The Muslim Milwaukee Project: Muslims Negotiating Racial and Ethnic Categories

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This article draws on a first of its kind demographic survey of Muslims in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, conducted in collaboration with Muslim community leaders, to explore Muslim self-identification in this important Midwestern city, within the larger national context of growing Islamophobia. We report our data on racial and ethnic diversity among Muslims within the Milwaukee area to explore the complexity of Muslim identities in the city, and interpret our survey data critically to contest the reification of Muslim identities. Our survey data show that Muslims in Milwaukee are more likely to identify their households as belonging to more than one racial and/or ethnic category than the general U.S. population. Our data also suggest that, among householders identifying themselves as Arab/Middle Eastern or South Asian, a significant majority do not identify as ‘white.’ Additionally, we address survey participants’ complex attitudes towards the survey—including both acquiescence and resistance—in relation to Muslim community leaders’ strategies for organizing the community in the face of Islamophobia in the United States. Taken together, our survey data, and knowledge gained through the survey design and fieldwork, suggest that Muslims in Milwaukee are engaging in complex negotiations of identity politics.

Introduction

What ethnic and racial categories should we use in a survey of Muslims in Milwaukee? This problematic question confronted us when we were approached by leaders of a local mosque interested in conducting a demographic study of Muslims in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. One of their principal goals was to establish a more accurate estimate of the number of Muslims in the Milwaukee area. National surveys seemed to them to be serious undercounts. Such low ‘official’ numbers of Muslims in the Milwaukee area troubled the leaders, especially since other religious and ethnic minority groups had already been the focus of research and the subjects of reports and books (e.g. Johnson 2012, Gurda 1999; see also note 2). We agreed that research on Muslims in Milwaukee was long overdue: The existing research on Muslims in the United States focuses primarily on the large metropolitan areas such as Chicago, New York, Los Angeles, and Houston. Milwaukee, a medium-sized city in the Midwest and in the shadow of Chicago, is rarely thought of as a place where Muslims reside—though Muslims have lived in the city since the mid-1900s (Othman 1998). Such research would be valuable not only to the Muslim leaders, but also to scholars working to understand Muslims in less-studied, but more common, medium-sized cities. However, accustomed as we were to ethnographic research,
this survey project posed several thorny problems. One of the most vexing proved to be how to ask questions about race and ethnicity. Such questioning is especially sensitive when researching a minority religious group that has been racialized by state and media discourses, and when doing such research in a city struggling with racial segregation and the politics of immigration, amidst the difficult economic circumstances of economic restructuring, including long-term deindustrialization.

This paper presents data from a larger project, the Muslim Milwaukee Project, a first of its kind demographic survey in Milwaukee that aims to fill a lacuna in demographic research on Muslims in the city. The project is unique in that it is a collaboration with Muslim, primarily Sunni Muslim, leaders in Milwaukee. The surveys are the outcome of many meetings and discussions (Mansson McGinty et al., 2013). The project is proceeding in several stages: First, we completed a household survey, and second, we are currently distributing an individual survey. We anticipate a third stage involving individual and focus group interviews. Overall, a few questions we aim to address in this multiyear project are: What can we learn from information about where Muslims reside geographically, about their socio-economic status, and about the relations between immigrants and U.S.-born Muslims? What might we discover about their ties with other countries and communities, and their experiences of harassment and racism? Some of our overarching and long-term goals for the project are to provide new knowledge about Muslim immigration and settlement patterns, U.S. race relations, and the ways that religion intersects with race and culture. Putting such case study research into conversation with case studies of Muslims in other urban locales in the United States (i.e. Goldwasser 1998; Baker 2004; Jamal 2005; Ghazal Read 2008), Australia (e.g. Dunn 2012), and Europe (Verkeuten and Yildiz 2009; Ahmad and Evergeti 2010) will advance scholarly debates on Muslim geographies in the West (Hopkins and Gale, 2004; Phillips 2009) and the role of local ethnic and racial relations in relation to national and transnational constructions of identity.

In this paper, we draw on our household survey findings, as well as our field notes on the survey design process, in order to explore Muslim ethnic and racial self-identification within the context of larger problems of—and concerns about—Islamophobia as well as racialization and segregation in Milwaukee. This paper examines, thus, both the methodological and political problems of sampling, representation, and category identification in population studies and social geography, and the findings of the survey. Our research findings contest the reification of Muslim identities by demonstrating multiple identities and belongings, and complex negotiations of identity politics, as well as the crudeness of the invented categories of the Census Bureau (cf. Peach 2006). Reification here refers to how the category ‘Muslim’ is constructed as homogenous through media and other representations; such a construction denies the multiplicity of identifications a person may live, and the embeddedness in place of the everyday social practices through which people actually live their identities (Peach 2006, Nagel 2005). Surveys and censuses have historically been used by states to fix people and social relations in place, and to bolster state power (Hannah 2000, Anderson 1991). Yet this survey was initiated by Muslim community leaders to collect knowledge of the Muslim community as a resource for self-organization, albeit through a rather traditional survey instrument. Survey participants’ responses — on the survey itself as well as through face-to-face interaction during survey distribution and collection — suggest ambivalence regarding the survey, its
categorizations, and what it might mean regarding power relations within the community and discriminatory treatment by the U.S. government.

