

The Intersection of Ethnic Origin and Religion: Two Middle Eastern Muslim Doctoral Students' Counternarratives in the West

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ABSTRACT

International doctoral students experience many difficulties while pursuing their degrees in the West. Since they join the program with their intersectional identities, they experience problems related to biases, stereotypes, and discrimination. Studies for international doctoral students' experiences are available in the literature, yet they mostly focus on language, supervision, and adaptation to society and culture aiming to focus on the problems all international students' experiences. Yet, a gap exists in the counternarratives of particular groups with intersectional identities. Considering the intersection of ethnic origin and religious identity, Middle Eastern Muslim students' experiences should be investigated due to the Islamophobia and xenophobia. Here, as two Middle Eastern Muslim scholars, we used counternarratives to tell our experiences through the intersection of our religious and ethnic identity while pursuing our doctoral degree in Western institutions. We concluded that airports are the sites of Islamophobia and xenophobia while higher education institutions are the camouflaged sites of Islamophobia and xenophobia.

Keywords: Middle Eastern Muslim Doctoral Students, Intersectionality, Counternarratives, Higher Education

Middle Eastern Muslim students in the West experience various difficulties while mediating their education and adapting to the community (Abdo, 2005; Bleich, 2012). Yet, these difficulties are not solely based on their ethnic origin or religion; it is due to the intersection of both. Thus, both religion and ethnic origin play an equal role in these difficulties, which can also be framed as othering (Kunsta et al., 2012). The experiences of Middle Eastern Muslims in higher education are distinctively shaped by Islamophobia and xenophobia. However, there is a scarcity of research exploring these experiences (Garned & Selod, 2015). Although some scholars are examining intersectional identities in higher education (e.g., Godley, & Loretto, 2013; Godrej, 2011; Lunthold et al., 2018; Milner IV, 2008), there remains a notable lack of in-depth examination of Middle Eastern Muslim doctoral students' experiences. As one of the fastest-growing religions in the West, their experiences are often underexamined despite the increase in Islamophobia and xenophobia.

Middle Eastern Muslim students immigrated to the West for education a while ago. In the 1960s, Middle Eastern Muslims came to the US from oil-producing countries such as Saudi Arabia thanks to changed immigration policies in the U.S. for education (Bilici, 2011). In this article, immigration refers to the process by which individuals move from one country to another for the purpose of settling temporarily or permanently. Although international students are not always classified as immigrants due to their typically temporary status, they often face similar challenges, such as navigating visa policies, adapting to a new culture, and coping with discriminatory practices (Frideres, 2002). In this context, the term “migrant” is used for this article to reflect the sense of displacement and adaptation faced by Middle Eastern Muslim doctoral students, many of whom have lived in their host countries for long periods of time, which can blur the line between student and migrant. Yet, the first immigrants considered the U.S. as a kuffar (infidel) country that they left the country after their degree (Bilici, 2011). After the 1960s, some immigrants started believing they could keep their religion in the U.S. instead of experiencing hatred and anger against themselves (Bilici, 201; Niyazov & Pluim, 2009). Further, the political atmosphere in the Middle East changed the

regimes in many countries, which caused a shift to see the U.S. as a safer place than their home country and led to more Middle Eastern Muslim immigrants in the U.S. Similarly, another Western country, the U.K., has a large Muslim population. In England, the Muslim population is 4.8% of the total population which increased from 1.55 million to 2.71 million (MCB, 2015, p. 6). Despite this growth, still, Middle Eastern Muslims' needs are hardly ever met such as 46% of the Muslim population lives in a 10% most deprived situation and only 1 in 5 Muslims work full-time jobs (Stafford & Marmot, 2002, p. 358). Their negative experiences are not limited to their socioeconomic status. They also experience othering, and it is even greater for international Middle Eastern Muslim students due to the intersection of their religious and ethnic identity.

The intersection of religion and ethnic origin plays an important role in international Middle Eastern Muslim students' lives since they continuously experience Islamophobia and xenophobia. Yet, despite being the fastest-growing religion in the West, Middle Eastern Muslim students' experiences in higher education have not been extensively investigated. In this study, we aim to highlight our experiences as two Middle Eastern Muslim doctoral students in the U.S. and U.K., which is often different than mainstream culture. Here, we engaged in telling our experiences through counternarratives both at the university and societal level through intersectionality to highlight our experiences of othering.

Theoretical Framework

This study is theoretically informed by intersectionality, a framework derived from Black feminism to illustrate how enslaved Black women's experiences differ from the enslaved Black men by broaching the intersection of different identities (e.g., social class, religion, sexual orientation, ethnic origin and more) Studying an individual's lived experiences requires significant consideration to understand how social identities interconnect in unique ways. (Bailey 2009; Cusick, 2009; Giles 2006). Bailey (2004) illustrated this interconnectedness while referencing how Anna Julia Cooper (an enslaved Black woman who earned her doctoral degree in France) had different experiences than an enslaved Black man in the same time period due to the intersection of race, gender, and social class. Cooper (1892), who first framed the intersectionality, discussed how her race, gender, and social class intersect to distinguish Black women from

Black men. The intersectional identities are the resource for knowledge production, and they should be considered together to identify the oppression that Black women experience (Copper, 1982; Crenshaw, 1989)

Oppression originates from the interconnection of social identities such as religion, social class, race, ethnic origin, gender, (dis)ability, and more. Instead of approaching these identities independently, intersectionality is needed to highlight the connection between oppression and entangled identities. Thus, intersectionality allows us to fully understand the experiences of minoritized groups. Crenshaw (1989), who coined the term, has also emphasized the interconnectedness of identities to decenter the dominant group's norms and explain the marginalized groups' experiences through intersectional identities.

