RICE UNIVERSITY

Negotiating Race in a Climate of Islamophobia: How Muslim and Sikh Americans Perceive Discrimination and Construct Racialized Religious Identities

by

Sharan Kaur Mehta

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE Master of Arts

APPROVED, THESIS COMMITTEE

Elaine Howard Ecklund, Chair
Herbert S. Autrey Chair in Social Sciences
Professor of Sociology

Jennifer Bratter
Professor of Sociology

Anna Rhodes
Assistant Professor of Sociology

HOUSTON, TEXAS
May 2019
ABSTRACT

Negotiating Race in a Climate of Islamophobia: How Muslim and Sikh Americans Perceive Discrimination and Construct Racialized Religious Identities

by

Sharan Kaur Mehta

Since 9/11, the dramatic rise in hate crimes against Muslim Americans has garnered increasing concerns about the pervasiveness of Islamophobia in the US and inspired growing scholarship on the racialization of Muslims and those perceived to be Muslim, such as Sikhs. However, significant gaps remain in our understanding of Muslim and Sikh experiences, as crime reports fail to capture the scope of hate incidents and discrimination that represent critical ways in which racism and Islamophobia shape the lived experiences of racialized religious minorities. Here, I examine the ways in which Muslim and Sikh Americans perceive experiences of discrimination, the effects of such experiences on their everyday lives, and how perceived discrimination shapes the construction of racialized religious identities. After conducting 30 interviews with community members (14 Muslim and 16 Sikh) and participant observations at a masjid (mosque) and gurdwara (Sikh place of worship) in Houston, Texas, I find that, in addition to perceived experiences of discrimination, the perceived risk of being discriminated against shapes life “choices” and chances. Further, Muslims and Sikhs’ assertions of their religious identities are shaped not only by direct experiences of discrimination, but also an awareness of the broader socio-political climate which situates their collective identities as under threat. This awareness undergirds a complex negotiation between blending in and standing out that embeds religious and racial meaning into visible and invisible religious symbols. Findings contribute insights into the racialization process by pointing to the critical role of religion for members of these minority traditions when negotiating racialized experiences.
Acknowledgments

This thesis would not have been possible without the guidance, patience, and support of my advisor, Dr. Elaine Howard Ecklund, as well as Dr. Jenifer Bratter and Dr. Anna Rhodes who served on my thesis committee. Their advice has been invaluable at each stage of the research process, and I am so grateful for all that I have learned while working with each of them. I am also incredibly grateful for all of the support from my friends and family, and I want to especially thank my mother, Ashvinder Kaur Mehta. I simply do not have the words to express the extent of my gratitude for all that she is and all that she does, and her constant support for all of my pursuits. And I also want to thank my respondents and all of the wonderful people who I had the privilege of interacting with during the course of this project who so generously supported this project. I feel honored that they felt comfortable sharing so much about their personal life journeys and experiences with me, and am eternally grateful to them not only for this study, but also for affording me the privilege of sharing their narratives in the hopes of having their voices heard.
# Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contents</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negotiating Race in a Climate of Islamophobia: How Muslim and Sikh Americans</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceive Discrimination and Construct Racialized Religious Identities</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literature Review</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data and Methods</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Results</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion and Discussion</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Notes</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION

The dramatic rise in hate crimes and bias-motivated violence against Muslim Americans in recent years has garnered increasing concerns about the pervasiveness of Islamophobia in the US. While the 1,600% increase in hate crimes against Muslim Americans between 2000 and 2001 illuminated a spike in anti-Muslim sentiment in the immediate aftermath of 9/11 (FBI 2002), such expressions of bias have far from dissipated since then. In fact, the number of hate crimes against Muslims in the US increased by 67% between 2014 and 2015 (Domonoske 2016), and the number of assaults reported in 2016 exceeded those reported in 2001 (Kishi 2017). More recently, the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) received over 1,500 reports of potential bias between January and March 2017 (North 2017). And between January and July 2017, there were over 60 reported incidents of arson, vandalism, and threats against mosques across the US, averaging about 9 per month (Coleman 2017).

