



# Identity Development among Muslim Indonesian-American College Students: A Phenomenological Study

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## Abstract

This study was conducted to understand Muslim Indonesian-American college students' experiences of identity development from the perspectives of the reconceptualized model of multiple dimensions of identity (RMMDI) proposed by Abes, Jones, and McEwen (2007). Through purposeful sampling, six participants were selected for participation in this study. This study was qualitative in nature by using the phenomenological approach to capture the essence of how Muslim Indonesian-American college students experienced, processed, and interpreted their identity development in college. Questionnaire and interviews were utilized for data collection. The collected data were analyzed using the analysis procedures proposed by Moustakas (1994) including *epoche*, phenomenological reduction, imaginative variation, and the synthesis of structural/textural descriptions. The study revealed that the salience of four identity dimensions for Muslim Indonesian-American students including religion, culture, social class, and gender. These identity dimensions were found to be impacted by varied contextual factors such as family, the 9/11, peer support, and college support.

## Keywords

Identity development, Indonesian, Muslim-Americans, phenomenology

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## Introduction

In the late 1930s, the American Council on Education instructed the entire higher education institutions in the United States to enlist individual and professional development as an essential goal to be achieved for their educational practices (Evans, Forney, & Guido, 1998). Due to its significance, an understanding on student development in post-secondary education has been widely used as a basis for policy-making in college. Student development greatly varies in terms of its focuses and one among them is identity development. For decades, research on identity development with different groups of students has grown rapidly and addressed a variety of identity dimensions including, race, gender, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, and religion (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010).

There are different models of identity development which have been revealed to explain a wide range of college student groups from diverse backgrounds including not only majority, such as white students (Helms, 1990), but also minority groups, such as women (Josselson, 1973, 1996), black or color (Cross, 1991, 1995; Helms, 1990, 1995; Horse, 2001; Kim, 1981, 2011), multiracial (Kerwin & Ponterotto, 1994; Poston, 1990; Root, 1990), and LGBT (Cass, 1984; D'Augelli, 1994; McCam & Fassinger, 1996) students. The presence of these models provides a conceptual and empirical framework for better understanding underrepresented students in college. Moreover, the models of identity development can serve as a guide to institutions, administrators, staff, faculty, and other agents in college to provide necessary supports and assistances with the aim of enhancing student success of marginalized groups in terms of academic, personal, and professional attainment (Jones & McEwen, 2000).

The population of Muslim-American people is estimated to be more than 2.7 million with the annual growth rate of about 6% and they constitute around 1% of the total population in the United States (Pew Research Center, 2011). Based on the shared aspects of interest, beliefs, national origin, as well as culture and tradition, immigrants from Middle East and non-Arabic speaking Asian countries, including Indonesia, mostly represent the largest Muslim-American communities (Pipes & Duran, 2002). An increase of the Muslim population in the United States results a growing number of Muslim-American young adults entering post-secondary education. However, they are frequently misunderstood and have become increasingly scrutinized as well as prejudices since the horrible event of 9/11 and other following terrorist attacks acted by Muslim persons (Britto & Amer, 2007; Cole & Ahmadi, 2003; Peek, 2005; Sirin, Bikmen, Mir, Fine, Zaal, & Katsiaficas, 2008; Williams & Vashi, 2007). An insufficient understanding of this group of students has hindered institutions and their agents from identifying their needs and providing necessary supports for enhancing their experiences and development during in college (Britto & Amer, 2007; Cole & Ahmadi, 2003; Peek, 2005; Sirin, Bikmen, Mir, Fine, Zaal, & Katsiaficas, 2008; Williams & Vashi, 2007).

Since the number of Muslim-American college students keeps growing, there has been an increasing interest of practitioners and scholars to seek a better understanding of identity development of Muslim-American college students (Britto & Amer, 2007). However, most of existing research studies on Muslim-American students in college focused more on Middle Eastern descent students (e.g., Britto & Amer, 2007; Cole & Ahmadi, 2003) and a limited number of identity dimensions (e.g., Barazangi, 1989; Bartkowski & Read 2003;