Collins and Bilge (2016) defined intersectionality by emphasizing the epistemological and theoretical aspects:

Intersectionality is a way of understanding and analyzing the complexity of the world, people, and human experiences. The events and conditions of social and political life and the self can seldom be understood as shaped by one factor. They are generally shaped by many factors in diverse and mutually influencing ways (p. 2).

In this study, therefore, we have used this definition and understand that discrimination against Muslims is not only based on religion. Ethnicity plays an important role too. We focused on Middle Eastern Muslim identities to capture the nuanced counternarratives we have experienced in our doctoral studies in the West. There is a dearth of research about the intersection of religious identity with other identities, even though religion is a significant part of identity (Moore, 2009). Islamophobia, a form of othering toward Muslims, should be researched in depth to capture the intersection of Islam with race, class, gender, ethnicity, ethnic origin, and nationality (Garner & Selod, 2015). In this study, we employed intersectionality as a theoretical framework to tell our experiences who were two Middle Eastern Muslim doctoral students in the West. We focused on our religious identity (Islam) and ethnic identity (Middle Eastern) to detail the Islamophobia and xenophobia. Since the Middle East is often considered a war-torn geography, and Muslims are associated with this geography in the West, we believe that what we experience in our doctoral

program matters since our othering stems from the racialization of our Muslim identity that is often originated from Islamophobia and xenophobia.

As intersectionality guided this study, we focused on the interconnection of our identities instead of considering them as separate entities. While engaging in conversation through phone calls, we focused on narratives that are unique to Middle Eastern Muslims and emphasized the intersection of Islamophobia and xenophobia. In this sense, we believe that intersectional identities are spiral and cannot be separated from each other.

Review of Literature: International Doctoral Students' Experiences in the West

Available studies on the experiences of international doctoral students in the West often investigate students of Asian and African origin (Doyle et.al., 2018; Le & Gardner, 2010). These studies mainly highlighted how language was considered a barrier for international students whose mother tongue is different than the country they live in (Elliot et al., 2016; Bilecen, 2016). However, we have not identified any studies focusing on international students' religious identity, particularly Muslim identity. This dearth of research is prevalent for the intersection of religious and ethnic identities of Middle Eastern Muslim students too. While Middle Eastern Muslim students experience similar difficulties to other international students such as language barrier and cultural adaptation to society (Veliz & Marandi, 2023), their experiences (Elliot et al., 2016) also alter due to the interconnection of religious and ethnic identity that Western countries hardly ever meet the needs of these particular groups of students. These students not only deal with the difficulty of the doctoral process but also other challenges resulting from differences in language, culture, and more.

Bilecen (2013) highlights the significant contribution of international graduate students not just within the academic circles, but also in administrative and other key sectors of the academy. These students enrich the university's mission and vision, particularly in terms of diversity and inclusion. Defining this phenomenon as transnationalism, Bilecen (2013) also notes the advantages that international students offer to Western institutions, particularly through the unique knowledge and perspectives they bring from their own cultural backgrounds. Yet, despite their

contribution to Western institutions, international students often experience discrimination; therefore, frequently stick to their clicks and face difficulties in socializing with their Western peers (Bilecen, 2013). As Samuelowicz (1987) exemplified, Asian students and how they are perceived as incapable of critical and analytical thinking and passive. These stereotypes are developed based on their race, but still, no studies have examined how other identities intersect with race for international students (e.g., the intersection of religion and race).

On the other hand, Jindal-Snape and Igram (2013) framed the experiences of international students under three subtitles and named the *triple effect*, which disturbs their educational motivation, humiliation, and self-confidence. This three-sided effect is briefly: a) moving to a new country, b) being involved in an education system with different expectations, and c) finding themselves in an educational stage that requires their independence. However, Jindal-Snape and Igram (2013) did not address the language problem that most international students experience. Yet, in another study, Doyle et al. (2018) emphasized this issue and acknowledged that English proficiency is an ongoing problem for international students whose mother tongue is not English. Although most students are required to come to Western countries with a valid grade in the language proficiency exams (e.g., TOEFL, IELTS), still their language is considered a barrier to their education. As Doyle et al. (2018) exemplified, most international students are depressed about the feedback they receive about their papers and exams. Adding to these disturbing situations, international students also suffer from adapting to different cultures, different social environments, and their written and unwritten rules. Reflecting Middle Eastern Muslim students, what they experience in the West is more complicated than the triple effect due to the intersection of ethnic and religious identity.