This striking and durable surge in anti-Muslim sentiment has signaled the emergence of new process of racialization in addition to an existing process of racialization, given the observed social consequences of being ascribed into a racial category whose cultural meaning and structure has and continues to evolve since 9/11 (see Omi and Winant 1994). This transformation has motivated a growing body of scholarship examining the racialization of South Asian and Arab Muslims, particularly in the US and Europe (Canikar and Selod 2018, Considine 2018, Kibria et al. 2018, Meer 2013, Selod 2015, Selod and Embrick 2013, Taras 2013, Zopf 2018). However, significant gaps remain in our understanding of Muslim American experiences. Hate crime statistics tend to underestimate the frequency of bias-motivated crimes (see
Mehta and Hansmann 2016) and fail to capture the scope of hate incidents and experiences of discrimination that represent critical ways in which racism and Islamophobia shape the lived experiences and life chances of members of this racialized religious community. Further, Muslim Americans are not alone in terms of experiencing heightened expressions of bias since 9/11. Similar increases in hate incidents have been observed for other religious minorities, such as Sikh Americans (Considine 2017).

Adherents of Sikhism, estimated to be 25 million worldwide (Pew Research Center 2012), predominately originate from the northern region of India known as Punjab and maintain a visibly distinct appearance, particularly men who adorn dastaars ( turbans) and beards as articles of faith. Sikhs have resided in the US since the late 1800s and since then have experienced a legacy of exclusion from the mainstream (see Kurien 2018). However, the shooting of Balbir Singh Sodhi, a Sikh American from Arizona, on September 15, 2001 – the first reported fatality from a hate crime after 9/11 – signaled the beginning of a spike in hate incidents against Sikhs in the US. Public awareness around this rise in bias-motivated violence was catalyzed after a mass shooting in August 2012 at a gurdwara (Sikh place of worship) in Oak Creek, Wisconsin, which claimed the lives of six community members during Sunday services. Yet until 2015, hate crimes against Sikhs were not documented by the FBI (FBI 2016). Thus, recent work has examined the role of advocacy organizations such as the Sikh Coalition, the Sikh American Legal Defense and Education Fund (SALDEF), and South Asian Americans Leading Together (SAALT) given their unique meso-level position at the frontlines of hate crime tracking (Love 2017). However, little work exists that interrogates Sikh
Americans’ encounters with discrimination and the effects of such experiences on their everyday lives.

Despite this empirical gap on Sikhs in the US, scholars have increasingly theorized that Muslims and those often perceived to “look Muslim” (Love 2017) such as Sikhs have negotiated similar racialized experiences, especially since 9/11 (Considine 2017, Mishra 2016). These experiences reflect an emerging perception of “brown threat” (Silva 2016), which has increasingly situated Muslims and the “apparent Muslim” not only as “other” but the “enemy” (Gottschalk and Greenberg 2008, Joshi 2006, Peek 2004), thus ascribing specific racial meaning to those who are perceived to belong in this category. Yet significant gaps remain in our understanding of how racialized religious minorities perceive this categorization, and whether the identities they hold align with or depart from this external ascription. Scholars have increasingly focused on the racialization of religious symbols and cultural markers (Selod and Embrick 2013, Zopf 2018) and the ways in which the visibility of such markers facilitates the ascribed, categorical “lumping” of diverse racial, ethnic, and religious communities through the perception of “looking” Muslim. Largely absent from this literature, however, is the critical role of religion as a source of meaning-making and cultural resources for adherents to negotiate racial and ethnic boundaries and construct individual identities as they “do religion” (Avishai 2008, Ecklund 2005).