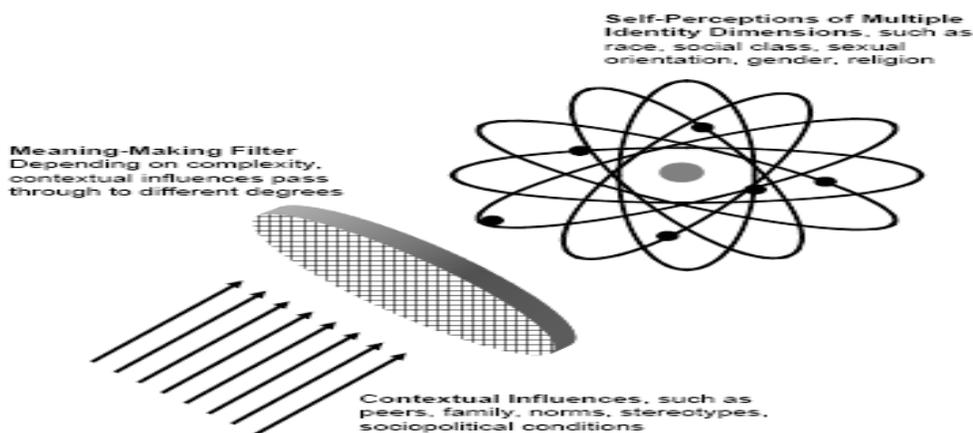


Haddad, 2004; Hermansen, 2000; Khan, 2000; Marshall & Read, 2003; Peek, 2005; Read, 2003). It is hardly to find research which examines more comprehensive dimensions of identity and involves Muslim student groups with non-Middle Eastern descents, particularly Indonesia. This subgroup of Muslim-American students is frequently marginalized and even has been subject to exclusion from the largest group to which they belong (Sirin et al., 2008; Smith, 1999). Due to the gap in literature and the necessity to enhance their development during in college, this study utilizing the phenomenological approach aimed to explore Muslim Indonesian-American college students' experiences and their identity formation. According to Jones and McEwen (2000), the varied salience of distinct identity dimensions is mostly determined by contextual factors which intensely shape the identity formation of an individual. Therefore, this study deployed the Reconceptualized Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity (RMMDI) proposed by Abes, Jones, and McEwen (2007) as a lens in understanding experiences and identity formation shared by Muslim Indonesian-American college students. The following research questions guided this study: (1) What are the lived experiences of Muslim Indonesian-American college students regarding their identity development in college? and (2) What are salient identities to Muslim Indonesian-American college students?

### Theoretical Framework

Building upon the previously developed model (Jones & McEwen, 2002), Abes, Jones, and McEwen (2007) proposed the Reconceptualized Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity (RMMDI). They asserted that the previous model limitedly focuses on identity component without the inclusion of cognitive and interpersonal components which are needed to gain comprehensive understanding of identity development and the relationship of multiple identities. To address this drawback, they improved the model by incorporating the process of meaning making as an individual capability of filtering contextual influences that shape the formation of his or her personal and social identity. The newer model is later known as RMMDI in Figure 1.

**Figure 1.** *Reconceptualized model of multiple dimensions of identity (RMMDI)*





Abes et al. (2007) asserted that the salience of identity dimensions heavily relies on contextual factors including family, historical background, cultural traditions, norms, and sociopolitical conditions. Hence, to have a better understanding of the identity formation of any individual or group students in college, it should include personal attributes and traits, socio-cultural conditions, family backgrounds, life planning, current experiences, and career decisions (Jones & McEwen, 2000). The existing literature revealed that identity development of Muslim -American college students is influenced by their social and political conditions, hostility, experiences of discrimination, friends, family, and community (Britto & Amer, 2007; Cole & Ahmadi, 2003; Peek, 2005; Sirin et al., 2008; Williams & Vashi, 2007). Given the intersecting identity dimensions and their environment, understanding how Muslim Indonesian-American college students experience their identity formation is best achieved by inclusion of contextual factors.

## **Literature Review**

### ***Muslim-Americans and identity development***

Muslim Americans in general fall into three different categories. The first category is Americans who convert into Islam. This group is largely constituted by African-Americans and remnants of the Nation of Islam, a political and religious movement founded in the United States in 1930 by Wallace D. Fard Muhammad with its key figures such as Elijah Muhammad and Malcolm X (Smith, 1990). The second category is immigrants who came to the United States seeking better lives and opportunity as well as taking benefit from the more open immigration regulation enacted in 1965 (Smith, 1990). The last category is immigrants' children and many of them are young adults going to high schools and college (Pipes & Duran, 2002; Smith, 1999). They are generally considered as first generation of Muslim-Americans who grew up or were born in the United States. This study focused more on the last group, Muslim Indonesian-American young adults who ever went or are currently in college.

It estimates that there are around seven million Muslim-Americans or constitute about 1% of the total population in the United States (Pew Research Center, 2011). This number is as large as the Hispanic population few decades ago. With the annual growth of about 6%, Muslim-Americans are considered a fast growing population compared to less than 1% for the annual growth of the entire population in the United States (Pew Research Center, 2011). Only one third of Muslim-Americans were born in the United States. From those who were born in other countries, more than 20% are of Arab decent, less than 10% from Iran, 5% from European countries, less than 9% from Pakistan, and about 10% from other Asian countries including Indonesia (Pew Research Center, 2011). In terms of ethnicity, Muslim-Americans in the United States are very diverse coming from South Asian (such as Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, and Iran), South East Asian (such as Indonesia and Malaysia), and Arabic-speaking countries (such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, and Morocco) (Pipes & Duran, 2002). Using religion as a basis for unity, Muslim-Americans are often referred themselves as Umma that literally means a community and this term owns sociopolitical implications reflecting an expectation and ultimate goal to be united under the religion of Islam for the greater good (Smith, 1999).



