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Identity Doesn't Form In a Vacuum: Deconstructing the Role of Hegemony in the Identity Formation of Religiously Diverse People

The events of 9/11 left almost 3,000 Americans dead and the rubble of iconic American buildings sending plumes of dust into the air like a funeral pyre. But the tragedy of the day itself continues to live, grow, and thrive, written into the struggles of Muslim Americans in a post-9/11 world. Anti-Muslim incidents have mounted rapidly since 2001 (Haque, 2004). Discrimination against Muslims is increasing, directly impacting the rise of psychological disorders among those affected (Padela & Heisler, 2010). This discrimination diminishes the ability of Muslim Americans to attain an education, improve their socio-economic status, and develop a healthy sense of identity (Sirin & Fine, 2008). Othered by the nation in which they live, and in which they may actually be citizens, these Muslims or Muslim-looking individuals suffer not because of who they *are*, but because of what they *represent*. The following article will discuss how identity is impacted by the society in which an individual lives, specifically revealing the important and often overlooked or underrepresented role of hegemony in impacting the way society views marginalized populations.

The term *identity* carries many different meanings. Miskovic (2007) found that some scholars use the term *self* (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000), others use the term *identity* (Schachter, 2005; Schwartz, 2005), and a third group of scholars use the term *self-identity* (Bautista & Boone, 2005; Yihong, Ying, Yuan, & Yan 2005). Additionally, the definition of what constitutes an identity varies among scholars. For example, Hoare (1991) claimed that identity is one's interconnectedness and understanding with one's own self and its authenticity. Schachter (2005) saw identity as a construction influenced by socio-cultural factors. Gubrium & Holstein (1995)

proposed an idea of the self in the process of continuously being shaped by everyday practice in the local culture through the shared resources, languages and institutions (as cited in Miskovic, 2007).

According to Gee's (2001) definition, identities are connected to societal performances. In other words, as the person interacts with others, those others "recognize that person as acting and interacting as a certain 'kind of person' or even as several different 'kinds' at once" (p. 99). This is not to say that there is no "core identity," just that often what is externally visible and readable in society writ-large is not necessarily that which is intrinsically how we see ourselves, or who we really are.

Gee (2001) describes identity as having four different parts that interact much like a soundboard in a recording studio. Each of these four parts is related to different forms of power, and they all have an effect on each other, just as a soundboard affects the overall sound of whatever is being recorded. Gee (2001) calls these four parts the nature perspective (N-identity), institutional perspective (I-identities), discursive perspective (D-identities), and affinity perspective or (A-identities).

The nature perspective, or N-identity, represents traits out of a person's control, resulting from forces of nature. An example of this would be gender. While there are obvious shifts today in terms of the fluidity of gender identification, there still exists a general belief within dominant society that gender identification is based on a biological construct (Gee, 2001). One only has to enter a restaurant and see the Women's restroom clearly demarcated by a stick figure in a dress to understand this. However, Gee explains this idea further by stating that N-identities are buttressed by the other parts of identity; through institutions (such as restaurants, in my example), discursive elements, or affinities with others.

The discursive perspective, or D-identity, refers to an individual personality or character trait. An example could be introversion or extroversion. These traits, according to Gee (2001), only become identities because “rational individuals” will “treat, talk about, and interact with the person in ways that bring forth and reinforce that trait” (p. 103). For example, the introverted boy may be infrequently invited to parties because it is well-known that he dislikes large groups, thereby reinforcing his social isolation. However, Gee (2001) believes these traits remain on a continuum in terms of how active or passive the individual is in reinforcing them. For example, the extroverted woman may demonstrate her conviviality at work, but then prefer to spend time alone in the evenings, therefore recruiting other personality traits.

Gee’s (2001) understanding of rational individuals, however, could be deconstructed and contested. Again, Gee claims that “rational individuals” signify those who interact with another in a particular way “not because they are ‘forced’ to do this by ritual, tradition, laws, rules, or institutional authority (which would render the trait an I-Identity)” (p. 103). This isolation of the individual from the world is not quite believable. For example, what if a young boy is shy because he enjoys playing with dolls and gets made fun of by his peers? In this instance, the children who tease their classmate are acting within cultural traditions, which tell them that boys who play with dolls are strange. Or perhaps the boy is shy because he has been labeled with what we call “learning disabilities,” and both he and his peers see himself as deficient. Again, in both of these instances the children do not act separately from their cultural traditions – their actions inevitably spring from or respond to these very traditions. And these traditions go beyond the institutions in which they are predominantly used.