Thus, here I contribute to the burgeoning scholarship on Islamophobia by examining how members of two religiously distinct, but similarly racialized faith communities perceive discrimination, construct meaning around these experiences, and negotiate race through the construction and assertion of their religious identities.
Specifically, I examine three central research questions: 1) In what ways do perceived experiences of discrimination shape the everyday lives of Muslim and Sikh Americans? 2) How does the perception of discrimination shape the construction of their religious identities? And 3) to what extent are these identities racialized? In order to address these questions, I conducted 30 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with Muslim and Sikh Americans (14 Muslim and 16 Sikh) and participant observations at a masjid (mosque) and gurdwara (Sikh place of worship) in Houston, Texas.

LITERATURE REVIEW

*Race, Racism, and Islamophobia*

According to the Hate Crime Statistics Act of 1990, hate crimes are legally deemed to be “offenses against a person or property motivated by bias toward race, religion, ethnicity/national origin, disability, or sexual orientation” (FBI 2005). The codified designation of this form of bias has facilitated the construction of hate crimes as a social problem worthy of public attention and empirical analysis (Disha et al. 2011, Jenness and Grattet 2001, Scheitle and Hansmann 2016). Thus, in the aftermath of 9/11, the quantifiable rise in hate crimes against Muslims served as an integral measure with which to conceptualize and interrogate the more nebulous conditions that undergirded an intensifying climate of Islamophobia, in addition to observing the centrality of race and racism in shaping these conditions. As Love (2017:83) explains:

“Islamophobia in America is structural, systemic, and institutional. It finds expression through culture, politics, and policy. The physical nature of many hate crimes makes visible the often-invisible structures of race, but through closer
analyses it becomes possible to see not only moments of racist violence but also ongoing patterns of racist discrimination and exclusion that shapes life in America in both subtle and profound ways.”

In this vein, Islamophobia has been conceptualized as a racial project (see Love 2017, Omi and Winant 1994). And while some debate remains, scholars are increasingly recognizing Islamophobia as a form of racism (Canikar and Selod 2018, Kibria et al. 2018, Zopf 2018). In this vein, theories of racialization (see Bonilla-Silva 2004, Omi and Winant 1994) have been increasingly embraced as a robust framework with which to address the prior absence of race in analyses of Islamophobia (Meer 2013), directly engage with the fluidity of race (Selod and Embrick 2013), and integrate a consideration of ethnicity, culture, and national context in shaping racialized experiences (Considine 2018). In so doing, this framework has created a space within race scholarship to integrate the experience of religious minorities, as well as ethnic minorities such as Arab Americans who may otherwise be categorized as white and, thus, be overlooked in a discussion on race and racial experiences (Disha et al. 2011, Naber 2000, Read 2008, Zarrugh 2016, Zopf 2018).

The Racialization of Muslims and Sikhs in the US

Theories of racialization have been increasingly used to remedy the “virtual absence of an established literature on race and racism in the discussion of Islamophobia” (Meer 2013:386). As Omi and Winant (1994:55) explain, racialization represents the sociohistorical process whereby “racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed” as the cultural meaning and structure of these categories evolve. However, this framework also affords a means of linking an examination of race,
Mehta 9

religion, and culture in this intersectional social phenomenon and unveiling racialization as a “layered process” (see Zopf 2018). Specifically, recent work centered on the perception of and treatment towards Muslims and those who “look Muslim” since 9/11 offers growing evidence that the experience of “looking” Muslim is predicated not only on an individual’s perceived race based on phenotypic markers such as skin tone and hair color, but also the racial meaning ascribed to diverse religious symbols and cultural markers.