Although Muslim-American have not attracted yet major intention from researchers of college student development, there have been a small number of studies with the aim of exploring the factors that influence the identity development of Muslim-Americans young adults. Some examined the role of religion (Barazangi, 1989; Haddad, 2000, 2004; Mukminin, Fridiyanto, & Hadiyanto, 2013). Peek, 2005), others focused on the impact of politics (Khan, 2000; Marshall & Read 2003), and several studied the role of gender (Bartkowski & Read 2003; Haddad, 2006, 2007; Hermansen, 2000; Read 2003; Read & Bartkowski, 2000). However, none of the existing studies attempting to address the multiple dimensions of identity development with the focus on Muslim Indonesian-American young adults. Under the framework of RMMDI (Abes et al., 2007), the salience of each identity dimension is significantly determined by certain contextual factors which have greater influence on an individual's identity development. Hence, it is crucial to explore the dynamics between multiple dimensions of identity and contextual influences in understanding Muslim Indonesian-American college students' experiences of identity development.

### ***Religion and culture***

Religion has been an important identity for Muslim-American youth and a point of interest due to the increased declaration of religious sense of self mostly impacted by family, peers, organizational membership, and the sense of alienation particularly after the event of 9/11 (Hermansen, 2003; Peek, 2005). Muslim-Americans are more likely to turn to religion as their effort to address hostility issues and create a more familiar and comfortable environment within a least known society (Kurien, 2001; Kwon, 2000; Rayaprol, 1997; Smith, 1999). As a result of its significance to their lives in the United States, religion, in terms of identity dimension, has been considered more salient for Muslim Americans than it was in their origins (Peek, 2005). It encouraged the younger generation of Muslim Americans to be more committed to following and practicing Islam than their parents. This was often reflected from their dress, religious rituals, and participation in organizations established to strengthen a sense of self and group unity (Abdo, 2005; Hermansen, 2000; Peek, 2005; Pipes & Duran, 2002; Sirin et al., 2008; Smith, 1999).

The identity of culture actually reflects the intersection and interconnection of other identity dimensions including ethnicity, class, nationality, and religion (Berry, Phinney, Sam, & Vedder, 2006). According to Fine (1995), culture is constituted by four core elements: beliefs, values, symbols, and norms. The massification of culture within a community could be accomplished through the involvement of community members such as parents, peers, and neighbors; institutions such as schools and worship houses; and media such as movies, games, and social media (Sirin et al., 2008). In terms of rules and standards, Islam and its associated cultures are different from or even contradict the western cultures. Muslim-Americans have to face the western values and customs which are often perceived as a threat to their way of life and faith (Pipes & Duran, 2002). It concerns many Muslim-Americans in preserving their family honor and traditional culture and more importantly keeping their faith. Within the complexity of the assimilation between seemingly contrasting cultures, Islam and western cultures, Muslim-American youth have to continuously experience negotiation and integration of these two different value systems in their day to day lives during in college (Sirin et al., 2008).



### ***Social class and gender***

The identity of social class for Muslim-Americans intersects with culture, particularly as it is seen from the perspective of contextual influences including social and cultural setting, current experiences, family backgrounds, and career and life plans (Abes et al., 2007). More than half of Muslim-Americans in the United States have attended college with about one-fourths are degree holders and this number is much higher than 18% of the total population in the United States (Gates & Cooke, 2011). Even, about 10% of Muslim-Americans hold post graduate degrees compared to less than 8% of the total population in the United States (Gates & Cooke, 2011). More than 40% of Muslim-Americans are employed in full-time job and earn \$50,000 or higher (Pew Research Center, 2011). Muslim-Americans have been perceived as a vibrant community falling into the middle and upper class, receiving higher incomes, and holding exceptionally postsecondary education degrees compared to the general United States population.

The identity of gender is interconnected to religion and its associated culture. More than 45% of Muslim-Americans are female and this percentage is slightly lower than the general population in the United States, about 50% (Gates & Cooke, 2011). The role of gender in Islam and its most cultures is well defined but might become a subject to misunderstanding and misinterpretation by either within or outside the community of Muslim-Americans. For instance, many Muslims believe that a certain separation between male and female individuals who have no family relations. This is necessary since if they are allowed to be together, they would fall into an evil temptation to be committed what are considered sinful actions which would take away or exclude them from the circle of Islam and negatively influence society in general (Pipes & Duran, 2002). In Islam, females are allowed to work but they are not obliged to provide for their family since this is considered to be the primary duty of males (Smith, 1999). Also, to express their sincere obedience to the God, many Muslim-American females prefer to dress in a conservative way and often wear a long veil namely hijab.

### **Methodology**

The phenomenological approach was employed in the study in order to capture the essence of how Muslim Indonesian-American college students experienced, processed, and interpreted their identity development in college. Phenomenological research aims to "explore and search for the essential, invariant structure (essence) or the central underlining meaning of the experiences that contain both the outward appearance and inward consciousness based on the memories, images and meaning" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 52) of the participants. Because the lived experience of the individual with a certain phenomenon is a key element in this study, a phenomenological approach is relevant for the current study on how Muslim Indonesian-American students experienced and perceived identity development in college within the lens of the multiple dimensions of identity model.



