To show modesty is the reason to wear Hijab

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Included terms</th>
<th>Semantic relationship</th>
<th>Cover term</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To follow God’s command</td>
<td>X is a reason for doing Y</td>
<td>Wearing Hijab</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To hide sexuality</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To be chaste</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>To feel unique</td>
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<tr>
<td>To feel protected</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
• To be respected
• To show identity

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Included terms</th>
<th>Semantic relationship</th>
<th>Cover term</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To get better job</td>
<td>X is a reason for doing Y</td>
<td>Learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To improve self-esteem</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To help one’s country</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To help with kids’ homework</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To motivate my kids</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To feel good about myself</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To follow God’s command</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To contribute to the society</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To be a better Muslim</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>To bring more money home</td>
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Included terms</th>
<th>Semantic relationship</th>
<th>Cover term</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To complete prayers</td>
<td>X is a reason for doing Y</td>
<td>Combining prayers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To avoid conflicting with daily activities</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>To make up missed prayer</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
IV. Semantic relationship

Location is the for action

Form: X is place for doing Y

Example: Classroom is place to study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Included terms</th>
<th>Semantic relationship</th>
<th>Cover term</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Middle Town public university</td>
<td>X is place for doing Y</td>
<td>Study</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community college</td>
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<tr>
<td>Career Center</td>
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<td>Middle Town elementary school</td>
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<td>Library</td>
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<td>Home</td>
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<td>Office</td>
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<tr>
<th>Included terms</th>
<th>Semantic relationship</th>
<th>Cover term</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Middle Town Islamic Center</td>
<td>X is place for doing Y</td>
<td>Worshiping God</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Outside the movie theater</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>The car</td>
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<td>The airplane</td>
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<td>A corner in the hospital</td>
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<tr>
<td>Included terms</td>
<td>Semantic relationship</td>
<td>Cover term</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle Town Islamic Center</td>
<td>X is place for doing Y</td>
<td>Gathering</td>
</tr>
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<td>Friend’s house</td>
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<td>Restaurant</td>
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<td>Mall</td>
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<td>Park</td>
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<tr>
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<th>Semantic relationship</th>
<th>Cover term</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Park</td>
<td>X is a place for doing Y</td>
<td>Entertainment</td>
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<tr>
<td>Zoo</td>
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<td>Movie theater</td>
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<td>Home</td>
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<td>Campus</td>
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<td>Shopping center</td>
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<td>Friend’s house</td>
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<td>Outdoor</td>
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V. Semantic relationship

Means ends

Form: X is a way to do Y

Example: Working as a nurse is a way to get money
Included terms                        Semantic relationship                          Cover term

- Working at the dining service       X is a way to do                             Get money
- Doing an assistantship
- Working in Public Health Office
- Fund-raising dinner
- Giving a presentation at the church and women’s organization
- Asking husband to donate
- Asking friends to donate

Included terms                        Semantic relationship                          Cover term

- Praying                             X is a way to do                             Get closer to God
- Reading Qur’an
- Helping people
- Constant remembrance of God
- Seeking knowledge
- Respecting your parents
- Be good to your neighbor

Structural Questions:

For example:

- Are there many reasons for learning?
• Are there many ways to cope with live in Middle Town?
• Are there many different kinds of Muslim husbands?
• Are there many ways to get closer to God?
• Are there many ways for entertainment?
• Are there many different kinds of professors?
• Are there many different kinds of classmates?
• Are there many challenges in learning?
• Are the many Qur’anic verses or Hadith spoken about women and education?
• Are there many different kinds of feminism?
• Are there many different methods of learning?
• Are there many different kinds of learners?
• Are there many reasons for conversion?
• Are there many reasons to like Islam?
• Are there many different kinds of friends?
• Are there many different kinds of gatherings?
• Are there many ways to make up prayers?
• Are there many changes happened after you become a Muslim?
• Are there many religious experiences that affirm your faith?
• Are there any connections between Islam and your learning?
• Are there any differences between what Islam teaches with the way people practice them in many Islamic world?
• Are there many stereotypes concerning Muslim women in Middle Town Indiana?
Are there many ways to deal with the stereotypes about Muslim women in class, workplace, or other places in Middle Town?