Our key findings from the household survey data show that the greater Milwaukee area has a very diverse Muslim population, which resonates with the diversity of Muslims on a national scale. Further, we found that nearly 60% of members of participating households were born in the United States, and that Milwaukee has a majority of Muslims identifying as being of Arab/Middle Eastern descent. At the same time, we found that participating Muslims in Milwaukee were more likely to identify their households as belonging to more than one racial and/or ethnic category than the general U.S. population. Our data also suggest that, among householders identifying themselves as Arab/Middle Eastern or South Asian, a significant majority do not identify as white. These ethnic and racial identifications need to be understood as being formed among a community that is a young community, that is a mixture of immigrants and U.S. citizens, and for whom religious identity has been politicized in particular ways.

We begin with a discussion of the racialization of Muslims in the United States. Second, we comment on existing estimates of Muslim Americans nationally and locally, and provide a brief discussion of the Muslim community in Milwaukee. Third, we discuss the methodology and how our collaboration with Muslim community leaders shaped the design of the household survey question on race and ethnicity. Fourth, we report our findings on racial and ethnic diversity as well as nativity and age within the Milwaukee area. Lastly, we address survey participants’ complex attitudes towards the survey—including both acquiescence and resistance—in relation to Muslim community leaders’ strategies for organizing the community in the face of Islamophobia in the United States.

Muslims, racialization, and ethnicity in the United States

Historically, Islam has not been explicitly considered a racial or ethnic category, but there has been a ‘racialization of Islam’ in Europe and the United States, particularly in the post-11 September 2001 (hereinafter “9/11”) environment (Peach 2006; Naber 2008, 2; Love 2009). In the United Kingdom the discursive shifts of this racialization have meant a change from emphasis on ‘colour’ as of the 1950s, to ‘race’ in the 1960s, to ‘ethnicity’ in the 1990s, to ‘religion’ as of the 2000s (Peach 2006; Ahmad and Evergeti 2010). In the United States ‘Muslim’ has been conflated with Arab, and the racial classification of Arabs, as well as other non-European Muslims, has undergone several different shifts since 1900 (Samhan 1999; Naber 2000; Cainkar 2008;). Naber (2000) argues that the multifaceted nature of Arab Americans’ identities has been reduced to a small set of representative images; they are considered white—but also “not quite” white; they are racialized in relation to religion; and the identity categories Arab American immigrants bring to the United States (mostly religious) conflict with and are subsumed within U.S. racial/ethnic categories (Naber 2000). In the U.S. Census, Arabs are officially accorded ‘white’ status.

Since the events of 9/11 and the creation of the Department of Homeland Security there has been widespread blaming, surveillance, arrest and detention of Arabs and Muslims. Alongside these phenomena the racialization of Muslims has intensified (Cainkar 2009). This process of racialization was, however, well underway before 2001, as it is linked to U.S. foreign
policy, which had for decades circulated negative and essentialized notions of Islam and Middle Easterners (Said 1997).

Certainly, Muslims have suffered from essentializing categorization in ways similar to other racial and ethnic groups in the US. As Love (2009) has pointed out, Islamophobia, or radicalized bigotry and discrimination against Muslims, has presented special challenges for its victims. First, of all, Islamophobia affects not only Muslims, but also those people perceived to be Muslims, Arabs, or Middle Easterners. Said’s (1979) well-known thesis on Orientalism shows how centuries of Western scholarship have constructed an imaginative geography of ‘the Orient’ or ‘the Middle East,’ whose inhabitants are homogenized (as Arab-Muslims) and ascribed negative attributes (terrorist, fundamentalist, undemocratic). Today in the U.S. this imaginative geography has effects in everyday life: Love (2009) argues that there has been a racialization of Islam, whereby aspects of bodily appearance are the basis for categorization as ‘Muslim,’ accurate or not, and those categorized may become targets of hostility. Thus, as many incidents—from the killing of Babir Singh Sodhi in Arizona on September 16, 2001, by a man apparently reacting to the 11 September attacks, to the recent tragic mass shooting of Sikhs at the gurdwara in Oak Creek, Wisconsin—have demonstrated, Sikhs, Arab Christians, and others have suffered as a result of Islamophobia (Yaccino et al. 2012, Love 2009). Second, because Muslims and Arabs are nowhere officially considered an “ethnic minority,” they are discriminated against without the possible legal redress available to other minority groups. In the present study, we have found that Muslims in Milwaukee have a multitude of perspectives regarding racial and ethnic labeling, which we will discuss below with reference to the survey’s design and participants’ responses to the survey.

Muslims in the United States and Milwaukee: Surveys, estimates, and internal diversity

Muslim Americans are a significant part of American society. Some studies suggest that Islam is the fastest growing religion in the U.S. and Europe, and that early in the 21st century it will replace Judaism as the second largest religion in the U.S. (Haddad & Esposito 1998; Leonard 2003). However, since the U.S. Census may not legally ask questions about religious affiliation, and important national surveys such as those released by the Pew Research Center (2007 and 2011) and Gallup (2009) only give a broad overview of the Muslim population in the U.S., we are left with vague estimates, both on a national and a local scale. Also the estimates produced by scholars vary, ranging from 2 to 8 million (Leonard 2003, 4f.) Whereas national Muslim groups estimate the Muslim population in the United States to be at least 6 or 7 million, the surveys by Pew Research Center (2011), in combination with U.S. Census data, suggest the much smaller number of 2.75 million Muslims, or less than 1 percent of the population (for 2011).