## ***Participants***

Since the purpose of this study was to gain in-depth understanding of identity development of Muslim Indonesian-American college students, it was sufficient to recruit a small number of participants (Creswell, 2013). Through purposeful sampling, six participants were selected to take part in this study. All of the selected participants met the criteria assigned in this study for participant selection including: were born or mostly grew up in the United States, had both parents who were Indonesian immigrants, were traditional students (age between 18 and 24), completed a Bachelor's degree in no more than five years, and graduated from higher education institutions in the United States. In the process of participant recruitment, I utilized mostly social media, Facebook, and Whatsapp. This yielded six participants, two males and four females, ranging from 24 to 28 years old. One participant identified herself as coming from upper-middle income family while the rest from middle income family. All six participants attended public four-year institutions in the Midwest of the United States. To keep their confidentiality, this study used pseudonym names suggested by the participants: Asma, Zahra, Zaid, Ali, Hasma, and Ayu.

## ***Data collection and analysis***

Data of this study was gathered utilizing two primary methods including questionnaire and interview. Questionnaire listed questions about demographic information as well as their parents' status and salient identity dimensions. It was used as supplementary data to interviews. Each participant took part in an individual and semi-structured interview which lasted about 60-75 minutes. These are some examples of the main questions in the interview: (a) tell me your experiences when you were in college, (b) how were you perceived by others in college?, (c) what challenges did you experience in college?, (d) what did being a Muslim mean to you?, and (e) what did being an American to you when you were in college? The participants were asked additional questions to explore issues raised by them during the interviews. Due to the distance issues, the participants and I as a researcher could not make in-person interviews. Therefore, interviews were carried out through Skype and were audiotaped and then transcribed. The collected data were analyzed by using the data analysis process proposed by Moustakas (1994). This process included *epoche*, phenomenological reduction, imaginative variation, and the synthesis of structural-textural descriptions needed to describe thoroughly the participants' experiences with formative assessment practices. In the first step, *epoche*, I temporarily suspended my existing biases, preconceptions, assumptions, and beliefs about the issue under study to better understand the lived experiences of Muslim Indonesian-American college students. This step is critical in a phenomenological inquiry to gain the pure essence of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). The next step was phenomenological reduction as the process to rid the phenomenon under study of its surface appearances and then reveal the essence or deep understanding about it (Moustakas, 1994). In this step, I began with careful and repetitive readings of all interview transcripts. Then, I highlighted the participants' responses, eliminated the redundant parts, and developed a cluster or category of meanings from the responses. Next, it was imaginative variation where a researcher utilized imagination and approached the phenomenon from divergent angles to unveil possible meanings of narratives (Moustakas,



1994). I followed up the previous step with development of core themes by understanding the transcribed interviews from different perspectives. Then, these themes were validated by checking the transcripts. If the identified themes were compatible with the participants' responses and experiences, they would remain. However, as they did not fit the participants' words, they would be excluded. Then, the last step was the synthesis of structural-textural descriptions to capture the essence of the phenomenon under study (Moustakas, 1994). In this step, I took the developed and validated themes and then provided relevant excerpts from the transcripts as well as the description of what was experience of the research participants. For the description, I wrote a paragraph or some of descriptive passages with the emphasis on shared experiences revealed among the research participants.

### ***Trustworthiness***

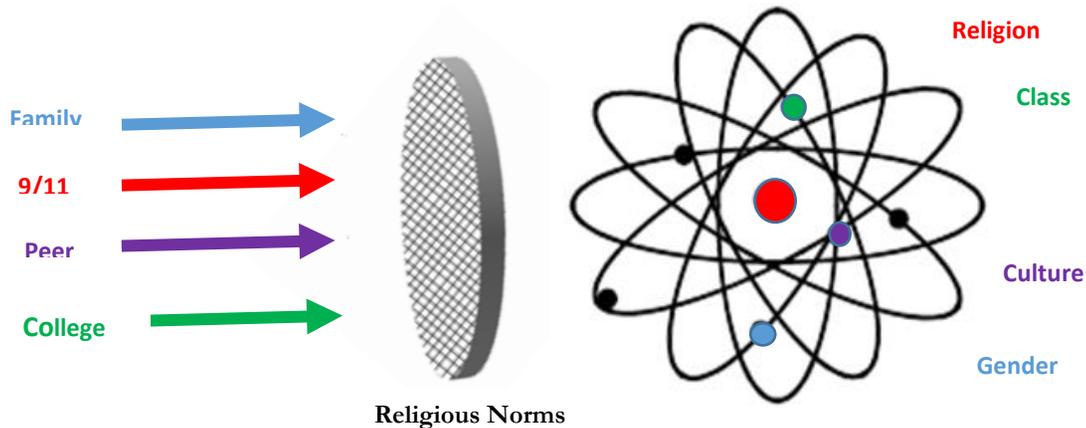
In qualitative inquiry, trustworthiness is commonly determined by the degree of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility refers to a degree of correspondence between the findings and the reality. I employed different methods to enhance credibility of the findings. First, triangulation of multiple data sources, interview, and data across multiple participants were employed to cross-check and confirm emerging themes. Second, member-checks were conducted with all six participants by sending them summaries of the themes that emerged from the analysis and invited to provide feedback. Another aspect needed to establish trustworthiness is transferability. It refers to a degree of applicability of findings in settings outside of the phenomenon being investigated. Transferability of the findings in this study was accomplished through thick description allowing the participant to speak in detail about particular experience (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Being provided a complete description of the participants' experiences, readers can determine if the findings are transferrable to other situations.