While the claims stated above are transferable to all international students at different educational levels, international doctoral students' experiences can be more traumatic while they are trying to be experts in the field. Since pursuing a doctorate is a long journey that aims to train international students to learn academic English, which is not the same as colloquial English, it adds to the problems. Thus, international doctoral students have to deal with many other things, such as different religions, cultures, rules, politics, weather, social environment, education

environment, and language (Elliot et al., 2016), which is defined as educational pessimism that is temporary but still depressing (Bengtsen, 2017). All these issues complicate the doctoral education process and lead to students' inability to express themselves clearly in their new environment.

Further, international doctoral students also have problems with counseling: "Faculty supervisors were neither culturally sensitive nor supportive of international students" (Woo et. al., 2015, p. 296). As a result, they avoid bringing their identities to their doctoral programs. This ignorance often encourages assimilation, creating a homogeneous group instead of supporting diversity. Thus, international doctoral students' identities matter as a whole and create spaces for themselves in academia with their intersectional identities. McLeod (2021) concluded in a comprehensive article that international students' interpersonal communication and psychological challenges outweigh physical challenges. Students cope with such challenges through factors such as religious practices, family, and exercise. Although there are support centers for international doctoral students, these support centers are often insufficient (Le & Gardner, 2010).

Obviously, international doctoral students face more than one challenge, and the literature generally surrounds Asian and African international doctoral students. Based on the literature, these experiences can be summarized as a language barrier (Elliot et al., 2016; Doyle, 2018; Canagarajah, 2011; Pennycook, 2013), supervising (Bahtilla & Oben, 2022; Pinto & e Sá, 2020; Zackariasson et al., 2020), cultural differences (Tarry, 2011; Manathunga, 2014; Grant & Manathunga, 2011; Khoshnevis, 2017), the adaptation brought by these differences (Jindal-Snape & Ingram, 2013; Le & Garner, 2010; Zhou et al., 2008; Zhou et al., 2010), and the limited assistance of the institutes to the students (Elliot et al., 2016; Leask & Carroll, 2011). Khoshnevis (2017) expands these difficulties by interviewing 15 Middle Eastern students from Middle East (from Iran), and all the participants tell how U.S. airports caused them many problems while entering to the country. Waters, J., & Brooks, R. (2011) examined the challenges faced by international students and concluded similar findings with previous studies which are cultural adjustment, academic adjustments and social integration. Further, they discussed the opportunities for 'necessary growth' that when these challenges are present, international students should improve themselves not only academically but also socially to adapt the culture. On the other hand, the Phelps (2016)

highlighted how international doctoral students experience identity formation in globalizing academic fields. It emphasized the tension between the cultural backgrounds in which doctoral students are raised and their academic expectations in a global context and addressed the emotional and social difficulties they face in these new environments they created for themselves. Furthermore, this study underlines that these conflicts also affect the academic success of international students.

Despite these studies about international students, particularly international doctoral students, still little is known about international Middle Eastern and Muslim students. While some general problems apply to them, they also have unique experiences due to their religion and ethnic origin. As two international Middle Eastern Muslim scholars, we aim to address our experiences to highlight how our intersectional identities form our journey in Western institutions. We approach this study from our emic perspective and acknowledge that international Middle Eastern Muslim doctoral students are not monist. Thus, we do not aim to generalize our experiences for all international Middle Eastern Muslim doctoral students; instead, we want to initiate and maintain the discussion about our experiences in the intersection of religion and ethnic origin as doctoral students in Western institutions.

Methodology

Counternarratives have been extensively used to explore the narratives of historically marginalized groups with different experiences than master dominant discourse (Lunthold, Maagaart, & Piekut, 2018). Counternarratives are also used in this study to examine how Middle Eastern Muslim identity is historically marginalized. To do so, we engaged in telling our counternarratives that are different than master narratives. Master narratives are the realities told by mainstream (norm) culture, yet other realities can exist when counternarratives are available (Bamberg & Andrews, 2004). As this paper focuses on analyzing and understanding intersections of religious and ethnic identity, building a counternarrative is highly important. We believe that various realities exist and can be exemplified through counternarratives. In this sense, positioning matters in counternarratives: "The discussion of counternarratives is ultimately a consideration of multiple layers of positioning" (Bamberg &

Andrews, 2004, p. 1). For example, Researcher X, a Middle Eastern Muslim man from Turkey who lived in the U.S. for eight years to earn his master's and doctoral degrees, experienced various forms of marginalization, yet his counternarratives are rarely seen and told. Similarly, Researcher Y, a Middle Eastern Muslim woman living in the U.K., is currently working on her doctoral degree experienced various forms of discrimination. Thus, we approach counternarratives from our intersectional identities as Middle Eastern Muslims who experience Islamophobia and xenophobia. We are aware that Christian privilege and White supremacy still lead the master narratives (Schlosser, 2003). Therefore, this study is needed to capture the counternarratives of Middle Eastern Muslims' experiences, as we believe that our intersectional identity as two Middle Eastern Muslims opens new doors to contribute to the ongoing conversation about international students' experiences.