Despite the greatly varied estimates with respect to numbers, we can conclude that American Muslims are today the most racially diverse religious group in the U.S. (Gallup 2010). In a recent Gallup survey, African Americans represent the largest racial group (35 percent), more than a quarter (28 percent) identified themselves as ‘white,’ 18 percent classified themselves as ‘Asian,’ and 18 percent classified themselves as ‘other’. However, according to the Pew Research Center 2011 survey, 30 percent of identified themselves as white, 23 percent as black, 21 percent as Asian, 6 percent as Hispanic and 19 percent as other or mixed race.
Further, 63 percent of Muslim Americans are first generation immigrants to the United States, of which 45 percent have arrived since 1990. While 37 percent of Muslims are born in the United States, the nearly two-thirds that were born elsewhere come from at least 77 countries. Of these foreign born American Muslims, 41 percent came from the Arab region (Middle East and North Africa), 26 percent from South Asia, 5 percent from Iran, 11 percent Sub-Saharan Africa, 7 percent from Europe, and 10 percent from other parts of the world (Pew Research Center 2011).

Unlike other religious and ethnic groups in Milwaukee, the Muslim community has not been subject to large-scale surveys and research; thus we are left with only anecdotal estimates from Muslim leaders and survey institutions. Muslims have a history in Milwaukee dating back to the mid 20th century. Arab Muslims started to arrive in the 1940s, followed by Muslims from Pakistan, India, and Kashmir in the late 1950s and early 1960s (Othman 1998; Atta 2007). According to the 2006-2010 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates, the population of Milwaukee County with Arab heritage was 3,142 (0.3 percent of the total population of 940,000 at that time) (U.S. Bureau of the Census 2010). The report Religious Congregations and Membership in the United States, 2000, lists five Muslim congregations with an estimate of 2,857 adherents in Milwaukee County. The estimates we have heard from Muslim leaders range from 10,000-15,000 individuals. Based on the accounts of Muslim leaders, and our own experience with this survey, we suspect such differences — specifically, the undercounts by national surveys - to be shaped by the Muslim community’s fears that survey data might be used by government agencies such as the Department of Homeland Security to target Muslims for searches and detention.

The two largest mosques are the Islamic Society of Milwaukee (ISM) and the Islamic Da’wa Center (IDC). Both serve primarily Sunni Muslims. The ISM is the largest Muslim mosque in the state of Wisconsin, and is located on the south side of the city. We began this study knowing that the ISM, sometimes referred to as ‘the Palestinian mosque,’ serves a diverse immigrant community with ancestry predominantly from the Middle East and South Asia, whereas the IDC is located in the northern part of the city, and serves more African American Muslims and African immigrants. Consequently, we are interested in examining how the demographics of these two mosques and their neighborhoods reflect larger patterns of residential segregation (Sziarto et al. forthcoming).

It is clear that there is considerable diversity within the Milwaukee Muslim community with regard to economic status, educational and professional attainment. Our current and future research examines the relative needs of both congregations in terms of schools and other establishments designed to serve Muslims. The IDC’s web page speaks powerfully about the tension between the haves and have-nots within the Muslim community, stating that ‘[t]he Asian immigrants and the Arabs from North Africa form the affluent group and the African immigrants and the African-American Muslims form the other half.’ So, while ‘Muslims’ as a group have been targeted through anti-Muslim discourse and might find a sense of unity and commonality in the collective experience of being stigmatized as ‘the Other’ (Birt 2009), they are also a very diverse ‘community’ with respect to sectarian belonging, race, ethnicity, and socio-economic conditions. These differences problematize the category of ‘Muslim’ itself, and complicate the phenomenon of Islamophobia. The questions of racial, ethnic and income
diversity, and the racialization of Islam, are intensified in the case of Milwaukee, a deindustrializing, racially segregated city in the U.S. Midwest.

The Milwaukee metropolitan area has long been considered one of the most segregated areas in the United States. A recent Brookings Institution study ranked Milwaukee as the most segregated city in America, placing it ahead of metropolitan areas historically associated with high levels of segregation, including New York City, Chicago, Detroit, and Cleveland (Frey 2010). Milwaukee’s classification as a highly segregated city has sparked a certain amount of resistance in local popular discourse, as citizens and city officials raise doubts about this label for reasons of civic pride and national image. Nevertheless, most majority African American neighborhoods have been adversely affected by disinvestment and deindustrialization (Levine 2007). In terms of our study, these facts add up to the reality that we are working in an urban environment in which racialization is a highly contentious issue, as is the matter of what racial segregation means for the city. The need to be sensitive to community members’ concerns about stigmatization and racialization, as well as our own concerns for the safety and anonymity of survey participants, and the need to gain the trust of the local Muslim community, therefore, strongly shaped our methodology.

Methodology

Given this context of Islamophobia and racialization, the Muslim Milwaukee Project was designed in collaboration among the three authors, and several Muslim leaders in Milwaukee who represent a total of seven community organizations and mosques. Our collaboration with the community leaders was essential to the project. Elsewhere we discuss the political nature of such collaboration looking at knowledge production and positionality (Mansson McGinty et al. 2013). In this paper we focus on the negotiation of racial and ethnic identification in the survey design, in the findings, and in research participants’ responses to the research. We should note that we have presented findings to the community leaders, and are preparing to make presentations to the community, who may—indeed, are likely to—have their own interpretations of the data and further comments on the overall project.