Gee (2001) recognizes the complexities mentioned above but tended to focus his attention on the manifestation of these complications within D-Identities, and minimally within

the A-Identities. He mentioned trends which have rendered D-Identities more problematic, such as what he calls “new capitalism” (p. 100). Gee states that within this “new capitalism,” elites often fashion identities in opposition with non-elites, ascribing a sense of inferiority to non-elite identities. The non-elites are encouraged, or forced, to accept these identities. As a result, non-elites often see the superior place the elites occupy in society as a result of their D-identities, or rather, the personality traits the elites cultivated to help them succeed within a fair system of competition. By this process, non-elites accept the perspectives of the elites, internalize them, and judge themselves in negative ways. However, Gee focuses this insight predominantly on the impact of “new capitalism” on D-Identities to the exclusion of the other identity perspectives.

I argue that the impact of this invisible force – what Gee (2001) calls “new capitalism” – can be read in the manifestation of the other three identity perspectives just as clearly as in the D-Identity. For example, the power that elites exert over non-elites can also be seen between races, ethnicities, and genders – elements that are arguably N-identities. Are there not still those who believe that brown men and brown women lack the capacity to govern themselves, and that white men must do the job for them (Spivak, 1988)? Gee begins to acknowledge the role of “new capitalism” in complicating the behavior of “rational individuals,” but this conversation must be more deeply examined, and amplified, especially if it is to be relevant for minorities or marginalized populations.

The next identity, institutional perspective, or I-identity, refers to identities determined by authority figures within particular institutions. Gee (2001) provides the example of a prisoner, whose identity is defined by prison wardens, or a college professor, whose identity is defined by the university’s administration. Of course, as he points out, these institutional identities require discourse and dialogue to sustain them. Students and colleagues will refer to the woman inside

the institution of learning at which she works as “Professor.” Yet, the identity of the woman in this space is underwritten by the institution itself – if she were not employed by the college, no one would refer to her as “Professor.” What interests me, however, are the metrics by which we measure the capacity of an individual to serve society as an educator, or the metrics which determine a need for an individual to be excluded from society as a prisoner. For example, the Professor must attend the “right” schools, join the “right” associations, and earn the “right” degrees – in the eyes of dominant society. While Gee (2001) does mention that it is important to keep Gramsci’s (1971) understanding of hegemony in mind while considering the formation of these identities, the role of hegemony must be brought more to the forefront.

The final identity perspective defined by Gee (2001) is the affinity perspective, or A-identities. These identities are built through common experiences within a group which shares “allegiance to, access to, and participation in specific practices” (p. 105). Important to note is that this sense of affinity relates to personal choice – joining the group must be something the individual chose to do, and continues to feel a part of. Gee explains this thusly: “While I could force someone to engage in specific practices, I really cannot coerce anyone into seeing the particular experiences connected to those practices as constitutive (in part) of the ‘kind of person’ they are.” (p. 106).

While Gee (2001) does mention the role of institutions in creating and enforcing certain A-identities, the conversation needs to go deeper into the belief systems and hegemonic forces which undergird these institutions. Gee points out that today, during what he calls the “new capitalism,” many institutions attempt to create affinity groups and enforce a sense of cohesion within them among particular groups of people (Rifkin, 2000). For example, Gee (2001) discussed how businesses create affinity groups for their employees or customers in order to

bond these groups together and build an allegiance for the brand of the business (p. 106). He called these “institutionally sanctioned” A-Identities (p. 107). In addition, Gee suggests that elites now form “a powerful affinity group that transcends local and state borders,” alluding to a growing transnational hegemonic force (Gramsci, 1971). However, what are we to make of groups of people that are forced into a particular A-Identity on a broader scale, at a national level? Is this still the work of a particular institution, or does this transcend institutions? Though Gee (2001) mentioned religion as an institutional identity, I see religion as more of an affinity, which this paper will address at greater length in further discussion. However, in our post-9/11 world with heightened Islamophobia, many individuals who are not Muslim are labeled as such by airport security personnel, the media, and other methods of profiling meant to prevent terrorism during the War on Terror. These labels are a trend among institutions, and, as such, must be recognized as a force that undergirds institutional expression. Gee rightly called this force hegemony. Later in this discussion I will argue that, though Gee (2001) touches on broader societal forces at play in the formation of identity, more must be deconstructed to understand the role of hegemony in understanding A-identities.