Data

In this study, our data is derived from our doctoral student's notebook, where we noted down our othering experiences to share. The term “doctoral student notebook” refers to the personal journals in which doctoral researchers record their academic progress and personal reflections, as well as the events and developments they experience in different or the same countries, throughout their doctoral journey. These notebooks help as qualitative data sources for doctoral students, providing insights into their daily experiences. For example, doctoral students, whether local or international, are used to document their academic challenges, encounters with prejudices, and experiences of the process of the PhD journey (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Our notebooks include the date, the place, people get involved, incidents, what happened, what we felt, and our analytical memos that highlight how it is different than master narratives and how it is related to our Middle Eastern Muslim identity. Here, we both agree that we will not focus on our othering experiences stemming from only our ethnic identity or religious identity. We particularly focused on the intersections of ethnic and religious identity since we approached this study from an intersectional lens. In these notebooks, researcher X has identified 10 notes related to his Middle Eastern Muslim identity, while researcher Y identified 14. “In order to analyze the data coming from our doctoral student notebook, we had several phone conversations to share these experiences noted down. In the phone calls that lasted around 30 minutes (a total of 15), we transparently shared our experiences related to our Middle Eastern

Muslim identity. In these phone calls, we recorded our conversation and referenced our doctoral student notebooks we kept separately during our doctoral program. During these calls, we switch the interviewer and interviewee roles based on the dynamic of the conversation.

Data collection process

As is stated above there are two different data we have. One is doctoral students' notebook and other is phone conversations. We kept our doctoral students' notebook separately and we did not know each other. A common friend introduced us. At this time X had recently finished his PhD and Y was still working on her dissertation. When we have met, we directly shared our ideas about our othering experiences as Middle Eastern Muslim students. Since we both are focusing on Islam and Muslim identity in different disciplines, we believed that we could collaborate on a study that focus on our Middle Eastern Muslim identity. X shared his doctoral student notebook and Y also told that she kept one. We decided to focus on these notebooks to examine our own experiences to better understand the social context that discriminate international Middle Eastern Muslim students. These notebooks have personal notes that we kept since the day they we left our home country to describe our doctoral process. This notebook contributed to both this study and the phone conversation process as a reflection of the doctoral program. *Phone conversations.* In addition to the notebooks, we conducted 15 telephone interviews of approximately 30 minutes to discuss and reflect upon the processes we recorded in the notebooks. The conversations were semi-structured. This allowed us to have more space and focus on the themes stated in the notebook. The roles of the interviewer and the interviewee changed reciprocally according to the flow of the conversation, which facilitated mutual connection and sharing. The telephone conversations were recorded with the consent of both parties.

Analysis

To analyze the data, we referenced our doctoral notebooks and the therapeutic phone conversations. After the entire data collection process was completed, both the notebooks and the telephone conversations were transcribed. In cases where the telephone conversations addressed different points than the notes, they were classified separately. The transcriptions were divided into thematic classes. Once transcriptions were completed on both sides, we compared data across telephone interviews, notebooks, and

transcriptions to ensure consistency and depth. We cross-referenced multiple themes throughout the process to reflect the details in our experiences. We focused on decontextualized excerpts that reflect the pre-existing meanings, beliefs, and practices (Bamberg, 2004). Here, we did not only position ourselves as the knowers but also as learners. That is, even though Researcher X and Researcher Y have shared intersectional identities (Middle Eastern Muslim identity), their other identities (e.g., gender) still make these counternarratives unique to them. As a result, instead of speculating on the data, we analyzed them as interactive, cultural, and social practices (Bamberg, 2004). We also focused on "inconsistencies, contradictions, and ambiguities" (Bamberg, 2004, p. 365). The inconsistencies, contradictions, and ambiguities are provocative in that they lead us to counternarratives different from master narratives. Further, we discussed how our experiences in the notebook reflect our intersectional identities to avoid the additive approach to identities (e.g., Middle Eastern Muslim \neq Middle Eastern and Muslim), and we also discussed the other ways of interpreting the data. As a result, we focused on our experiences based on our intersectional identity of Middle Eastern Muslim identity and warrant it through our data in our phone calls. While the discriminatory acts we encounter due to our Middle Eastern Muslim identity can be extensively exemplified, here, we decided to focus on two significant counternarratives in the data based on our Middle Eastern Muslim identity. The former is about discrimination in the societal context, and the latter is about the school context. Before delving into the findings, for the trustworthiness of the study we provided our positionality (Hyvärinen, Hatavara & Rautajoki, 2021).

Researchers' Positionality

Researcher X was born in the southeast part of Turkey, close to Antakya (Biblical name Antioch), in a religious community that utilizes religion as a part of their culture. While growing up, he also considered Western countries as infidel that he could not practice his religion freely because of Islamophobia. However, after living in the U.S., he noticed that Islamophobia is present, yet some allies volunteer to fight against Islamophobia. As Kurd, he did not witness many Turk allies fighting for Kurds' rights. Therefore, he was surprised with that experience. However, the othering was still prevalent in the U.S even though it was not particularly for his Kurdish identity. He did not have any clue about xenophobia until he moved to the U.S. Now, he is well-informed about how his intersectional

identities, particularly Middle Eastern Muslim identity, becomes a way of othering in the U.S. Researcher X also experienced many difficulties due to his intersectional Middle Eastern Muslim man identity in his doctoral program which are often different than mainstream culture. In this study, Researcher X brought his emic perspective with first-hand experiences as a Middle Eastern Muslim man to this study.