### **Findings and Discussion**

This study used Abes et al.'s (2007) framework of the RMMDI that provided a useful lens for exploring how Muslim Indonesian-American college students experienced and perceived identity development. This study identified several dimensions of identity which were salient to the participants including religiosity, social class, culture, and gender. Additionally, it revealed that family, the impact of 9/11, peer support, and institutional support were contextual factors which contributed to the participants' identity development. Figure 2 shows how, under the framework of RMMDI, the identified identity dimensions intertwined with contextual influences in the process of Muslim Indonesian-American students' identity development.



Figure 2. Identity development of Muslim Indonesian-American college students



### *Dimensions of identity*

**Religiosity**, for all involved participants, religion was more than about ritual practices. Islam is a way of life that ultimately affected whole aspects of their lives, including values, relationship with others, daily activities, life and career plans, and also college success. Asma said, “Believing in Allah and everything from Him also following His Messenger provides a way of life for me. Islam gives me a guide how I should live my life in its every aspect. For me, being a Muslim is my way to make my life much better. It is not just a religion, in everyday dealings. I always feel connected to the religion when doing anything including what I did during in college when I was an undergraduate.” Zaid shared similar thought, “Islam is the center point and anything else must rotate around it. Everything I do in my life, such as education, my family, my personal life should keep rotating around Islam.” Even Zahra tried to always use relevant verse(s) from the Qur’an, a Muslim holy book, to verify what she did was in line with the God’s commands. Zahra said,

“Since the second year of my undergraduate, I learned the Qur’an more seriously. Not only how to read it but also how to understand it accordingly. I just want to make sure that everything I do is actually what Allah wants me to do. That’s why I need to better understand the Qur’an and so I can verify all of what I do.”

Religion has become the most salient dimension of identity for most Muslim-American young adults who either grew up or were born in the United States with immigrant parents from Muslim-majority countries (Hermansen, 2000; Peek, 2005; Pipes & Duran, 2002). They are often found practicing Islam in a more conservative way than their parents or other individuals of older generation (Abdo, 2005). There have been an increasing number of Muslim-Americans who restrict themselves to Halal food and beverages (Pipes & Duran, 2002). More Muslim-American youth wear veils and identify themselves with Islam’s conservative principles, and even they need to argue with their parents as they desire to fully practice and embrace Islam (Abdo, 2005). According to Pipes and Duran (2002), more than one-third of



Muslim immigrants became more likely to be religious after they moved into the United States. One third of female Muslim-Americans does not wear make-up in public and avoid shaking hands with males who are not relatives for religious reasons. Peek (2005) asserted that as individuals, typically children or teenagers, perceive their religion as a part of their personal attributes by the fact that they were born into or raised in it, they are not likely to be engaged in the process of self-reflection and internalization of being a Muslim. When they turn to be older and more mature, they become more thoughtful and aware of what they believe and value. As a result, they begin to be more open to idea of questioning their inherited belief and eventually they view it as an essential part or even core dimension of their identity. Moreover, as they experience or see hostility against the community of Muslims, they identify themselves more closely with being Muslims than before. This also what had led the participants in particular to learn the Qur'an and Islamic literature more deeply as well as align themselves with Islam and express it through their physical appearance, talk, and behavior.

**Culture**, most participants seemingly identified more with the culture of origin and the country, Indonesia, that their parents came from rather than the American culture. Ali shared, "the American culture would be the least important aspect of my identities. Muslim and Indonesian are at the top. Although I was not born and never lived in Indonesia, I really like the culture and people." In addition to cultural elements, some participants commented about social and political situations or events in Indonesia and how these facilitated the stronger connection between them and their culture of origin. For instance, Ayu said, "In 2014 after the presidential election, I was like horey! I am really proud of it." This sense of pride in their culture and heritage of Indonesia was commonly shared among all participants, particularly those who were heavily exposed at home to cultural elements of Indonesia including food, language, music, and even frequent visits to Indonesia. However, they clearly declared that they were a part of the United States. "I definitely love my country (the United States) where I currently live in. We go out and enjoy the fireworks on July 4<sup>th</sup> to celebrate the independence day of this country. It is beautiful thing to see and I am proud to be an Indonesian, a Muslim and an American at once," Ali said. The definition of the label of Muslim-American is complicated since there are many ways for someone to express it. This socially constructed identity was a result of the tragic terror of 9/11. This event caused Islam to be a more salient dimension of identity for Muslims in the United States and their standing in the general society was increasingly doubted and questioned (Sirin et al., 2008). Consequently, Americans practicing the Islamic faith have utilized the label of Muslim American in addition to their nationality of origin, such as from an Indonesian American to be a Muslim Indonesian-American, (Sirin et al., 2008) as a coping mechanism often used by marginalized groups in the United States such as Asian-Americans, Jewish-Americans, and African-Americans (Grewal, 2009). Over time, the label of Muslim-American has turned to be a collective identity referring to a group of Americans, typically immigrants, who obeyed the religion of Islam and had similar experiences as the United States citizens.