While I see Gee’s (2001) theoretical understanding of identity as rich, nuanced, and complex, there are some gaps that I hope to address in this paper. In his understanding of how social interactions lead to recognition of an individual as a particular “kind of person,” Gee’s analysis requires a deeper critical understanding of how minority identities are read. While I agree with his analysis, particularly his point that “elites in a society...can ‘author’ themselves in much more socially and politically powerful ways” (p. 113), I believe that his Identity Formation theory will be more useful for other scholars if the role of hegemony is deconstructed and more deeply understood. Gee mentions that it is always important to note how and by whom a

particular identity is recognized (Gee, 1999; Wieder & Pratt, 1990), and that “this recognition is filtered through a particular perspective on ‘nature,’ the workings of an institution, or the distinctive practices of a specific affinity group’ (p. 109). Through this paper I will demonstrate the importance of bringing this “filter” to the foreground. Therefore, I introduce the use of a fifth category to add to Gee’s identity formation theory – hegemonic perspective, or H-identity. I will use this new addition to the theory to describe how the identity of a particular minority group in the United States – Muslim Americans – is particularly affected in terms of their identity formation by interactions with hegemony.

H-Identity

According to Gramsci (1971), hegemony could be described as a relationship, often of dominance, between groups of people. Hegemony is not necessarily structural or institutional, though it may be expressed or manifested in these forms. Rather, hegemony is expressed through systems of knowledge. In this way, hegemonic control is recruited through the media, school, and other elements of society.

Gee (2001) refers to a “filter” through which identities are processed, and “new capitalism” as the emerging context that governs modern society. I argue that these two forces are, in fact, one and the same. In the emerging “new capitalist” society, as Gee described (2001), transnational boundaries are blurred and the uber-rich from around the world intermingle with one another and determine the acceptable forms of knowledge which will delineate the rules, regulations, and boundaries of society. Ultimately, however, this emerging new capitalism is only one piece of an interlocking and self-supporting grouping of systems best described, most recently, by Bell (2000) hooks as a “white supremacist capitalist patriarchy.” Important to note is that the word patriarchy is a noun, and the four words that precede it are descriptors. In other

words, the patriarchy is the thing upon which all the other systems are built and sustained. Instead of “white supremacist capitalist patriarchy,” this paper will use “white supremacist neoliberalist patriarchy.” The reason is thus: capitalism refers to a market economy predicated on the protection of private property, whereas neoliberalism is refers to a laissez-faire kind of capitalism predicated on privatization, deregulation, and free trade (Stiglitz, 2004). It is the latter which dominates in modern society, largely due to the pressure the United States exerts on other countries to follow suit. During the time of growing neoliberalism, the world has seen a rise in wars, destruction of the environment, and increasing stratification between rich and poor (Stiglitz, 2004). This paper will refer to the interlocking systems of “white supremacist neoliberalist patriarchy” as the dominant hegemony.

Since hegemony underscores everything, it cannot simply be imagined metaphorically as another adjustable piece on the soundboard of identity. Instead, if we understand the identity of an individual to be the recorded sound, the H-identity is everything else – it is the room in which the sound is recorded, the brand of soundboard in use, the sound technician, the studio manager, the building owner, and more. The H-identity therefore greatly impacts the expression of the sound, or identity. It is everything that surrounds it, and, in many instances, determines the constraints in which the sound is produced. Of course, hegemony, much like identity itself, depends upon time, place, and context. It is a dynamic force, one that manifests in unique ways in particular locales. Please keep this in mind whenever the term is used. The following sections will demonstrate how elements of Muslim Americans’ N, D, I, and A identities are all impacted by the powerful reach of hegemony. Through isolating how identity perspectives are impacted, specifically among Muslim Americans, the discursive role hegemony plays in writing the meta-narrative will come into more clear and specific relief.