The household survey was distributed at several mosques and community centers beginning in August of 2011, with the goal of recruiting participants during the well-attended prayer services of Eid al-Fitr. Community leaders spearheaded this initial effort to recruit participants by announcing the survey in prayer services, and asking attendees to complete the survey in the mosques’ lobbies as they left prayer services. However, at a few mosques the community leaders promoting the survey found that people were too rushed to complete the survey during the holiday. Participant recruitment continued, therefore, through December, with the community leaders and/or the faculty researchers concentrating their efforts on one mosque for a few Fridays in a row. In addition, we also collected over two hundred surveys through Salam School, an Islamic school run by the Islamic Society of Milwaukee. This approach, combined with outreach to the unmosqued through a local Arab organization, yielded a total of 695 completed household surveys. From our results we can report a confirmed number of 3160 Muslims in Milwaukee. However, once we account for certain respondent errors, we estimate at least 3580. Further, given our different response rates by participation site (ranging from 10
percent from a mailing list to an estimated 50 percent from one mosque), we know that this estimate is still an undercount.

The absence of reliable estimates of the number of Muslims in the Greater Milwaukee area presents the difficulty of knowing the percentage of those we have reached in relation to the total Muslim population. Furthermore, due to sectarian divisions, in the first round of distribution we were not successful in reaching out to the Ahmadiyya and Shia communities, nor to the Nation of Islam. Consequently, the household surveys collected thus far represent Muslims from the different Sunni-dominated mosques and centers. We know these mosques serve the majority Sunni population, but, since we do not ask about sectarian belonging, a decision made by our Muslim partners, it is possible that some of our respondents were Shia (Mansson McGinty et al., forthcoming). Indeed, since completing the household survey we have met Shia Muslims who participated, but we cannot know in what proportions they participated. Finally, we recognize that our methodology has an important weakness. Since the project was initiated by and together with Muslim leaders, and distribution and collection have been done mainly at the various mosques and religious centers, we have missed a significant category of Muslims—the ‘unmosqued,’ which Leonard refers to as the ‘invisible’ Muslim category. These are Muslims who are either not practicing or do not belong to any Islamic religious institution or organization. They might identify as Muslim religiously, but practice privately (Leonard 2003, 43). Our attempt to reach the unmosqued through the Wisconsin Chapter of the American Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee yielded only a small number of surveys (30 out of 320 mailed, or about 10 percent).

The basic unit of analysis for this survey was the household; a primary goal of the survey was to obtain a more accurate count of self-identified Muslims in the Milwaukee area than those produced by other surveys. Further, we and the community leaders were interested in learning about age and household structure to be able to project community needs for schooling, housing, and other family services. We also wished to emulate the U.S. Census household survey in this stage of the research, for comparability with U.S. Census data, and because the community leaders felt the relatively familiar format would be acceptable to the community. However, when race and ethnicity are reported for the entire household, there are limits to interpretation of the data. We cannot distinguish between, say, a household in which all members identify as multiple racial/ethnic categories, or a household in which one member identifies as being of one racial/ethnic category and another member identifies differently. Nevertheless, the survey data show particular patterns, some of which resemble findings in other U.S. metropolitan areas, and some of which differ.

**Competing paradigms: Negotiating racial and ethnic categories in survey design**

We entered into this project with our community partners with full knowledge that, because of the imaginative geography of the ‘Middle East’ that conflates Arabs and Muslims (Said 1979, and which racializes both in paradoxical ways (Naber 2000), developing categories for the survey questions and answers would be challenging. In this section we discuss the negotiations over the household survey question on race and ethnicity. The final version of the question that appeared on the household survey prevents direct comparison with other surveys, yet offered categories that Muslim community leaders argued were necessary.
We cannot compare our findings directly to the findings of the U.S. Census in 2010 on racial identity because of differences in the survey categories. The U.S. Census short form in 2010 asked two questions about race and ethnicity, with the first offering “racial” categories, and the second asking about Hispanic origin (see Figure 1). However, U.S. Census categories were rejected by our Muslim community partners for several reasons. The two most important concerns were, first, the presence of a question on Hispanic ethnicity but none addressing Arab/Middle Eastern ethnicity (given that both are supposedly language-derived categories); and second, the breakdown of racial categories allowing the respondent to choose among several Asian identities, but not giving a similar range of options for other world regions. The community partners wanted to offer more options for identification, and we agreed. We all were aware that to limit the options for identification on the survey would have several undesirable effects—for example, possibly alienating participants by failing to offer a category they would prefer. Further, we were also aware that the identity of “Arab/Middle Eastern” is not simply an ethnic category deriving from Orientalist imaginings, but is also a racialized category in the context of the United States. A survey cannot get at the meanings of the category in respondents’ everyday lives. However, this survey does indicate respondents’ identification(s) with different, related categories—identifications that suggest clear directions for our future research.

Figure 1: U.S. Census 2010 question (Source: Population Reference Bureau 2009)
Therefore, while the U.S. census served as a model for the survey for some leaders, all agreed in the end that we wanted to use other race/ethnicity categories to better capture the ethnic and racial diversity of the Muslim community, and to avoid alienation of survey participants by forcing an uncomfortable racial identification. In the finalized version of the household survey the following categories were offered:

- White/Caucasian
- African American
- African
- Hispanic/Latino
- Other Asian
- Arab/Middle Eastern
- Iranian
- Turkish
- Some other race/ethnicity – please specify: ________________________
- Prefer not to answer

These categories were chosen drawing on the leaders’ in-depth knowledge of their own communities and members’ backgrounds. Also, we indicated that the respondents should ‘mark all that apply.’