The interview questions are as follows:

First Interview (30-60 minutes) – Light
1. Describe how you came to this city.
2. Describe your life here.
3. Describe your study here.
4. What do you like the most about being Muslim?
5. Please tell me how you became a Muslim (for converts)
6. What does your faith mean to you?
7. Why did you convert to Islam? (for the converts)
8. What changed in your life after becoming a Muslim? (for the converts)
9. Did you have a religious experience that affirms your faith? Please describe it.
10. How do you think your life would be different if you were not a Muslim?

Second Interview (60-90 minutes) – Full
1. How do you define Islam?
2. How do you define yourself?
3. How do you define your role as a woman?/What does being a woman mean to you?
4. How do you perceive yourself as a Muslim woman?
5. Are there any Qur’anic verses that support your faith? What are they?
6. How do you view education for Muslim women?
7. Do you know of any Qur’anic verses that speak to education?

8. Do you face stereotypes because you are a Muslim in Indiana? Give examples.

9. How do you deal with the stereotypes about Islam in Indiana?

10. Has being a Muslim affected your social life in Indiana? How?

11. Has being a Muslim impacted your education in Indiana? How?

Third Interview (60-90 minutes) – Probing Deeper

Questions consistent with Interview 2, but going deeper. Review the transcript from previous interviews for points to ask for stories and examples or clarification.

My Analysis

Based on what I read from the transcripts, there are several points and general pattern that I would like to bring up.

- Most of the key participants came from different countries and understand their culture pretty well
- All of the converts reported that they are so lucky to find Islam
- All of the key informants think that knowledge is power
- All of the participants think that their faith makes them be a better learner and persist in their effort to pursue education
- Most of the key participants wear Hijab or head cover and none of them were forced to do that either by extended family members, husband, or anyone else
- All of my key informants believe that bad treatments toward women such as
what happens in many Islamic worlds are not Islamic

- All of the key informants think that women have been mistreated in different level in almost all parts of the world including the US
- All of the key informants reported that they live a happy marriage
- Most of the informants think that language is the main barrier to learn better
- Some of the key informants have worries in terms of financial resources
- Two of the key informants have problem with baby sitting
- One of the informant complained that losing her assistantship has caused so much damage toward her life and study
- All of the key informants think that Middle Town is a pretty friendly environment to live as Muslims women and Muslim learners
- None of the key informants has problems with their professors due to their identity as a Muslim
- Most of the key participants experienced difference in terms of US educational system and the one back home
- Two of the key informants reported that they cannot establish deep relationship with American friends
- One of the key informants reported that living and learning in Middle Town is the most rewarding experience for her.
- One of the key informants reported that head covering has caused her lose many friends at work.
- All of the key informants think that Islamic teachings have been their way of
life

- All of the key informants think that their faith increases a sense of optimism, passion, comfort in living and learning
- All key informants believe it is necessary for the non-Muslims to learn about Islam from the original sources such as the Qur’an and hadith instead of from TV
- All of the key informants attribute the bad treatment toward women in many Islamic worlds or in any other countries to the cultural make up and the way the men were raised.
- All of the key informants believe that people have the tendency to mix culture with religion
- All informants think that they are a feminist as long as it is still in the boundary of Islamic teachings coming from the Qur’an and Hadith
- All informants think that there is no contradiction between Islamic teachings with the core belief of feminism
- Three of the informants mentioned that liberal feminism is not Islamic
- All informants think that their husbands are very supportive to their pursuing higher education and better career
- Most of my key informants are visual learners and love to work in group
- All of the key informants love professors who bring theory into practice
- Most of the key informants pass Islamic teachings to their children by being the role models and sending them to Sunday school.
• Most of my key informants think that the Muslim community gatherings mean so much to their sense of well-being.

• Most of the key informants think that Muslim close friends are their source of inspiration as far as pursuing higher education is concerned.

• All of the key informants have many experiences that strengthen their faith.
Appendix A

From: Amy Boos <no-reply@irbnet.org>
Subject: IRBNet Board Action
To: Iriantiusman@yahoo.com, mdudka@bsu.edu
Date: Wednesday, October 8, 2008, 9:21 AM

Please note that Ball State University IRB has taken the following action on IRBNet:

Submission: [96452-2] Surviving Prejudice: A Feminist Ethnography of Muslim Women Living and Studying in Middle Town, Indiana, United States
Action: Exempt
Effective Date: 10/08/2008

Additional information is available in IRBNet.

Should you have any questions you may contact Amy Boos at akboos@bsu.edu.
Thank You,
The IRBNet Support Team

www.irbnet.org