D-Identity

Gee (2001) defined the discursive perspective, or D-identity, as an individual personality or character trait. The examples given previously were introversion and extroversion. These traits, according to Gee (2001), only become identities because “other *people* treat, talk about, and interact with the person in ways that bring forth and reinforce that trait” (p. 103). Through a deeper understanding of the role of H-Identity, we can account for hegemonic meta-narratives funneled through an interactive person-to-person experience, and gain a better understanding of the white supremacist neoliberalist patriarchal forces at play.

To understand how hegemony impacts the expression of D-Identity among Muslims, I turn to the many studies conducted on the representation of Muslims in modern-day textbooks. The practice of isolating and denigrating the other, particularly in the Muslim world, has strong historical roots. William Griswold (1975) documented ethnocentricity among textbooks of the 20th century, which depicted Muslim societies as trying to “catch up” to Western ones. Often there were wildly inaccurate descriptions of practices among Muslims, such as the drinking of pen ink. One textbook stated that people in the Middle East “have gradually become somewhat civilized” though “none have become civilized enough to know how to organize governments for the benefit of the mass of people” (Redway & Hinman, 1898, p. 135).

While many argue that textbooks in the final quarter of the 20th century demonstrated significantly less bias against Muslims, a negative perspective of Islam has been amplified due to the War on Terror. In my own work I have discovered bias in the depiction of Muslims, Islam, and Arabs (Elbih, 2013). For example, the perpetrators of 9/11 are often described interchangeably as Muslims, Arabs, and Middle Easterners. These groups are often characterized as uncivilized, undemocratic, terror-inducing, irrational, and oppressive to women, regardless of

their involvement in attacks against the United States. Additionally, Jasmin Zine (2002) remarks that as a result of the 9/11 tragedy, “the resurgence of Orientalist tropes that label Islam and Muslims as barbaric and uncivilized terrorists have gained alarming currency” (p. 1). The denigration of the Muslim Other through schoolbooks demonstrates how the inherent supremacy of Whiteness is systematically upheld by a handful of corporate textbook companies.

Many studies demonstrate how negative representations of a non-elite group impact an individual of that group. One of the first examples of this kind is the Blue Eyes/Brown Eyes experiment conducted by 3rd grade teacher Jane Elliot in the wake of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s assassination. In this experiment, she labeled students inferior or superior based on the color of their eyes. In order to convince her students that blue-eyed children were superior, she told them that melanin, associated with blue eyes, was also linked to higher intelligence. She found that her students conformed to the social roles she prescribed for them – the dominant blue-eyed children performed better on exams and reading exercises, and became more bossy and controlling of their brown-eyed peers. The inferior brown-eyed children performed worse, and demonstrated subservient behavior. In other words, a hegemonic perspective of an N-trait (brown eyes or blue eyes) impacted the person-to-person interactions of the students and drastically changed the behaviors (or D-Identities) of the students. Of course, the teacher used this experiment as a means to demonstrate the real day-to-day experience of black minorities in America. If the differences among her students were so apparent in only a span of one day, how drastic might these hegemonic forces be on the true expression of D-Identity over the course of a lifetime?

Individuals steeped in the white supremacist neoliberalist patriarchal hegemony pathologize Muslims, which leads to negative self-perceptions and diminished opportunities for

success in school and later on in life. Children in a Canadian study post 9/11 conducted by Jasmin Zine (2004) were quoted as saying, “Other kids keep telling me to go back where I came from,” and “after September 11 my teacher told me I should change my name from Muhammed, because it was not a good name” (p. 110). Negative perceptions fomented in textbooks and accepted by teachers toward racialized students often lead to limiting opportunities for success due to false stereotypes such as “Islam doesn’t believe in educating girls” or “Blacks always do worse than Whites.” Lower expectations projected onto youth of particular communities, such as Muslim Americans, can perpetuate a racialized cycle of self-fulfilling prophecies (Sefa Dei et al., 1997; Zine, 2001). Thus, Muslim students may begin to view themselves through the filter of the elites, in Gee’s terminology (2001), or the filter of hegemony, confronted by false knowledge infused in stereotypes. Muslim students run the risk of seeing their D-Identities, or personality traits, as the source of their personal struggles and failures within what is purported to be a fair system. Through the deconstruction of the H-Identity, the pervasive fear and disregard for Islam can be demonstrated to filter through person-to-person interactions and negatively impact the development of healthy D-Identities, or personality traits, among Muslims.