The racialization of such signifiers based on religion, ethnicity, and national origin is exemplified by the rise in reported hate incidents against Muslims and Sikhs adorning visible religious symbols, such as hijabs (headscarves) and dastaars (turbans), or exhibiting distinct cultural markers, such as wearing certain clothing or speaking certain languages (Juergensmeyer et al. 2015, Perry 2014, Selod and Embrick 2013). This escalation in bias-motivated violence has signaled a socio-cultural shift that casts Islam – as well as symbols and communities perceived to be associated with Islam – as representations of threat. This perception of threat has resulted in what scholars like Silva (2016) describe as an emerging sense of “brown threat” such that those perceived to be associated with Islam and, in turn, the observed rise in global terrorism and religious extremism, are viewed not only as “other” but the “enemy” (Gottschalk and Greenberg 2008, Joshi 2006, Peek 2004). In this way, brownness has become “an identificatory strategy rather than an identity” (Silva 2016:12) that ascribes distinct racial meaning to diverse racial, ethnic, and religious communities – from Arabs and South Asians to Sikhs and Hindus – and renders extensive boundary blurring across social categories (Love 2017).
While racialization as a sociohistorical process is often conceptualized at the macro-level, this process requires the engagement of institutions and individuals alike and has critical micro-level implications. As Mishra (2016:89) explains “a complete racialization of Muslims as threatening, terrorist, and untrustworthy was reflected in the all-encompassing reach of the process, ranging from the actions of law enforcement and immigration agencies to innocuous encounters in workplaces, neighborhoods, and public spaces.” This conception of racialization builds on Omi and Winant’s (1994) in terms of acknowledging the dual roles of cultural representation and social structure in transforming the social meaning (and social consequences) of race, in addition to recognizing the relationship between micro-level interactions and macro-level structures. Thus, while recent work has examined numerous macro- and meso-level factors on racialized experiences, such as the role of national context and state policies on religious expression (Kuru 2009), the role of Muslim and Sikh advocacy organizations on reinforcing racial and ethnic boundaries (Love 2017), and the role of civil societies and the media on shaping public discourse around Islamophobia (Bail 2012), scholars have increasingly pointed to importance of studying individuals in order to examine the consequences of everyday encounters with racism and Islamophobia and advance our understanding of the racialization process.

From navigating workplace discrimination (Scheitle and Ecklund 2017) to experiences of ‘flying while brown’ (Considine 2017), recent work has begun to interrogate the individual-level challenges that many Muslims in the US experience in their daily lives since, as Afzal (2015:3) explains, “the everyday struggles Muslim Americans face are critical in shaping their ideas about identity, community, and
citizenship.” Some of these everyday struggles include enduring tensions around negotiating the “hybridization” of multiple minority identities (see Dhingra 2007). However, amplified concerns about the rise in anti-Muslim sentiment and growing social and political contestation around both Muslims and Islam after 9/11 raises critical questions around the ways in which individuals who may be ascribed as Muslim construct meaning around their contested identity and negotiate encounters of bias and unfair treatment. Recent work examining black and Latino Americans’ negotiation with experiences of discrimination, microaggressions, and other dimensions of everyday racism points to these experiences as critical sites for minorities to garner an understanding of the US racial landscape (Roth 2012), their positionality within the racial hierarchy (Bonilla-Silva 2004), and develop mechanisms of resistance to endure such experiences (Evans and Moore 2015, Feagin and Cobas 2013). In this way, individual-level conceptions of self, belonging, and citizenship become situated within broader social and political conditions and, in so doing, reveal the effects of an enduring climate of hostility.