During one of the survey design meetings we had a conversation about race and ethnicity during which we believe all of the research collaborators became aware of the malleable and contentious nature of the discussed categories. Originally the faculty researchers had not wanted to include the term “Negro” on the questionnaire. However, because some of the community partners had expressed interest in modeling questions after the U.S. census, we included the term “Negro” in an early draft. At that point, a few other partners said that they found the term offensive, so we removed it. Following the suggestion of the only African-American participant, we also removed the term “Black.” This discussion highlighted the political nature of the U.S. Census categories, particularly in the Muslim community of Milwaukee, many of whose leaders strive to emphasize the ummah, or communal identity, over ethnic/racial identities. The community partner who had wanted to use the Census categories, for comparability, did not continue to argue for their use. The rejection of “Black” suggests a refusal of the predominant U.S. racial/ethnic ordering of social difference (Naber 2000).

The discussion also addressed the problematic categories of “White” and “Arab.” According to the U.S. Census Bureau, Arab Americans are defined as white or Caucasian, however, in most social and political contexts they are approached and treated as “non-whites.” Naber (2000) argues that due to their confusing position within the U.S. racial/ethnic classification system, or what Cainkar (2009, 48) refers to as the “racial liminality of Arabs,” Arab Americans have been rendered “invisible.” This racial invisibility was mentioned by one of the Milwaukee community leaders, who hoped that the more explicit categories finally agreed upon would reflect the limitation and simplification of the U.S. Census classification system, and allow for the diverse face of Muslims in Milwaukee to emerge. Perhaps most significantly, our meetings with
community leaders revealed which categories they thought were the most relevant and valid for their own communities. We also understand this as reflecting the way in which “race’ operates according to multiple, shifting logics” (Naber 2008, 20).

In the next section, we present survey results on nativity, age structure, and racial and ethnic identity. A large proportion of Milwaukee’s Muslims were born in the United States, and the age structure of households shows a younger population than the U.S. average. Also, although reported racial and ethnic diversity at the scale of the household is greater than in the United States as a whole, there are nevertheless many households that identify as a single category. These findings raise questions about racial and ethnic identity in terms of how these categories are theorized and deployed in research. We will address these issues in the last section of the paper.

Survey Findings

Nativity and age structure

We found that 59.7 percent of members of participating households were born in the United States. This proportion indicates a somewhat lower proportion of U.S.-born members of the Milwaukee population when compared with the proportion of 87.6 percent U.S.-born for the general population (U.S. Bureau of the Census 2010, Table 1.1). However, it is a much higher proportion of U.S.-born than found in a national-scale survey of Muslims by the Pew Research Center, which reported 37 percent of Muslims surveyed were born in the United States (Pew 2011).

Some of the contrast may be explained by the age structure of Milwaukee’s Muslim population (see Figures 2 and 3). Compared with the age structure of the U.S. population as a whole, the age structure of households surveyed shows much larger proportions of ages 5-13 and 14-18 (cf. the U.S. Census 2010 categories of 5-14 and 15-19; we suggest the 1-year difference in the age ranges does not prevent this rough comparison). The age categories of 45-64, and 65 and over are proportionately smaller for our surveyed households than for the general U.S. population. Such a contrast might suggest that a large proportion of the Muslim households surveyed have children born in the United States. However, we cannot confirm any such hypothesis without generational data from the survey. Nevertheless, our anecdotal data suggests the presence of both Muslim families who have lived in Milwaukee for generations and very recent immigrants and refugees.
**Figure 2:** Proportion of household members by age range (N=611)
Figure 3: Proportion by age range for total U.S. population 2010

Racial and ethnic identification

By far, the racial/ethnic category most frequently chosen by respondents was “Arab/Middle Eastern.” Overall, 40.1 percent of households described their household members as “Arab/Middle Eastern” (only). Approximately 14 percent of householder reported their households to be “South Asian” (only). Twelve percent described their households by selecting more than one category. About 7 percent chose “African American” (only), and another 7 percent chose “white” (only). All other categories were chosen by less than 5 percent of respondents: 4.9 percent selected “other Asian” (only), 4.3 percent chose “African” (only), 2.4 percent chose “other race/ethnicity” (only, and often wrote in an identifier), 2.3 percent chose “Turkish,” and 0.3 percent chose “Hispanic/Latino.” In addition, 1 percent of participants selected “prefer not to answer,” and 3.7 percent simply did not answer the question. Finally, no respondents selected “Iranian” (see Figure 4 for percentages).

These responses show that Milwaukee Muslims are certainly a diverse group, but this diversity is rather different than among Muslims in the U.S. population as a whole. Compared with the Pew (2007) portrait of American Muslims, which reported 20 percent of all Muslims in the U.S. identifying as African American, our findings show only 9.5 percent of Muslims in
Milwaukee identifying as African American. Our finding of 15.5 percent South Asians, including Pakistanis, is close to the Pew’s of 18 percent nationally. However, our finding of 45.7 percent of respondents indicating “Arab/Middle Eastern” cannot be compared with the Pew’s findings, as they counted foreign-born Muslims from the “Arab region,” but among U.S.-born Muslims, distinguish only between ‘African American’ and ‘other,’ and do not identify any other ethnic or national origins. This difference, in combination with our finding of 59.7 percent of household members born in the United States, suggests that Milwaukee has a comparatively large proportion of U.S.-born Muslims of Arab/Middle Eastern descent. Finally, the complete lack of Iranian respondents, despite our knowledge of a Persian cultural center in Milwaukee and anecdotal reports from Shia Muslims who say they took the survey, suggests that there is little participation of Iranian Muslims in the mosques through which we conducted the survey.