Researcher Y was born in the east of Turkey in Van. Researcher Y focuses on Islamic Studies both in Turkey and the United Kingdom and still trying to complete her doctoral education on Islamic studies. Othering is not new to her. While in Turkey, as a woman wearing hijab, she experienced discrimination due to the intersection of her religion and ethnic origin during her high school and undergraduate education, it was forbidden to wear hijab in official places, which changed in 2011. While continuing her higher education in the UK, she also experienced Islamophobia and xenophobia during her PhD journey. Moreover, when she moved to the UK, she expected a more welcoming environment since the U.K. positioned itself as a country of democracy and freedom. However, after living there for a while, she realized that intersectional discrimination is a hidden yet dominant discourse in U.K. institutions. As a Middle Eastern Muslim woman, researcher Y conveys her experiences in this research and, similar to researcher X, brings her emic perspective to this study.

Findings

The findings of this study are represented under two categories.

Airports as Islamophobia and Xenophobia Sites: Based on the data set, we both found inconsistent, contradictory, and ambiguous experiences at the societal level and here we represented our experiences in the airports. It is quite crucial to make a connection between airports and immigrant Middle Eastern Muslim doctoral students, to have better insight in upcoming narratives. Airports, as places of transit and border control, represent an important symbolic and physical space for international students. For Middle Eastern Muslim students in particular, the airport often also represents a place where their identity is scrutinized and where they are likely to encounter suspicion (Zolberg, 2006). Due to the connection of international Middle Eastern Muslim students' experiences international airports and their other prior knowledge—both about the nature of the

airport and what students hear from other people—such journeys sometimes create a cognitive load as reminders of otherness (Khoshnevis, 2017)

The personal experiences we will present in next paragraphs—such as airport encounters—are not isolated incidents in themselves but reflect a systemic problem and a deeper structural dynamic related to our intersectional identity and discrimination. Such experiences are consistent with Crenshaw's (1989) concept of the unique disadvantages of overlapping identities (intersectionality), such as ethnicity, religion, and gender. In other words, the intersection of racial and religious discrimination is consistent with the theory of intersectionality.

Researcher X: When I watched the 2015 movie *Flight Plan*, directed by Robert Schwentke, the main character in the plane blames an Arab for kidnapping her child, and some people in the plane support her. At the end, the Arab man says, "Do you have other questions for me?" Then continues, "Now, you should find another Arab to blame." I found this excerpt unrealistic because when I was younger, I always thought that these types of discriminations would never happen in the West because of their overemphasis on freedom and democracy. The Arab character in the movie has been blamed due to the intersection of his ethnic and religious identity since there are many representations to Middle Eastern Muslim men as terrorists and that is a longstanding deficit ideology in the West (Younis, 2022). Not surprisingly, my experiences as a Middle Eastern man in the airports parallels with this movie, Middle Eastern Muslim men's intersectional identity often cause discrimination in the airports and flights to a Western country. I had very similar experiences due to the intersection of my religious and ethnic identity, a Middle Eastern Muslim man, in other words, a potential terrorist for some Westerners.

In 2013, I visited my family in Turkey during the break (also called Christmas break). During this 15-day break, I had a great time with my family since I had not seen them for one year. Like many international students, that break was an excellent opportunity for me to spend time with family. However, my return flight was full of troubles. I left Turkey from Hatay airport (A southern city in Turkey, and 1 hour from Syria). I landed in Istanbul, and from Istanbul, I transferred to my other flight to Hartsfield-Jackson airport in Atlanta/ Georgia. After landing in Atlanta, I was pulled from the airport security line and waited six hours in the security room

without any explanation. Although I had a valid visa and was a Ph.D. student, I stayed in the security room without any clarifications. In the first 2 hours, I was with another Middle Eastern Muslim man from Iran (another potential terrorist in the U.S.) who was married to a U.S. citizen. Later, I spent four hours alone in the security room without any explanation. Yet, I knew that some people were watching me through the security cameras. While sitting alone in the room, I kept thinking about how Western countries conceptualized me, a Middle Eastern Muslim man, as a threat to their society. When my Middle Eastern Muslim identity intersects with my gender, that would be enough for security guards to pull me up from the line and treat me like a potential terrorist. In this context, for them, my intersectional identity was something to be scared of. Airports, in fact, gave me more trouble than my doctoral program. When I reflect upon these experiences, I notice that passing from the airport security was somewhat harder than passing the doctoral proposal exam. Being a Middle Eastern Muslim man is a potential danger for some U.S. residents since Middle Eastern Muslim man identity is often associated with terrorism. While Middle Eastern men with different religions, or Muslims with different ethnic origins probably would not experience these type otherings, Middle Eastern Muslim men are often treated as potential terrorists in Western airports. This discourse is widespread in the Western community since mass media often represent Middle Eastern Muslim men as terrorists (Younis, 2022); these negative discriminative experiences in Western airports are particularly unique to Middle Eastern Muslim men due to the stereotypes Westerners developed based on their intersectional identities.