Despite the rise in bias-motivated violence against both Muslims and Sikhs in recent years, scholars have been keen to clarify that Islamophobia and the racialization of minority religious communities has existed long before 9/11, as evidenced by the history of discrimination that Muslims, Sikhs, Arabs, South Asians, and others have faced throughout the 20th century (Mishra 2016, Peek 2004, Singh 2015). However, as Love (2017:6) explains, “this is the awesome power, the terrible magic, and the ignoble wonder of race: to ignore diversity, to reject indigenous identity, and to promulgate its own version of history at the same time.” Thus, recent work has actively sought to challenge
the “flattening” of minority experiences (Kibria 1998) by examining diverse lived experiences and unveiling heterogeneity within minority communities. For instance, variation observed in Muslim Americans’ racialized experiences has signaled that such experiences differ by gender (Jasperse et al. 2011, Perry 2014). Veiled Muslim women have been shown to be at a greater risk of experiencing street harassment (Mason-Bish and Zempi 2018), are more likely to report being fearful for their safety in public spaces (Abu-Ras and Suarez 2009), and are more likely to perceive experiences of discrimination than Muslim men (Pew Research Center 2017). Such gendered disparities have been attributed to the visibility of the hijab (Jasperse et al. 2011), with Muslim women perceiving that they are more likely to stand out due to their physical appearance than men (Pew Research Center 2017). This experience of standing out often renders a negotiation between whether “to veil or not to veil” (see Read and Bartkowski 2000) due to the amplified risk of negative consequences associated with this form of religious expression.

However, as evidenced by growing research on the multidimensionality of race (Roth 2016), the racialization of religious minorities is also laden with experiences of racial ambiguity and racial misclassification. Such experiences of ambiguity and misclassification may result in some individuals being inaccurately categorized as Muslim – as Read (2008) observed in the case of Arab American Christians – while affording others a means of evading the negative consequences that may otherwise arise if ascribed into this social category. Thus, recent work has sought to interrogate how Arab Americans construct conceptions of brownness and experience race given that the external markers that pattern racial ascription may be less visible and, in turn, more
ambiguous for these ethnic minorities. Specifically, Zopf (2018:179) finds that Egyptians and Egyptian Americans perceive racialization as “both a homogenizing and differentiating process” whereby “visual and interactional cues, such as skin color, phenotype, national origin, name and religious appearance, contribute to their racialization as brown, foreign, anti-American, and terrorist.” Thus, racialization represents a “layered process” that may render a myriad of racialized experiences. Nonetheless, while some scholars argue that experiences of discrimination are patterned by the visibility of racialized religious markers, others contend that Arab American identity is shaped by a series of paradoxes that conflate race and religion and render considerable heterogeneity in racialized experiences (Naber 2000). Thus, for Muslims and Sikhs, the interplay between “looking” Muslim and perceiving experiences of discrimination is made more complicated by the additional experience of religious misclassification and religious ambiguity that can have significant implications on how members of these communities perceive discrimination and negotiate race.

Measuring and Analyzing Perceived Discrimination

Health researchers have long observed the negative effects of discrimination on physical and mental wellbeing, finding significant evidence of the psychological, emotional, and physical costs of perceiving discrimination1 (Kessler et al. 1999). And recent work by psychologists and public health experts suggests similar patterns for both Muslims (Jasperse et al. 2011, Rippy and Newman 2007, Rousseau et al. 2011, Samari 2016) and Sikhs in the US (Nadimpalli et al. 2016), linking perceived discrimination with heightened levels of stress, poorer mental health, and lower levels of overall wellbeing. Thus, from hiring discrimination (Adidas et al. 2010) to street harassment (Abu-Ras and
Suarez 2009), experiences of everyday discrimination have been increasingly examined in both qualitative and quantitative scholarship, given growing awareness of the importance of analyzing discrimination as a structured dimension of daily life (see Brown 2001, Essed 1991). However, perceived experiences of discrimination also have critical sociological implications, particularly for immigrants and racial and ethnic minorities. In addition to diminished performance in school or the workplace (Pager and Shepherd 2008, Scheitle and Ecklund 2017), such experiences can shape perceptions belonging and inclusion. In fact, according to a recent study conducted by the Pew Research Center (2017), US-born Muslims are more likely to perceive discrimination and less likely to think that Americans are friendly towards Muslims than foreign-born Muslims. Thus, perceived discrimination can serve as a marker of inclusion and signal patterns of acculturation for future generations of immigrants.