I - Identities

Again, Gee described the institutional perspective, or I-identity, as referring to identities determined by authority figures within particular institutions. Previously, the examples of a prisoner and a college professor were provided. However, the discursive role of hegemony subcategorizes each of these identities into hierarchical denominations. For example, the I-identity projected by the prison warden onto prisoners who committed the same offense may differ depending on their race. In other words, this prison warden may look down upon black prisoners for being black and prisoners, a kind of double offense. In the case of Arab, Middle

Eastern, or Muslim prisoners, particularly those accused of terroristic activities, the experience of their identity as a prisoner differs from that of a White prisoner accused of a violent crime. With the 2015 release of the Senate investigators report on the federal government's sanctioned program of torturing detainees captured in the wake of the 9/11, suspicions of the brutality faced by detainees were confirmed. Urinating on detainees, beating detainees until they vomited blood, and sexual humiliation are but a few examples of the horrific treatment inflicted upon these detainees. Yet, many Americans feel no moral qualms about such exceptional treatment (Aquino, Reed, Thau, & Greeman, 2007), which may say more about the current imperial moment in the manifestations and imaginations of American power (Reid-Henry, 2007). Kept in an "exceptional space" outside of the U.S., yet under American purview (Reid-Henry, 2007; Gregory, 2006), the institutional identity of a Guantanamo prisoner is markedly de-humanized even compared to the most infamous criminals who have committed the most egregious crimes. The Muslim prisoner accused of terrorist activities literally exists outside of the United States and the protection of federal law, in an offshore facility. The reason? According to then Vice President, Dick Cheney, the roughly 600 men detained in Guantanamo represent "the worst of a very bad lot" (Golden & Van Natta Jr., 2004, para. 1). Yet, according to an investigative report by the New York Times, the "government and military officials have repeatedly exaggerated both the danger the detainees posed and the intelligence they have provided" (Golden & Van Natta Jr., 2004, para. 3). In fact, intelligence and government officials believe only a handful – between one and two dozen – detainees have provided useful or relevant information (Golden & Van Natta Jr., 2004, para. 4). In other words, hundreds of innocent men continue to be detained, and tortured, for years. The complete violation of the prisoners' access to habeas corpus, and the International Convention Against Torture, provides a gruesome example of how the current

white supremacist neoliberalist patriarchal hegemony creates epistemological hierarchies within institutional identities that manifest in brutally material ways for marginalized populations.

A- and N- identities

Because of the way in which Muslims, Arabs, and Middle Easterners are often universally read as one and the same, this paper will demonstrate how A- and N- Identities for these individuals must be discussed simultaneously in order to deconstruct the role of hegemony. N-Identities are inalienable biological traits, of which country of origin and brownness of skin are examples. A-Identities are built through common experiences within a like-minded group that shares an allegiance to and participation in specific practices for which the individual willingly takes part. Again, Gee (2001) considers religion as an example of place and a filter through which institutional identity is formed. However, this paper argues that for many, religion is an affinity since commitment to a particular spiritual practice often stems from a personal choice, and within the definitions of many religions, must be practiced with a sense of commitment and belonging for that practitioner to be truly delineated a believer. In this words of Gee (2001), “while I could force someone to engage in specific practices, I really cannot coerce anyone into seeing the particular experiences connected to those practices as constitutive (in part) of the ‘kind of person’ they are” (p. 106). In other words, for Muslims who truly see Islam as a part of their identity, this could be considered an A-Identity.