Muslim-American young adults are often found anxious about integrating or balancing their original and American cultures within the United States where they live in (Sirin et al., 2008) and therefore the participants continuously negotiates their dual cultural identities, Indonesian and American. However, the participants reflected Muslim-American young adults in general who had capacity to create integrated and parallel identities as well as to be engaged and involved not only with their ethnic and religious communities but also with the mainstream



society of the United States (Peek, 2005; Sirin et al., 2008). Muslim Indonesian-American young adults are responding to the liberal and open culture, particularly compared to the more conservative environment of origin but Islam always comes first. It is in line with the fact that although almost half of Muslim-Americans identify themselves as Muslim first, they do not have any conflict between becoming a Muslim and at the same time living in the modern way in the United States (Pew Research Center, 2011). Therefore, Muslim-Americans have integrated to the mainstream society more easily compared to other minority groups in the United States (Pipes & Duran, 2002).

**Social class**, participants shared similar experiences and thoughts that having a good job was their primary reason and goal to attend college. Zaid said, “If you are Muslim, a minority group like us, you have to attend college and then get degree. So, you can get a job with high salary. And actually, that’s why I went to college.” Ali shared that he was not interested in social sciences since it would not generate sufficient earnings,

“If you are studying social sciences, oh man, other people would comment ‘you are a person of color and you are studying social sciences?’ What are you doing? That’s why instead of studying social sciences, I took a program of computer science like Ayah (Dad).”

While Hasma noted,

“I went to college and took Medicine. When in high school, I wanted to study something like science or finance because they are big things. While my parents always want me to be a doctor or an engineer, prestigious jobs, I guess. And this is it, I am a doctor now. I think my parents realize what kind of opportunity they wanted to give their children by moving here. So, they should take advantage of it.”

Different from typical Muslim immigrants in European countries mostly living in lower income communities, Muslim-Americans represent a vibrant community with their higher socioeconomic status (Pew Research Center, 2011). Although Europe is close to many Muslim majority countries, it is not really appealing to wealthy and skillful immigrants. Meanwhile, the United States could attract wealthier and more educated Muslim immigrants and their success to achieve American dream was primarily driven by high societal and family expectations as well as largely influenced by Americans’ openness and tolerance towards Muslims until the 9/11 horrible attacks (Pipes & Duran, 2002). As a result of the high pressure and expectations from the community and families, Muslim-American young adults tend to prefer high paying careers such as a doctor and an engineer and hence, once combined, these two fields account for more than 30% of the community of Muslim-Americans (Pipes & Duran, 2002). However, recent social and political situations, especially under President Donald Trump’s administration, have made changes in the environment for Muslims in the United States including Muslim Indonesian-American young adults who have to build a more pronounced identity because of mostly the current Islam related issues such the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), terror attacks, and travel ban that drew more media and public attention on Islam and the community of Muslims in the United States (Saleem & Ramasubramanian, 2017). Therefore, Muslim-Americans in general and Muslim Indonesian-Americans in particular have to



understand who they are in the environment with different culture form theirs and becoming increasingly unreceptive towards their presence.

**Gender**, the salience of identity dimensions, such as gender, relies on the extent to which an individual interacts and becomes exposed to these (Jones & McEwen, 2000). In this study, gender was a more salient identity dimension for females than males. It is in line with what females in general experience that they have very high salience of gender identity compared to their male counterparts since they live in a conceptually male dominated world (Jones & McEwen, 2000). The high salience of gender for the female participants could be reflected from their preference of dress. Hasma shared,

“Being a female in our community, Muslims, gives me a much stronger voice. I think people really want to hear voice from the female. Being a female and a Muslim also wearing Hijab (a veil), I would be more likely to be heard and people would respect my opinion and pay attention to what I think and say.”

Whether they covered their heads or not, all female participants talked about the issues of dress as an essential aspect that would define their identity. Muslim-American students in college, particularly those wearing the Hijab, are often found experiencing prejudice and alienation by their class or college mates, faculty, and staff whose negative views are driven by their misconception perceiving a female student with the Hijab as submissive, oppressed, marginalized, and limited to express their thoughts and feelings (Cole & Ahmadi, 2003). Although some Muslim male students probably have similar experiences, there is a greater likelihood that Muslim female students are to be subject to hostility since they can be easily identified as Muslims from their appearance. It became the reason for some female participants to be reluctant of covering their heads when firstly entering college. Zahra shared her experience that she preferred not the Hijab to cover her head in the first weeks of entering college. However, she later decided to wear it once she received more courage and realized that wearing the Hijab could strengthen her identity as a female and a Muslim as well as provide a platform to impact her community and the society in general. She said,

“I was very happy for finally making decision on wearing the Hijab since I can show to others that I am a Muslim and female who has freedom to wear it and still have a life like others such as going to college and actively involving with my community. I can still do all these while wearing the Hijab. Also, I can still achieve anything I want without having to show my head and hair. I found many women spend more times to enhance their beauty. They focus more on their beauty than their knowledge or behavior. So, I believe Hijab makes me and my voice much stronger.”