Experiences of discrimination can also be critical in constructing ethnic and religious identities (Read 2008) which may afford psychological and emotional benefits. In fact, recent work suggests that perceiving discrimination may amplify the salience of religious identity for Muslim immigrants in the US which may, in turn, buffer the potential negative effects of discrimination on self-esteem (Ghaffari and Ciftci 2010, Jasperse et al. 2011). Further, while 75 percent of Muslims surveyed by the Pew Research Center (2017) perceive that Muslims experience a lot of discrimination, Muslims millennials have been shown to express similar levels of religiosity as older generations, indicating that Muslim Americans are not experiencing a generation gap in religious adherence as observed in other religious traditions. Thus, the salience of religion for Muslims across generation coupled with evidence that religious identity
moderates the negative effects of discrimination on self-esteem suggests that religion represents a critical site of meaning-making around conceptions of self that may shape how discrimination is perceived and experienced.

In addition, examining the relationship between perceived discrimination and identity construction has become increasingly important given the ways in which, historically, perceived discrimination has transformed racial and (pan)ethnic boundaries, as observed through the emergence of Asian American panethnic identity since the 1980s (see Espiritu 1992, Okamoto 2003). Similarly, recent work has examined whether shared experiences of discrimination may be mobilizing collective action efforts among South Asian and Arab Americans and, in turn, motivating racial and ethnic boundary blurring through the potential formation of a new panethnic identity. However, as Mishra (2016) explains, standing in the way of panethnic identity formation is the role of religion as a salient social stratifier across South Asian and Arab communities. At the meso-level, advocacy organizations tend to mobilize more readily on the basis of religious identity rather than shared racial identities, rendering what Love (2017) describes as a “race dilemma” such that organizations contend with racialized issues and community concerns without actively engaging with or directly addressing race. While mobilizing around shared identity has long been recognized as critical in order to mobilize individuals in collective action and social movements (see Marx 1998, Nagel 1994), much remains unexplored about the process of identity construction itself. Yet this process remains critical not only for religious minorities, but also for immigrants, for whom religion has been shown to play a particularly unique role in their adaptation into the American mainstream.
Gaps in the Literature

While there has been an impressive growth in research on Islamophobia and the racialization of Muslims in recent years, considerable gaps remain in our understanding of the experiences of racialized religious minorities. Scholars have increasingly examined the racialization of religious symbols and cultural markers (Selod and Embrick 2013) and the ways in which the visibility of such markers facilitates the ascribed, categorical “lumping” of diverse racial, ethnic, and religious communities through the perception of “looking” Muslim. However, what if you are Muslim, but do not necessarily “look” Muslim? While recent work has begun to interrogate the relationship between racial ambiguity and identity construction for Arab Americans (Disha et al. 2011, Naber 2000, Zopf 2018), the ways in which individuals develop meaning, make choices around religious expressions, and negotiate race in their everyday lives remains underexplored. In addition, research examining the racialization of Muslims largely overlooks the scope of the process in terms of how other minority communities, such as Sikhs, may be affected. Thus, comparing Muslim and Sikh experiences affords a means with which to engage with this critical yet intricate relationship between religion and race and advance our understanding of the racialization process for members of these minority communities.

DATA AND METHODS

In order to address this empirical gap, I conducted a qualitative, comparative study of Muslim and Sikh Americans in Houston, Texas. Respondents were sampled from a masjid and gurdwara that were each selected within this urban center. The
motivation behind selecting faith communities as the primary sites of observation and respondent sampling was two-fold. First, houses of worship serve as ideal spaces in which to observe and engage with members of each faith community at regular, routinized meeting times, and represent contexts in which adherents ideally experience a sense of ownership, belonging, and comfort. Second, given the rising number of attacks not only against individual members of the Muslim and Sikh Americans but also directly against *masjids* and *gurdwaras* – from acts of vandalism to mass shootings – these spaces represent sites that are both sacred and under threat. Therefore, contextualizing individual-level experiences within faith communities affords an examination of how recent social and political events may be shaping religious expressions and discourse within these settings and, in turn, how religious communities may shape the construction of diverse social identities (Ecklund 2006, Read 2008).