**Figure 4: Responses to Question 8 on race and ethnicity**

It is worth noting that 12 percent of the participants marked more than one category in the race and ethnicity question. This percentage is much higher than the mere 3 percent of respondents to the U.S. Census 2010 short form who reported more than one race (U.S. Bureau of the Census 2011). We know that we cannot draw conclusions from this discrepancy, because
differences in both the unit of analysis and the survey categories prohibit a direct comparison. However, we think we can discuss this finding—that is, how many and which categories our respondents marked—to suggest particular understandings of race and ethnicity among the respondents. We will proceed by discussing the most frequently marked categories, and whether respondents marked only one, or more than one, category. First, we look at the relative proportions that indicated only one category. Second, among those who chose more than one category, we examine the patterns among the categories chosen.

**One or more identities? Arab/Middle Eastern, South Asian, white, and African American**

The most commonly selected categories were Arab/Middle Eastern, South Asian, white, and African American. Among these, there were different patterns of indicating a single racial and/or ethnic category, or indicating one or more (See table 1). Among respondents selecting “Arab/Middle Eastern” or “South Asian” as a category, 87.7 percent and 90.7 percent respectively marked only that one category. The proportions for those marking only one category are lower for those marking “white” (46.3 percent) or “African American” (77.3 percent). This low occurrence of respondents identifying themselves and their households as only “white” may suggest not necessarily a greater openness to racial difference among “white” Muslims than in the general U.S. population, but rather a disavowal of “white” identity among survey respondents.

**Table 1:** Percentages of respondents to the four largest racial/ethnic categories, that category only.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Large group racial/ethnic category (in order of predominance among respondents)</th>
<th>Percentage selecting that category, alone or in combination</th>
<th>Percentage selecting that category ONLY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Arab/Middle Eastern</td>
<td>45.7%</td>
<td>87.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Asian</td>
<td>15.5%</td>
<td>90.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>15.5%</td>
<td>46.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>9.5%</td>
<td>77.3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

We explore this possibility further by examining the data for each of these four main racial/ethnic groups to consider the patterns of identification among them. First, among those who selected “Arab/Middle Eastern” as a category, 87.7 percent selected that category only (see Figure 6). The next most frequently selected category by people who marked “Arab/Middle Eastern” was “white”: 8.8 percent of those indicating “Arab/Middle Eastern” also selected “white.” All other combinations “Arab/Middle Eastern” and one or more additional category were marked by only very small percentages of respondents. This pattern suggests two processes. First, many Muslim Milwaukeeans who identify as Arab/Middle Eastern do NOT also identify as white although that is supposedly the official U.S. Census category for people of Arab/Middle Eastern descent. Second, among Muslim Milwaukeeans identifying as Arab/Middle Eastern, there is little identification and/or within-household mixing with people of other racial and ethnic categories besides white. These findings resonate with a few other studies on Arab Americans in places such as Chicago (Cainkar 2009), central Texas (Ghazal Read 2008), and Detroit (Baker et al. 2004) where a significant majority of the respondents did not
consider themselves white. Cainkar (2009) notes that many of her respondents refused white identity for a number of reasons, including privileging their own cultural history, and because they do not feel that society treats them as white. We plan to do interviews on this topic to determine if similar attitudes exist in Milwaukee.

Figure 5: Respondents marking Arab/Middle Eastern, only or with another category, for their household
Figure 6: Respondents marking South Asian, only or with other categories, for their household

Among respondents who marked “South Asian,” a slightly higher proportion (90.7 percent) chose that category only (see Figure 7). Further, compared with those who identified as “Arab/Middle Eastern,” among those who identified as “South Asian” an even smaller proportion (4.6 percent) marked “white” as an additional category. The only other racial/ethnic category selected with any frequency was “Other: Pakistani” in which respondents selected the category “Other race/ethnicity” and wrote their response in their own terms. Thus, for these respondents, “South Asian” was an acceptable category, but it did not capture enough of the identifications they wished to list. To some extent such responses are “coached” by the inclusion of some national identities (Iranian, Turkish) in the answers offered for these questions. On the other hand, many respondents marked only “South Asian,” and did not also write in a specific country of origin or nationality. Finally, as with respondents indicating “Arab/Middle Eastern,” those marking “South Asian” indicate very few households with African identities also represented, and none marked “African American.”

What, then, of those respondents marking “white” as a descriptor for their household (15.5 percent) (see Figure 8)? First, only 46.3 percent of these respondents marked only “white.” Second, the most common combination was “white” and “Arab/Middle Eastern” (25.9 percent). All other combinations had small percentages, with none over 5 percent (and meaning 5 or
fewer households). This pattern suggests questions for further investigation: Among those marking “white” only, what does this mean, especially in relation to the racialization of Islam in the U.S.? Among those marking both “white” and “Arab/Middle Eastern,” are these ethnically mixed households, or households of individuals claiming to be both “white” and “Middle Eastern”? Further, what is their understanding of whiteness, and why do they claim or assert that identity category? We aim to answer these questions through the individual survey, then further through interviews, in later stages of the Project.

Figure 7: Respondents marking white, only or with other categories, for their household.
Among those respondents who marked “African American” as a racial/ethnic category for their household (9 percent of households), 77.3 percent chose only that category (see Figure 9). Also markedly different from the previous groupings of respondents discussed, the second largest category was those indicating both African American and African, with 7.6 percent. Six percent of household respondents chose both “African American” and “white.” These numbers refer to very small numbers of households: 5 and 4 respectively. All other combinations were reported by only one household each. Again, one interesting aspect is the marking, or not, of the category “white”: The percentage of households marking both “African American” and “white” is quite small, in comparison with the percentage of households marking both “Arab/Middle Eastern” and “white.” Another is the lack of households for which the respondent chose both “African American” and either “Arab/Middle Eastern” or “South Asian.” Instead, we found more households identifying as “African American” and “African.” These patterns suggest that, at the scale of the household, there may be little mixing of African American Muslims with Muslims of other racial and ethnic identities, with the exception of African immigrants, at this time in Milwaukee.