The contact between Muslim male and female students was another issue discussed by the participants. Ayu said,

“A lot of Muslim females, of course me too, when I was in college often complained that as Muslim males walked passing the sisters (Muslim females), they did not say anything. We know the male and he knows we were all Muslims but he did not say Salam to us. However, when we left, he was talking to a non-Muslim female student. “



The double standards practiced by Muslim male students to their female counterparts were due to the misunderstanding that the rule to avoid intense eye and physical contacts between males and females merely applied to Muslims. It was reflected from what Zaid shared,

“We (Muslim males and females) are not as free as with each other like non-Muslims who would be with their opposite gender friends. It is certainly because of Islamic principles. We do not want to get close just to prevent ourselves from committing any sinful act.”

The separation rule comes from the cultural and historical traditions across Muslim communities that males and females, especially teenagers and adults, are not allowed to closely mingle with one another to avoid them from falling into evil temptation and then being involved in sinful relations outside of marriage (Smith, 1999). However, Muslims, especially females challenge the hypocrisy performed mostly by males who can comfortably interact with non-Muslim females but tend to be shy and keep Muslim females at a distance (Smith, 1999).

### *Contextual factors*

*Family*, for most participants in this study, family was found as a major contextual factor in the identity development of Muslim Indonesian-American students. Zahra recalled her experience with her parents,

“I was raised in a very strict family. At that time, I was not allowed to listen to music but Islamic songs or Quran recitation and have pictures of actors or actresses on my room’s walls. However, I still listened to RHCP (Red Hot Chili Peppers) without my parents finding out. But overall, I realize that they were strict for my own good.”

Muslim parents in the United States share similar concerns of raising their children within the western culture and values which either partly or mostly contradict and even challenge their way of life and faith, Islam (Pipes & Duran, 2002). They worry about preserving their family honor and traditions and are afraid of leaving their culture and faith. Therefore, many Muslim families put more emphasis on religiosity and Islamic lesson as well as values when raising their children and sometimes they seem to be overly strict when doing so (Pipes & Duran, 2002). The participants also reported that their families impacted their identity development in terms of their degree of conservatism in expressing their faith. Ali shared that his conservative family caused him to be conservative as well. He said, “My family is very religious and have high conservatism in practicing Islam. So, having grown up within a conservative family, I became conservative too.” On the contrary, Ayu was raised within a more secular Muslim family and it impacted her identity development. She shared,

“I found my parents were not really strict and conservative. Although my mother was wearing the Hijab, she never pushed me to wear it. However, she gave me courage when I decided to cover my head by the Hijab. My parents must have had impact on who I am now.”



According to Abdo (2005), Muslim-American young adults who grew up in somewhat conservative and strict environments are more likely to be conservative individuals and those with less conservative or more secular families seem to reflect their families' impact on them as well. In addition to values and morals, families, mostly parents, provide a source of motivation for their children's success and even they are not physically present (Haddad, 2004).

**The 9/11**, the participants were children as 9/11 happened. After that horrible terror, all participants experienced kinds of bullying and stereotyping in their very young and vulnerable age. It might have made them to question and even challenge their identity as well as discourage them from identifying themselves as Muslims. Asma shared her experience of being a victim of bullying after the 9/11,

“It was a great time as I was little. I was very very happy. I used to celebrate Ramdhan with family and relatives. Then, in 2001, that thing (the 9/11) happened and it caused everyone or many people in this country to hate us, Muslims. So, I began to keep distant from it a bit. Moreover, some I met in college said to me ‘you and your people cannot even read. Oh no, I guess you can read very well because terrorists have to read instructions to assemble and blow a bomb. It was really bad.”

Some students reported that they had similar experiences but these, in turn, made them stronger and they expressed their gratitude for the non-Muslims' support and protection to the Muslim community in the United States. Zahra said,

“We are currently in a time when Islam is the new black. I feel like I am being crushed right now. It hurts me a lot as a Muslim that they are dehumanizing and insulting my faith. However, in the same time, it made me much stronger and prouder of being a Muslim. Absolutely, the support from our non-Muslim communities is really valuable and made me feel that I am not only a Muslim but also an American and so I can confidently declare I am a Muslim-American.”

These participants' experiences indicated that the event of 9/11 and its aftermath have had a major influence on their identity development. Since the 9/11 and its aftermath, Muslim-Americans, including Muslim Indonesian-American students, have become subject to increased prejudice, stereotyping, and hostility (Britto & Amer, 2007; Cole & Ahmadi, 2003; Peek, 2005; Sirin et al., 2008). Clearly, bullying and discrimination have a great impact on, in addition to identity development, Muslim Indonesian-American students' anxiety when attending a new environment in college. According to Connell and Farrington (2000), students who have experienced bullying and discrimination tend to have low self-esteem and lack self-confidence and assertiveness. Bullied and discriminated students are also often found suffering from any personality problem and facing difficulty in trusting others. They become more cautious and careful with what they state and what they act (Connell & Farrington, 2000).