These faith communities were selected in Houston, Texas – a city that is rapidly becoming one of the most racially and ethnically diverse cities in the nation (Klineberg and Wu 2013) with a markedly rising population of South Asian and Arab Americans. In fact, recent work has identified Houston as “home to the fourth-largest and one of the most internally diverse South Asian Muslim populations of any major city in the United States,” experiencing so much growth since the 1960s that it has become viewed as a “gateway city for immigrants from South Asia” (Afzal 2015:21). And while limitations remain around Arab American population estimates due to enduring ambiguity around their racial and ethnic categorization, estimates from the 2000 Census based on ancestry indicate that Houston is home to the fifth largest population of Arabs in the nation, totaling nearly 2 million residents (de la Cruz and Brittingham 2003). Thus, this regional
growth in migration affords a dynamic opportunity to engage with members of these minority groups who are concentrated in this urban center.

That said, given that Muslims and Sikhs in the US are minority groups that together represent less than 2% of the nation’s population, an extended case method approach was employed in an effort to center the ‘societal significance’ of this work instead of its ‘statistical significance’ (Burawoy 1998, Small 2009). In this vein, the masjid and gurdwara examined for this study were selected given that they represent critical cases (see Flyvbjerg 2006), since their racial and ethnic composition reflect mainstream demographic trends. The majority of adherents at the gurdwara selected were South Asian, and specifically had ethnic ties to Punjab, the region of origin of the Sikh faith – thus reflecting the ethnic composition of the majority of Sikhs in the US (Khalsa 2017, Pew Research Center 2012). Meanwhile, the masjid selected was comprised of adherents of diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, including South Asian, Arab, black, and white practitioners, which reflects the growing diversity of the Muslim community in the US at large (Pew Research Center 2017). Thus, these sites were viewed as non-representative microcosms of broader demographic trends of each respective community. Further, while both communities draw community members from across the Greater Houston area, they are housed in census-tracts with a high median income (>50,000). Thus, given that these faith communities are located in neighborhoods of higher socio-economic status, these sites were conceptualized as “least likely” cases of being targeted or attacked (Flyvbjerg 2006), which would situate empirical findings about community level discourse around safety concerns as particularly meaningful, given this theorized lower risk.
Study participants were sampled through several non-random sampling strategies, including key-informant referrals, participant observations, and snowball sampling. In total, 30 semi-structured interviews were conducted (14 Muslim and 16 Sikh), with analysis centered on responses to a series of questions regarding perceived experiences of unfair treatment, self-described religious and racial identities, perceived racial classification by others, and meaning of religious and racial identities. The questions asked regarding experiences of unfair treatment were intentionally designed with the recognition that, given the two minority communities of interest, there are likely multiple dimensions of marginality that may shape respondents’ social identities and emerge as salient in patterning experiences of differential treatment in their daily lives – such as immigrant status, gender, and sexual orientation. Thus, respondents were asked if they have ever felt that they have been treated unfairly because of who they are? Respondents were subsequently asked for narratives that exemplified these experiences and their perception of the motivation behind this experience and asked if they could identify a reason(s) for why they were treated this way. Respondents were then asked to share how they would define the term *discrimination*, in order to garner how they conceptualized this term and, thus, afford a means with which to contextualize their use of this term as it arose during the interview and determine whether experiences of unfair treatment were, in fact, conceptualized as discrimination.