Figure 8: Respondents marking African American, only or with other categories, for their household
Finally, we suggest that attachment to national identity—meaning the country or countries from which respondents or their ancestors came to the United States—is significant for many respondents. We offered the write-in category of “Other race/ethnicity,” please specify: ___________________. Five percent of survey participants used this category. Most who selected this option wrote in the name of a nationality including: Brazilian, Indian, Pakistani, Indian-Pakistani, Iraqi, Jamaican, Somali, Serbian-Muslim, and Albanian. It is worth noting that fourteen respondents wrote in “Pakistani,” though they could (and sometimes did) select “South Asian,” as could the four respondents who wrote in “Indian.” Other terms respondents wrote in included ethnic/language groups (Berber, Wolof; Native American), other regional designations (Southeast Asian), the term “mixed,” and one wrote “Amircon.” Thus, respondents used this “Other” option to emphasize an identity not mentioned in our categories, even as the types of identity written in (national, language group) fell within the types of identity category given in the survey options.

“We are not cattle”: Competing paradigms of social classification and resisting governmentality

That the household survey mixes racial and ethnic categories is both a weakness and a strength of the survey. First, by mixing terms, it mixes up paradigms of conceptualizing race in the United States, specifically the ethnic and racial formation paradigms. These paradigms are not compatible. Indeed, the categories of race and ethnicity in the U.S. Census have changed over time, often in response to claims made by organized minority groups (Omi and Winant 1994). To a large extent the design of the racial and ethnic identity question emerged from the collaborative survey design. It was what our Muslim community partners accepted, and what best corresponded with their own knowledge about the community. Yet, that very negotiation process, and survey participants’ responses, highlights the way that many Muslims in the Milwaukee area think about identity.

Some respondents seemed to think of their household identities in terms of ethnicity as it derives from national origin. This tendency is visible in the way that some of those who could have, for example, chosen the category “South Asian” chose the category of “Other race/ethnicity” and wrote in nationalities (Pakistani, Indian). This tendency is similar to how recently immigrated groups earlier in American history thought of themselves. Those identifications, however, lost resonance over time and under the pressure to become “American.” For European-ancestry groups, the attraction of becoming “white” to gain the benefits of white privilege eventually overshadowed national identifications (Roediger 2007). Assimilation theorists might point to the second- and third-generations’ increased use of English and eventual loss of languages of origin country as sufficient reason for ethnic and racial identification shifts. However, such interpretations minimize the effect upon individuals of both the power relations of racial formation, and the pressure to speak English and renounce other languages, especially the languages of geopolitical adversaries of the U.S. (Omi and Winant 1994; Bloemraad 2006). It is important to acknowledge that discourses about assimilation are not merely scholarly, but that political debates over immigrants, citizenship and belonging also involve assimilation discourses—normative statements about what immigrant groups must do to “belong” (Ehrkamp 2006). Despite the majority of our respondents’ citizenship status, the
“Othering” through racialization of Muslims in the United States acts similarly in its pressures on identity negotiation.

Despite our offering multiple categories of racial and ethnic identification in the survey, some respondents were dissatisfied. One participant penned on his/her survey “We are not cattle,” wrote in “Iraqi” and drew his/her own box for the racial/ethnic question, instead of marking “Other race/ethnicity.” This respondent was clearly resisting some of the parameters of the survey. His/Her comment speaks to the inherent problems of categorizing and counting people, problems that raise critical questions about the politics of data collection, classification and representation. It also gets at the slippage between social categories, and people’s lived experience and complex self-identities. We are also acutely aware of the various ways that members of the Muslim community, policy makers and scholars such as ourselves might use the data for different political or scholarly ends. So are Muslims in Milwaukee: One survey participant, after putting his completed survey into the collection box, approached one of the faculty researchers to ask what we would do with the data, whether we would share it with Homeland Security, and lamented how the neighborhood he lived in seemed to be a “target.” Other participants asked when they would hear results of the survey, because, they said, other researchers had come and gone, and never shared their research with the community.

The practices of surveying populations—indeed, the very term “population”—date from the birth of the modern-nation state and from colonial state modes of governing (Curtis 2002, Anderson 1991). Early surveying of populations was designed to facilitate states’ tax collection and troop levies. Colonial and postcolonial surveys were modes of knowledge production that often enabled ‘rule-from-a-distance,’ in that such information could be taken to another place and used in ways beyond the control of those whom the data were counting and categorizing (Hannah 2000). Such use of data was clearly a concern among the Muslim community during our survey. Yet contemporary surveys, argues Curtis (2002) are entwined with what Foucault calls governmentality. Governmental power involves the decentralization of the state under liberalism, such that the aim of the state—and other centers of power—is not merely to punish or discipline, but to construct and manage the ‘population’ through practices such as census-taking, and ways of thinking that induce ‘self-government’ among at least sectors of the population. Here ‘governing’ may include control of and care for the people. In this picture, our own household survey is a governmental practice, whereby the Muslim community, represented by certain leaders of organizations, enlisted us to assist in the production of knowledge of the community that state institutions are not carrying out. Although the survey could be understood as a governmental practice, the most salient intention of the project is to generate knowledge about an under-represented and marginalized minority that could further serve the community.” Thus, we should also recognize that the emphasis and selection of categories such as the ‘Arab/Middle Eastern’ by the Muslim leaders reflects an identity politics. With the support of numbers, community leaders will be able to argue for particular goals and resource distribution within the community.