Researcher Y: The first time I flew to the UK was towards the end of January 2016, when I took off from Istanbul. As a visible Middle Eastern Muslim woman traveling alone, I could realize some people's gaze on me. When I arrived in the UK, a man sitting beside me suddenly asked, "*Where is your husband?*" After this question, I kindly replied that I was single. He maintained the conversation and continued: "*Then how are you going anywhere alone?*" I replied, "*Why should not I have traveled alone?*" He said, "*Muslim women cannot go anywhere alone.*" I expressed to him that this rule was made many years ago to protect women from danger, but in the modern age, Muslim women can travel alone. While many Muslims experience stereotypical questions related to their religion, through the intersection of ethnic origin, mostly Middle Eastern Muslim women are questioned due to their solo travel. As a Middle Eastern Muslim woman,

this question was very unusual to me, and I had never thought that Westerners had an idea that Middle Eastern Muslim women could not travel alone. Later on, when I started to engage in conversations with Muslim women around the world, they also shared their perspectives that mostly Middle Eastern Muslim women experience these types of questions related to traveling. For example, a Black Muslim woman friend shared her concerns regarding this question, and she stated that she never experienced this in the airports. Similarly, my White British woman colleague who converted to Islam has never experienced similar questions even though she is also a visible Muslim woman. I kept grappling with the idea of how my Middle Eastern Muslim identity is perceived differently than other Muslim women or other Middle Easterners. The man in the airport probably did not have bad intentions, but it surely illustrates the longstanding problematic representation of Middle Eastern Muslim women who are often portrayed as submissive, lack of power and agency, and cannot travel alone. I have never been questioned about traveling alone before, but it surely stems from some biases. In the past traveling alone was dangerous for everyone because they could get lost and be attacked by thieves, in the Middle East (Rahman, 1982). This situation also continued after Islam was introduced to society. Traveling began to settle in the lives of the prophet Muhammad (Peace Be Upon Him), and traveling was a part of the lives of the prophet and his followers to spread and introduce Islam and to see the beauties in the world created by Allah (God). Unlike the premodern ages, traveling was, in fact, considered a sacred act. Yet, with different interpretations of some Islamic rituals and the effect of patriarchy in some Middle Eastern Muslim communities, it was widely believed that Middle Eastern Muslim women should travel with a man from their family to minimize the problems they may encounter during the journey (Al-Ghazali, 2016; A'la Mawdudi, 2013). While this has been persistent for Middle Eastern Muslim women, Muslim women of other ethnic origins do not experience this, and Middle Eastern women from other religions also do not experience this. This experience is one of the many I had as a Middle Eastern Muslim woman in the Western airports due to the intersection of my ethnic and religious identity.

Higher Education Institutions as Camouflaged Islamophobia and Xenophobia Sites: While analyzing the data, we also noticed that our schooling experiences have similarities that are different than master narratives. In higher education institutions, our experiences were not clearly visible. The difficulties faced by Middle Eastern Muslim students are not

an individual problem but rather a reflection of deeper institutional Islamophobia and xenophobia in higher educations. Research has emphasized that these micro and macro difficulties are not limited to the academic field but also continue with implicit prejudices coming from administrative perspective. For example, Shain (2013) emphasized that the lack of adequate administrative and institutional support causes and reinforces the marginalization of Muslim students. Furthermore, Nasir and Al-Amin (2006) and Bayrakli (2023) acknowledged that the feeling of marginalization in students is intensified because it requires them to cope with microaggressions inside and outside the school brought about by visible religious symbols such as headscarves. They were hidden, in other words, camouflaged. Here, we present our schooling experiences below.

Researcher X: I was often not approached as a potential terrorist in the higher education context, yet I felt that some people were skeptical about me and my Middle Eastern Muslim identity. While doing my master's at the University of A in the U.S., I experienced many forms of discrimination due to my Middle Eastern Muslim identity. However, at B University in the U.S., my experiences were more positive. This difference might be due to the urban context in B University. The Christian privilege invisibly embodied both universities that most people are not aware of since it was the norm, However, as a Middle Eastern Muslim man, I have noticed the examples of Christian privilege such as my religion and religious festivals were ignored, or people were silent about them.

Like many Muslims in the U.S., I was unable to access the prayer rooms in higher education as most buildings were not designed to meet the needs of Muslim students (Jilani, 2016). However, here, I represent my counternarratives in the intersection of my Middle Eastern and Muslim identity. In one of the required courses in my master's program, we were required to read *Black Ant and Buddhist, Thinking Critically and Teaching Differently in the Primary Grades* by Mary Cowhey written in 2001. While enjoying this book and the discussions around the topics covered in it, I was put on the spot in one chapter, which was about terrorism, as illustrated in the excerpt below.

In early October 2001, Yolanda one of my first graders read a very simple story she'd written. It said, "It was on TV. Bad men knocked the buildings down." Quickly the other students began to concur that

"bad guys" had done it. Yes, said others, "bad guys with beards." "And towels," some added. Then more agreed, adding that all bad guys had beards. Others joined, saying that all men with beards are bad guys. I interrupted and asked about specific bearded fathers in the class and asked if they were bad guys. I asked why the police didn't arrest all men with beards. A student answered, "'Cause all the bad guys would cut them off to look like good guys, and then we'd all be mixed up."

