# The Construction of Islamophobia in the West

Sociology Senior Thesis
Mitali Shukla
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"I believe in religion, but a religion that includes political, economic, and social action designed to eliminate some of these things and make a paradise here on earth while we're waiting for the other."

—Malcolm X

# Abstract

Islamophobia is rampant in different areas across the globe: the Christ Church shooting in New Zealand, the internment camps in China detaining Muslims, and Trump's Muslim ban are a few of the many acts of Islamophobia that have plagued society. My research consists of an in-depth exploration of how Islamophobia has been constructed in the West. The specific research questions I seek to answer are how societies exhibit traits of Islamophobia, how such ideology is enforced, and how to challenge misconceptions of Islam. The research design for this study included participant observation, in-depth interviews, and survey research. Through these methods, I found that not only is Islam intersectional, but that there are different levels of religiosity. I also found that Islamophobia is primarily rooted in fear and Islam is not a threat to democracy, America, or other world religions. In summation, my research sets a precedent for how to challenge misconceptions of Islam by understanding the ideology behind it.

# Introduction

- 1.8 billion Muslims globally
- Islamophobia is a global issue
- Trump administration
- Sociology of Religion
- Hate crimes against Muslims on the rise (Sardar 2019)

Research questions:

- How societies exhibit traits of Islamophobia
- How such ideology is enforced
- How to challenge misconceptions regarding Islam within the context of racial and ethnic politcs
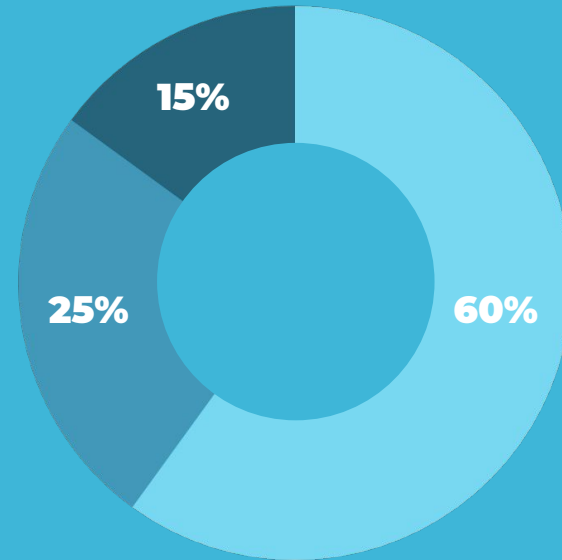
# Methods

**Participant Observation** ○

Hijab & Kufi Day, Persian New Year, New Zealand Vigil

**Quantitative Analysis** ○

Survey Data from Association of Religion Data Archives

**In-Depth Interviews** ○

Dr. Joseph Baker, Essraa Nawar

15%

60%

25%

# Literature Review

- Runnymede Report (*Islamophobia: A Challenge for Us All* (1997))
  - Defines Islam as…
    - Monolithic & Static
    - Separate or other
    - Inferior
    - The enemy
    - Manipulative
    - Racial discrimination against Muslims is justified
    - Western critique of Islam is a one-way street
    - anti-Muslim discourse is natural
- *Islamophobia and the Rise of the Alt-Right* (Sardar 2019)
- *Islamophobia and the Politics of Representation of Islam in Korea* (Koo 2018)
- *On Rocks and Hard Places* (Mugabo 2016)

# Data Analysis

Coding Themes

- Intersectionality
- Womanhood
- Culture
- Islam/Islamophobia

- Family Structure
- Religiosity
- Fear
- Threat

# Data Analysis

- ## Intersectionality
  - The patterns of divorce, sexual minorities, and the ranging differences in the strictness in their faith.

- ## Womanhood
  - (NAME) doesn't feel that women are respected and treated equally in the Muslim community; (NAME) feels the same way. Just like how women are repressed sexually and emotionally in extremist Christian faith: she is made to be the housewife, the provider, and the child bearer.

- ## Culture
  - However, to my Muslim friends, it is a staple of the culture. (NAME) calls hookah "shisha" and mentioned that his mom would take him to hookah lounges in Egypt.

- ## Islam/Islamophobia
  - "Muslims are not very different from us at all, and Islamophobia has controlled the narrative to make people think otherwise."

# Data Analysis (continued)

- **Family Structures**
  - "Yeah, they've been divorced and remarried, like, four times," she relayed to me that in some Muslim countries, in her case Jordan, they see it as necessary to be married to condone sexual relations. So, every time that her parents wanted to have sex, they had to get remarried.