This identity politics must be understood in relation to U.S. ‘Homeland Security’ policy and Islamophobia. Muslim community leaders in the United States are being confronted with a choice: assist the Department of Homeland Security and other police forces, or (continue to) be targets of raids, detention, and so on. The experience of round-ups of “Muslim-looking” men shortly after 9/11, and other punitive tactics by the Department of Homeland Security have led
some Muslim leaders to argue that—even as they fight the Islamophobia that infuses U.S. homeland security policies—they must also take on some kind of responsibility by acknowledging and addressing problematic and sensitive aspects within their own community (cf. Sardar 2009). We have certainly heard Muslim leaders in Milwaukee stating that they feel responsible for monitoring any problematic elements within their own communities. Indeed, the Muslim Milwaukee Women’s Coalition has organized and held educational and dialogue sessions for local law enforcement officials to facilitate and improve relations between law enforcement and the Muslim community.

The above mentioned survey participants’ different responses to the survey speaks to the ambivalence of the power relations at work. On one hand, those who refused to take the survey may have been resistant to the categories of the survey, or to any data collection about them. On the other hand, participants may recognize that participating in a Muslim community-led survey is one way to ameliorate the disciplinary power of the Department of Homeland Security. We suggest that for the Muslim community leaders, and for those who participated despite misgivings, such engagement with a survey is strategic. The risks of participating in knowledge production that might reveal community vulnerabilities or lead to further stigmatization have been outweighed, for participants in this study, by the hope that survey data, and the complex representations of Milwaukee’s Muslim community that ensue, can enable Muslim community leaders to better serve the community.

Conclusion

Understood as a tool for producing community self-knowledge, the household survey of the Muslim Milwaukee Project has provided several important findings. Reflecting the demographic structure of Muslims nationally, Muslims in Milwaukee compose a very diverse community, ethnically and racially. Further, within this diversity, the data points to a significant proportion of households identifying themselves as “Arab/Middle Eastern.” Another noteworthy finding that begs for further investigation is the high proportion of U.S. born Muslims in Milwaukee (≈60 percent) compared to the national estimate of 37 percent (Pew 2007). Finally, the disinterest in asserting whiteness that emerges from the household survey suggests several interpretations. First, the embrace of “Arab/Middle Eastern” suggests the importance of culture, heritage, religion, and language (cf. Cainkar 2008), but it might also indicate an insistence on an Arab American identity, a sense of belonging that denounces the idea that they have to abandon their Arabness (“nonwhiteness”) to be seen as full members of American society (cf. Staeheli and Nagel 2006). We state this recognizing the political and historical construction of “whiteness” and the processes that have made it a more or less invisible and normative racial category, overlooking ethnic identities and power (Peach 2000). We are critical of the “presumption that racialization occurs only through moving away from ‘whiteness’ in a predictable trajectory, and engaging in nonwhite racial formation” (Abdulrahim 2008). Assumptions that engagement in the category of “white” automatically indicates moving towards “assimilation” and “sameness” are indeed problematic. As Nagel (2002, 280) states: “...assimilation is itself a racialized process.” From this perspective, filling out the box “Arab/Middle Eastern” becomes an act of agency to display belonging on the individual respondent’s own terms. Second, because of the high number of respondents born in the
United States, we can also speculate whether the social practice of filling out the survey could be viewed as engaging in a dialogue between respondents as citizens and their society/state. They may be asserting their right to define themselves and their belonging to the United States while holding onto an Arab or other identity (cf. Ehrkamp 2006). The available category “Arab Middle Eastern” (not offered in the Census) gave them the opportunity to make visible and assert their heritage and cultural background as American citizens.

The strong tendency of Arab Americans in this study to identify as “Arab/Middle Eastern” only may represent one aspect of the racialization of Arabs— that is, that individuals begin to use the larger racial category as a positive means of self-identification and potential social and political leverage. On the other hand, it may also be an example of sheer ambivalence about traditional race and ethnicity categories, and what Shryock (2008) describes as the potentially empowering aspect of non-conformity to racialization. It is also possible that Arab Americans see some value in preserving the ambiguity of their socially constructed identity, as it allows people to refuse to be labeled in ways that make no logical sense to them or to their community leaders.

Finally, the data also dispute underlying assumptions about census data and categories as meaningful representations of social reality. It raises specific questions about the limitation and crudeness of racial categories offered by the U.S. Census. What category/ies would our respondents with origins in the Middle East and North Africa have checked in the 2010 Census? As Abdulrahim (2008, 138) argues, “their agency to identify as nonwhite is undermined by the census.” It is politicians that decide the available categories and thus we have to ask: What are the political interests underlying the available and silent categories? (cf. Howard 2006).

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Notes

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3 Religious Congregations and Membership in the United States, 2000. Collected by the Association of Statisticians of American Religious Bodies (ASARB) and distributed by the Association of Religion Data Archives (www.theARDA.com).


6 We are currently developing ties with these centers, but have yet to obtain permission to distribute a survey.

7 Similarly, in the Pew Research Center’s survey Muslim Americans they use the categories White, Black, Asian, and Other/mixed (Pew Research Center 2007, 17).

8 At the time of writing, we three authors have presented the findings to the community leaders, and are scheduled to make presentations for the community at a community center near Milwaukee’s largest mosque and on campus (the latter in conversation with the Muslim Student Association).