Clearly, these children had been exposed to many images of Osama bin Laden attached to the term Islamic terrorist. Not surprisingly, they were working on the stereotype that all bearded Muslim men with turbans were terrorists (Cowhey, 2001, p.280).

This excerpt stresses the Middle Eastern Muslim men's intersectional identity and how they were traditionally associated with terrorism. While discussing this excerpt in the classroom, as a Middle Eastern Muslim man, I was surely on the spot. In the class, the instructor who represented herself as liberal and/or progressive turned to me and asked, "*Why do Middle Eastern Muslim men engage in terrorist acts?*" and that was the moment I was ashamed. Then, she continued, "*You do not look like a terrorist to me. I do not think you will bomb anywhere here.*" That was one of the most embarrassing moments in my life; as the only international student and a person of color in the classroom, I could not find any answers. I knew that after that class, most of my classmates would be suspicious of me because I was directly pointed in the classroom, and my Middle Eastern Muslim identity is connected to terrorism. While the professor might have an intention to help critical thinking, she, in fact, hurt me and discriminated against me by emphasizing ongoing biases about Middle Eastern Muslim men. The intersection of my ethnic and religious identity combined with my gender. I encountered this negative experience, and these types of experiences are unique to Middle Eastern Muslim men. Thus, my counternarratives are based on inconsistent, contradictory, and ambiguous experiences that neither Muslims nor Middle Easterners will experience. Only Middle Eastern Muslim men will experience this due to the intersection of ethnic and religious identity, and I had this same as many Middle Eastern Muslim men in higher education.

Researcher Y: As a visible Middle Eastern Muslim woman, I have been studying in the U.K. for around eight years. Since I arrived in the UK, I tried to ignore the disadvantages of being a visible Muslim from the Middle East, such as slurs I hear from some people on campus due to my hijab. I experienced discrimination based on the intersection of my ethnic and religious identity. In 2018, I started a Ph.D. at one of the prestigious universities in the UK. I was proud of myself for my admission to the doctoral program. Additionally, I was confident, eager, and highly motivated. Over time, I had to change my supervisor and department. Islamic Studies is my main field of study, and my research interest is around this topic. My supervisor constantly reminded me that my research would not be appreciated in this institution through feedback such as 'This place is not suitable for Islamic Studies' ironically everybody in the institution supports academic freedom. Based on this censorship, I had to change my research interest, and I included limited references to Islam. Further, I had to eliminate my Middle Eastern Muslim identity, my experiences, and positionality since they were not valuable to highlight for some scholars in the program. While grappling with the idea of why my experiences as a Middle Eastern Muslim woman whose research interest surrounds Islam are not valid, I continuously engaged in informal conversations with Muslims and Middle Easterners across the campus. The visible Muslim women from diverse ethnic origins did not have this censorship, and Middle Eastern women from different religious backgrounds also did not have this experience. This has been a remarking point for me to embrace my Middle Eastern Muslim identity.

In February 2020, I had an exam as part of the Ph.D. process. At the end of the review, panel members informed me that I failed the exam, and my education was terminated. Further, the examiner added, *'You can appeal against this decision of the panel member.'* He stared at my appearance at that time and looked at my hijab. *'You can say that they made a prejudice against me, but you cannot prove it/you have to prove it.'* Until then, as a doctoral student, I kept thinking that I was not good enough to pass the exam; however, the examiners' perspectives towards a Middle Eastern Muslim woman interested in studying Islam were the real problem. After this exam, I contacted Muslim and Middle Eastern women to gain more insights from them. I affirmed that it is unique to Middle Eastern visible Muslim women. This particular negative experience, amongst many of them, caused me to have severe depression, and I lost my self-confidence.

Moreover, I started to think that Western institutions were not suitable for me and other Middle Eastern Muslim women. I had to find another university and a new supervisor. Once, I shared my experiences in my old institution with my new supervisor, she responded: *'If you were a White woman, even if you failed the exam, they could find a way for you to improve academically and intellectually instead of removing you from the department and university.'* I acknowledge that being Muslim itself brings many discriminations. I add that being a visible Middle Eastern Muslim woman is another phase of discrimination due to the intersection of religion and ethnic origin. This particular experience made me realize how being a Muslim woman is different than being a Middle Eastern Muslim woman. Now, I am in a new institution working on my PhD but this time I had the opportunity to embrace my Middle Eastern Muslim identity, yet I am constantly reminded by some Muslim scholars who are not from Middle East to be careful while representing my Middle Eastern Muslim identity.