- **Religiosity**
  - "My Muslim friends are knowledgeable about the Quran and the teachings of Islam, have distanced themselves from it." (Participant Observation)

- **Fear**
  - We definitely saw an increase in concern about immigrants after 9/11 and then we see some specific instances of fear of Muslims specifically.

- **Threat**
  - "Putting all Muslims in the same box and stereotyping them endangers them, and it's important for Americans to understand that Muslims are not a threat to democracy, or to their faith, or their safety at all."

# Dr. Joseph Baker Interview

**In your opinion, why do you think many Americans have a fear of immigration or multiculturalism?**

*B: I think its cultural threats and status threat. There's a lot of rhetoric that goes along with it kind of this idea that the true America or the "true Americans" are losing out. There's sort of this sense of losing power. I see it as almost a kind of response to the growth of multiculturalism and also the diversification of America demographically. I kind of see it as a response to this perceived threat. And then inside of those questions we would ask about immigrants, a few different kind of threats that people can perceive so they might perceive it as an economic threat or they might perceive it as a sort of cultural or moral threat. So a threat can be seen in different ways. But I think it's really kind of this sense of a perception of losing power and sort of looking for a scapegoat for that.*

# Esraa Nawar Interview

**How would you describe the fear of multiculturalism in America and how it has affected you?**

*N: It's the fear of the unknown. I had the same fear moving from Egypt to the United States. It was 2002 and it was a year after 9/11. I was 21, I had just gotten married and was moving to this country after all the backlash that had happened after that. My own parents were equally afraid - sometimes equally concerned - about the "other": just the way everybody right now with the changing demographics in this country are also afraid of the changing demographics and the changing culture. So I think it's mainly the fear of the unknown and also sometimes it's the use of identity politics.*

# Chapman Survey of American Fears, Wave 3 (2016)

- N = 1511
- Mean Age: 47.06

**91) How afraid are you of the following events? Whites no longer being the majority in the United States**

|  | Total | % |
|---|---|---|
| Refused | 32 | 2.1 |
| Very Afraid | 110 | 7.3 |
| Afraid | 154 | 10.2 |
| Slightly Afraid | 266 | 17.6 |
| Not Afraid | 948 | 62.8 |

**94) How afraid are you of the following events? Terrorist attack**

|  | Total | % |
|---|---|---|
| Refused | 34 | 2.3 |
| Very Afraid | 271 | 17.9 |
| Afraid | 335 | 22.2 |
| Slightly Afraid | 526 | 34.8 |
| Not Afraid | 344 | 22.8 |

**95) Please indicate your level of agreement with the following: I think it is ok for Muslims to receive extra screening at the airport**

|  | Total | % |
|---|---|---|
| Refused | 38 | 2.5 |
| Strongly Agree | 283 | 18.7 |
| Agree | 604 | 40 |
| Disagree | 441 | 29.2 |
| Strongly Disagree | 145 | 9.6 |

**228) Age - Four Categories**

|  | Total | % |
|---|---|---|
| 18-29 | 322 | 21.3 |
| 30-44 | 380 | 25.1 |
| 45-59 | 402 | 26.6 |
| 60+ | 407 | 26.9 |

**230) Education (categorical)**

|  | Total | % |
|---|---|---|
| Less than high school | 185 | 12.2 |
| High school | 447 | 29.6 |
| Some college | 428 | 28.3 |
| Bachelor's degree or higher | 451 | 29.8 |

**231) Race/Ethnicity**

|  | Total | % |
|---|---|---|
| White, non-Hispanic | 981 | 64.9 |
| Black, non-Hispanic | 177 | 11.7 |
| Other, non-Hispanic | 101 | 6.7 |
| Hispanic | 233 | 15.4 |
| 2+ races, non-Hispanic | 19 | 1.3 |

**232) Gender**

|  | Total | % |
|---|---|---|
| Male | 728 | 48.2 |
| Female | 783 | 51.8 |

# Muslim American Survey (2011)

- N = 1033

**136) Since the terrorist attacks on September 11th, 2001, has it become more difficult to be a Muslim in the U.S., or hasn't it changed very much?**

|  | % |
|---|---|
| Has become more difficult to be a Muslim in the U.S. since 9/11 | 54.6 |
| Hasn't changed very much | 37.1 |
| Has become easier to be a Muslim in the U.S. | 1.7 |
| Moved to U.S. after 9/11 | 2.5 |
| Don't Know/Refused | 4.1 |

**137) How many of your close friends are Muslims?**

|  | % |
|---|---|
| All of them | 7.2 |
| Most of them | 41.3 |
| Some of them | 36.2 |
| Hardly any of them | 13.6 |
| None of them | 1.4 |
| Don't know/Refused | 0.3 |