**Peer support**, most of the participants reported the tremendous influence of their friends' supports through the organization of MSA (Muslim Student Association) on their lives and experiences in college as Muslim Indonesian-American students. Zaid shared his friends' impact on his process of integrating into college, “The organization, MSA, and its members



provided me a sense of belonging. Without the organization and friends there, my experience in college would have been worse. It turned to be my social outlet.” Moreover, the MSA was found to help the participants enhance their social skills. Hasma shared her experience, “In the first time I came to college, I was very shy and quite. After getting involved in the MSA and making friends with its members, I became increasingly friendly and open. I realized that I was not very social at that time. However, my involvement in the MSA had helped me a lot become more social.” The MSA, also, provided the participants with an environment which enabled them to remain on the Islamic path as well as refrain from any restricted behaviors. Ali described how having lack of the support from peers and an organization such as the MSA has put him off the right path. He said,

“Once I was involved in the MSA and kept contact with friends there, I became more religious. But it was only for a while. Then, I slowly left that environment and started doing what typical American students do. Later, I regretted my leave and turned back to my Muslim friends and tried to get involved again in the MSA. It was difficult to keep up with staying on the Islamic path without support group like the MSA.”

Peers and the MSA are clearly an agent of change in the college experiences of Muslim Indonesian-American students and their identity development. Student organizations and their members in college play a critical role in the development of underrepresented and marginalized students as a source of group support, network, friendship, and mentoring relationships which can facilitate and enhance their success in terms of social adjustment, academic attainment, and persistence in college (Swail, Perna, & Redd, 2003). Hence, an organization like the MSA in college should be supported by institutions as a critically institutional intervention and resource which help facilitate identity development of Muslim Indonesian-American students and resolve varied difficulties and problems they experience during in college.

***Institutional support***, some participants found their institutions from which they were graduated incredibly supportive by providing them resources and supports to meet their needs as Muslims. They specifically mentioned tangible examples including the budget for the MSA, the prayer room and the proper washroom to perform *Wudhu* (ablution) that have been provided in several campus buildings, the ability to reserve rooms for prayer meetings, and the availability of Halal food in campus. Ali said, “There was so much accommodation and flexibility on campus. Muslim students were given rooms for our prayers and flexibility around classes. Also, we could request an off-day to observe our holidays like Ied Fitr.” Similarly, Asma shared,

“My university already had the organization for Muslim students, the MSA. I think the university really supported it. For example, they offered prayer rooms and other necessary things to practice our religious rituals. And I did not realize that the MSA in my university was so big with hundreds of student members.”

Overall, Muslim Indonesian-American students seem very pleased with the support they receive from the college. Clearly, college support and understanding on Muslim Indonesian-American students are very important to promote their identity development.



## **Implications and Limitations of the Study**

Employing Abes et al.'s (2007) framework of the Reconceptualized Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity (RMDDI), this inquiry unveiled that environmental, cultural, and sociopolitical conditions have created contextual factors (family, 9/11 impact, peer, and college support) that influence the salience of various dimensions (religiosity, culture, class and gender) for Muslim Indonesian-American young adults during their study in college. The emerging findings from this investigation (the interviews) that have been rarely discussed in existing literature are that MSA, the student organization that Muslim students on campus are involved in, and college support were found to play a critical role in positively promoting Muslim-American students' identity formation. Having supportive environment at college is important for minority college students, including Muslim Indonesian-American students, because it impacts their entire postsecondary trajectory. However, prejudice based on religious practice and cultural differences remain to negatively influence Muslim-American college students' educational experience. If the institutions do not recognize the oppression they face and its impact on their development, and also unwillingly make efforts to resolve it, Muslim Indonesian-American college students will be more difficult to successfully persist at college. Further research is necessary to identify the identity development of Muslim Indonesian-American college students across types of socioeconomic status and postsecondary institutions as well as with the focus on on-going students in order to understand their complexities and accommodations they need at college.

The current study has several limitations that should be taken into the interpretation process of the findings. First, all participants had attended public four-year institutions in the Midwest of the United States which had quite selective admission. It was likely they had satisfactory academic attainment during college years and preparedness prior to attending college. Hence, the findings resulted from this study might not describe Muslim Indonesian-American students enrolled or graduated from less selective institutions. Second, another limitation of this study was its focus on Muslim Indonesian-American students who completed their degree. In addition, the participants in this study were from middle to upper-middle income family. Therefore, it is important for readers to be cautious in considering the transferability of this study's findings to on-going and lower socioeconomic status students.

### **Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

### **Acknowledgments**

The author wishes to thank Dr. Susan Jones for insightful learning and discussion particularly regarding the student development and its impact on student success in college. He would also thank Indonesia Endowment for Education (LPDP) for its endless support for his professional development and academic pursuit.



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