Discussion

In this study, we have illustrated the intersection of religion and ethnic origin to emphasize how Middle Eastern Muslim identity is othered in Western institutions. We told our stories through counternarratives. We used counternarratives to illustrate our experiences, which do not align with master narratives. Researcher X, a Middle Eastern Muslim man, and Researcher Y, a Middle Eastern Muslim woman, exemplified our experiences with intersectionality to highlight counternarratives both in the societal and school contexts. Paralleling with the literature that focuses on the othering of international doctoral students, we highlighted this othering here. While literature extensively focuses on the language skills of international doctoral students (Elliot et al., 2016; Bilecen, 2016), we added a new perspective to the othering that comes from the intersection of religion and ethnic origin. The intersection of identities could cause a clash in higher education for non-Western students. Further, we also experienced difficulties related to supervising (Bahtilla & Oben, 2022), adapting to the new culture (Jindal-Snape & Ingram, 2013), and the lack of assistance (Leask & Carroll, 2011) like many international scholars, yet here, we shared our othering experiences originated from the intersection of the religious and ethnic identity. The majority of the Middle Eastern Muslim population living in the U.S. and the U.K. experience discrimination, and what we have experienced can contribute to the intersectional theory.

As observed from both researchers' counternarratives, being a Middle Eastern Muslim brings a form of othering different from what all Muslims experience or what all Middle Easterners experience. As illustrated through our experiences, the counternarratives derived from our ethnic and religious identities have a great influence on exclusion from society and school context. In other words, Middle Eastern Muslim students experience both Islamophobia and xenophobia due to their intersectional identities. In addition to language barriers, cultural differences, and adaptation, we illustrated that Middle Eastern Muslim students also experience Islamophobia and xenophobia which is different than other international doctoral students or mainstream culture.

To address the othering experiences of Middle Eastern Muslim doctoral students and provide better support, universities can implement a variety of strategies that not only target academic success but also enhance well-being and effective supervision. Administrative staff and faculty working with international students can receive cultural competency training to eliminate and develop a deeper understanding of situations that target students' religious and cultural identities, such as microaggressions or experiences of discrimination. In addition, mentoring and peer networks can be established to help Middle Eastern Muslim students develop a sense of belonging to the institutions and supported within the academic community. Universities can develop faith-based accommodations by expanding places of worship on religious days and holidays, offering halal dining options, and offering flexible exam scheduling.

In addition, it can be underlined that supervisors should adopt culturally sensitive approaches in their guidance, and how students' identities play an important role in the academic level. Again, when we look at it from the perspective of supervision, being an international student already brings many responsibilities. When multiple identities intersect, the responsibilities turn into othering. Therefore, mentors should develop a sense of empathy for Middle Eastern Muslim students. In this way, the supervisory can go beyond a process of academic success. Mentors can expand it by helping to improve the well-being of Middle Eastern Muslim students such as by recognizing their traditions, or holidays. They can even pick them up from the airports to show the support after the Islamophobic and xenophobic experiences they will possibly encounter in the airports.

This will not only help Middle Eastern Muslim students' wellbeing, but also increase academic success since they will develop a better sense of belonging. Finally, institutions can provide more services particularly to international Middle Eastern Muslim students (and other international students with intersectional identities) by hiring culturally competent staff members to promote inclusive practices.

Conclusion

As two Middle Eastern Muslims, we told our counter-narratives to make our voices heard. Considering our negative experiences in the societal and school contexts, these experiences are not limited to us. We believe that many Middle Eastern Muslim students in the West experience similar types of othering due to the intersection of their religion and ethnic origin. Thus, a radical change is needed at both societal and university levels to accommodate Middle Eastern Muslim students.

Our counternarratives illustrate that Middle Eastern Muslim students experience many difficulties in both society and schools. Their experiences might be more visible on a societal level such as a direct observation of Islamophobia and xenophobia can be seen, and we have framed airports as Islamophobia and xenophobia sites. Further, these experiences can be hidden as we provide our experiences at university and referenced higher institutions as camouflaged sites of Islamophobia and xenophobia. As there is a dearth of research on the experiences of Middle Eastern Muslim students in the West, we suggest that more scholars should share their counternarratives to contribute to this ongoing discourse. Further, we suggest that Western institutions develop an action plan to better accommodate Middle Eastern Muslim students. We suggest that universities should offer a peaceful and inclusive environment for Middle Eastern Muslims, such as having a space for daily prayer.

The supervisors should be transparent with their Middle Eastern students to discuss some of their negative experiences and support them emotionally to dismantle the master narratives. As the supervisors provide safe spaces for their Middle Eastern Muslim students to share their experiences, they will feel more comfortable, and their counternarratives will be heard. This will help them to feel belonging to society and institutions. Further, the supervisors should be more informed about Islam

and the Middle East since the limited knowledge may cause tension between advisors and advisees.

Lastly, institutions should ask Middle Eastern Muslim students to share their first experiences with people in the school and society. Sharing these experiences voluntarily will help the mainstream culture to be more informed about Middle Eastern Muslim students' experiences. To address their needs, the policymakers in institutions should engage with Middle Eastern Muslim students in conversations related to their experiences.

In conclusion, in this study, we, as two Middle Eastern Muslim scholars in Western universities, shared our counternarratives and illustrated how the intersection of religion and ethnic origin adds to our othering since we experience both Islamophobia and xenophobia simultaneously. We believe that our counternarratives expand the current conversation about international doctoral students' experiences in a Western context and enlighten how Middle Eastern Muslim students' experiences encounter similar issues same as other international doctoral students but also differ based on the intersectional identities.

The author(s) declare(s) that there is no conflict of interest.

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