**138) Do you think that coverage of Islam and Muslims by American news organizations is generally fair or unfair?**

|  | % |
|---|---|
| Fair | 30.3 |
| Unfair | 54.9 |
| Depends | 10 |
| Don't know/Refused | 4.7 |

**189) Race/ethnicity**

| 189) Race/ethnicity | % |
|---|---|
| White non-Hispanic | 29.8 |
| Black non-Hispanic | 22.8 |
| Asian non-Hispanic | 20.8 |
| Hispanic | 6.4 |
| Other non-Hispanic | 18.3 |
| Don't know/Refused | 1.9 |

| 215) Age | % |
|---|---|
| 18-29 | 36 |
| 30-39 | 23.4 |
| 40-54 | 28.3 |
| 55+ | 12.3 |

| 216) Sex | % |
|---|---|
| Male | 51.1 |
| Female | 48.9 |

| 217) Education | % |
|---|---|
| High school or less | 53.8 |
| Some college | 19.2 |
| College graduate | 15.5 |
| Post-graduate training after college | 11.5 |

| 218) Politics | % |
|---|---|
| Conservative | 27.4 |
| Moderate | 42.7 |
| Liberal | 29.9 |

# ISPU American Muslim Poll (2018)

- N = 2481

**54) Most Muslims living in the United States are partially responsible for acts of violence carried out by other Muslims**

|  | Total | % |
|---|---|---|
| Strongly disagree | 1664 | 67.1 |
| Somewhat disagree | 225 | 9.1 |
| Neither agree or disagree | 185 | 7.5 |
| Somewhat agree | 173 | 7 |
| Strongly agree | 130 | 5.2 |
| Blank | 4 | 0.2 |
| Don't know/Refused | 100 | 4 |

**55) Most Muslims in the United States are committed to the wellbeing of America**

|  | Total | % |
|---|---|---|
| Strongly disagree | 200 | 8.1 |
| Somewhat disagree | 169 | 6.8 |
| Neither agree or disagree | 366 | 14.8 |
| Somewhat agree | 586 | 23.6 |
| Strongly agree | 1043 | 42.1 |
| Blank | 3 | 0.1 |
| Don't know/Refused | 113 | 4.6 |

**56) Most Muslims living in the United States are victims of discrimination because of their faith**

|  | Total | % |
|---|---|---|
| Strongly disagree | 251 | 10.1 |
| Somewhat disagree | 173 | 7 |
| Neither agree or disagree | 311 | 12.5 |
| Somewhat agree | 744 | 30 |
| Strongly agree | 900 | 36.3 |
| Blank | 2 | 0.1 |
| Don't know/Refused | 99 | 4 |

**144) Age**

|  | Total | % |
|---|---|---|
| 18-24 | 307 | 12.8 |
| 25-34 | 531 | 22.2 |
| 35-44 | 428 | 17.9 |
| 45-54 | 334 | 13.9 |
| 55-64 | 399 | 16.6 |
| 65+ | 398 | 16.6 |
| Missing | 91 | |

**143) Education**

|  | Total | % |
|---|---|---|
| High school graduate or less | 667 | 27 |
| Some college | 705 | 28.5 |
| Graduated college | 610 | 24.7 |
| Graduate school or more | 491 | 19.9 |
| Missing | 8 | |

**101) Race**

|  | Total | % |
|---|---|---|
| White | 1407 | 56.7 |
| Black/African American | 423 | 17 |
| Asian/Chinese/Japanese | 195 | 7.9 |
| Native American/American Indian/Alaska Native | 31 | 1.2 |
| Native Hawaiian / Pacific Islander | 6 | 0.2 |
| Mixed | 137 | 5.5 |
| Arab | 123 | 5 |
| Other | 111 | 4.5 |
| Refused | 48 | 1.9 |

**14) Sex**

|  | Total | % |
|---|---|---|
| Male | 1274 | 51.4 |
| Female | 1206 | 48.6 |
| Blank | 1 | 0 |

# Discussion

- Islam is…
  - Diverse & Intersectional
- Islamophobia is rooted in fear
- Levels of religiosity
- Islam is not a threat…
  - To Democracy
  - To Christianity
  - To Americans
  - The list goes on

# Conclusion

*Limitations*
- Participant Observation Cut short due to COVID–19
- Nawar had no experience of Islamophobia

*Implications*
- Confirmed Islamophobic bias, disproved characteristics of Islamophobia
- Identity Politics versus real change
- Diversity in Islam / Religion & Politics

Racial & Ethnic Politics

Media Representation

Dog-whistle politics & fear mongering

Identity Politics

Media Literacy

Cultural Attitudes

Diaspora Studies

World Religions

Alt-Right