How Muslims have been imagined by hegemony historically has often shifted. For example, before September 11, Islam was known to be the religion of the slaves (Smith, 2000). Since a large number of slaves who were brought from Africa to America during the colonial and post-colonial era were Muslims, Islamic identification was linked to the black race. In the 1900s Islam continued to be associated with African American populations due to the emergence of

several African American organizations affiliated with Islam such as The Nation of Islam (NOI) (Haddad, Smith & Moore, 2006; Smith, 2000). After 9/11, Muslims N-identities shifted from being associated with blacks to Arabs (Haddad, Smith & Moore, 2006). However, even those who look like they might be Muslim, through the hegemonic filter, are treated as such. In the context of the War on Terror, Arabs, Middle Easterners, and brown individuals are scripted as Muslims by the white supremacist neoliberalist patriarchy, particularly in the United States. Just as driving while black often leads to the pathologizing of black individuals, particularly in the context of the War on Drugs (Harris, 1999), flying while Arab (Baker, 2002) or brown (Chandrasekhar, 2003) leads to the pathologizing of brown individuals as Muslim fundamentalists particularly in the context of a post-9/11 world. In this way, brown individuals who may or may not be Muslim are separated, much like a contaminant, and treated as potential criminals by airport security staff. However, these airport security staff would not treat the individual in question with such disregard if it were not for the context of the War on Terror, and the hegemonic forces which currently see Muslim-looking individuals as the moral opposite of the white supremacist neoliberalist patriarchy.

Muslims who demonstrate a clear A-Identity with Islam are pathologized, marginalized, and infantilized by the H-identity. For example, many self-identifying Muslim women choose to wear the hijab, or not, depending on their relationship with Islam. Of those who do wear it in the United States, many claim the *hijab* represents an important identification as Muslims and an expression of the faith (Haddad, Smith & Moore, 2006). However, hegemony portrays the hijab as a symbol of oppression, leading to the idea that Muslim women need to be liberated from it (Nagamia, 2002). The hijab therefore represents a false idea of Islamic principles, serving as “an easy target for post-9/11 backlash and is often used to advance political agendas and facilitate

and justify discrimination” (Abdo, 2008, para.1). Therefore, many Muslim women who choose to wear the hijab are asked to remove it during job interviews (Zine, 2001). In my research, some Muslim women were told the hijab will limit their career, and were verbally and physically assaulted at school due to wearing it, among other things (Elbih, 2013). Many public figures debate whether or not Muslim women should wear the hijab. More important than the wearing of the hijab itself, however, is recognizing to the extent that these opinions about the hijab may be steeped in the white supremacist neoliberalist patriarchy which legitimizes speaking about what a woman should or should not do with her body. Also important to note is how the hijab serves as a piece of evidence in the justification for colonization of predominantly Muslim societies (Haddad, Smith & Moore, 2006). Not only are those individuals who self-identity as Muslims (i.e. A-identities) discriminated against, but the entire societies which they come to represent (through the conflation of their A-Identities and N-Identities) are denigrated through the filter of the H-Identity.

Conclusion

As an anti-racism and anti-Islamohobia scholar who witnessed along with my peers and colleagues the Othering experienced by Muslims, Arabs, and Middle Easterners from September 12, 2001 onward, I realized there was an urgency to frame a critical response to address the War on Terror’s impact on Muslim identity formation. To mitigate the attention that their perceived identities elicit, many Muslims hide any religious symbols. Women who wore the hijab were encouraged by Muslim scholars to wear hats and turtleneck pullovers instead (Moll, 2009). Others change their names from Mohamed to Mike (Zine, 2006). Some were simply lost between two cultures, suffering from having multiple identities and feeling as though they lived between two worlds (Zine, 2004; Moll, 2009). The net result of the hegemonic gaze on Muslims is limited

job and housing opportunities, and less access to economic and political power (Zine, 2004). In the face of diminished socio-economic and political power and increasing marginalization, the importance of anti-Islamophobia scholars and thinkers cannot be overstated. It is crucial that we critically examine the system mechanisms through which these identities are viewed. Through analytically deconstructing the dynamics of power in society that sustain these inequalities, we can better understand the experiences and defend the rights of groups targeted on the basis of their race, ethnicity, faith, or any other aspect of difference. We must not let these individuals and groups remain criminalized and pathologized, instead, through critical analysis we must work to reveal the structural forces behind these warped identity formations which deserve our full attention if they are to be effectively dismantled for the betterment of all.

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