In order to analyze the data collected, interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and then coded for themes. An open coding approach was first used (Strauss and Corbin 1998), which afforded an opportunity for new themes to emerge while also examining themes centered around the central research questions. In so doing, a pattern
emerged in which narratives of perceived discrimination arose throughout the interview, not only when directly prompted. Thus, responses to other questions more specifically related to 9/11, hate crimes, and the 2016 election were also analyzed as relevant. After an initial round of open coding, central themes were identified such as the concepts of “blending in” and “standing out,” the duality of visibility and invisibility, and the persistent negotiation of multiple, hyphenated negotiated identities in a climate of heightened contestation. The emergence of these themes motivated a second round of focused coding (Lofland 2006) centered on these concepts, in addition to the religious, racial, ethnic, and cultural markers that were associated with these experiences.

RESULTS

Ultimately, findings suggest that discrimination is a salient experience that many Muslims and Sikhs perceive, with such experiences emerging in a myriad of ways, across diverse settings, and largely patterned by the visibility of markers of difference, such as phenotype, hair color, and religious articles. However, it is not only direct experiences of discrimination that shape the everyday lives of members of these communities and the construction and assertion of their religious identities, but rather the perceived risk of being discriminated against that underlies this association. This perception of risk is shaped by an awareness of the broader socio-political climate which situates their collective identities as under threat and, in so doing, undergirds a complex negotiation between blending in and standing out that embeds religious and racial meaning into the assertion of visible and invisible religious symbols and identities. This negotiation demonstrates how the racialization process prompts religious meaning-making and, in
In order to illustrate this negotiation between *blending in* and *standing out*, I first detail the ways Muslims and Sikhs perceive experiences of discrimination, how such experiences shape their everyday interactions and “choices,” and some of the strategies they employ when confronted with such encounters. Some Muslims and Sikhs shared very specific examples of discriminatory encounters, while others denied or downplayed as a means of minimizing their psychosocial costs, and still others perceived an ability to evade such experiences by virtue of their ability to “blend in” or racially pass. Despite this range of encounters with and reactions to discrimination, members of both faith communities expressed an aware of their inability to escape the *risk* of discrimination, demonstrating that the effects of perceived discrimination extend beyond personal experiences of unfair treatment. Second, I detail the ways in Muslims and Sikhs’ awareness of their contested identity prompts *meaning-making* about their sense of self, the salience of their religious identity, and how to negotiate their religious expression given the racial meaning ascribed to their own bodies and their religious communities, more broadly. Taken together, this negotiation between *blending in* and *standing out* highlights the critical role of religion for many Muslims and Sikhs in the US in navigating racialized experiences.

**Negotiating Discrimination: Scope and Strategies**

For many Muslims and Sikhs, perceiving unfair treatment was a salient experience that emerged in a myriad of ways across diverse settings, and had both short-
term and lasting effects on the strategies employed and “choices” made when negotiating such encounters. For some, these experiences included perceptions of overt discrimination, such as being profiled, scrutinized, or questioned at airports during security screenings, being bullied or harassed at school, losing a job, and experiencing physical or verbal abuse in diverse public settings. For others, these experiences were described as more subtle or covert, often emerging during relatively innocuous interactions at work, school, or other public spaces. During these interactions, respondents sensed tension or discomfort from those around them in ways that, while often unspoken, was visceral.

While these latter experiences did not appear to result in tangible, negative outcomes, the uneasiness perceived around their presence in a given space often sparked a felt need to employ strategies to negotiate these interactions. These strategies involved either actively ignoring this perceived tension or stepping into it by finding ways to break the ice and ease others’ discomfort. One such setting for these interactions was at airports. For instance, as one Muslim hijabi woman in her 20s described:

*Definitely airports. That’s always fun... getting on the plane it’s like everyone is staring at me as if I’m a threat that didn’t pass, or like sneaked through TSA or something. I don’t know. I’m like look, guys, chill out. Like literally every eye on the entire plane is looking at me, and I’m just like, I know you’re looking, I’m going to keep smiling in my seat. I feel like there’s nothing else I can do really.*

---

1 Muslim woman, age 24, 1.5 generation, MA_Int12, conducted April 2, 2018.
While this respondent shared that she had never personally experienced any challenges going through TSA screenings when traveling, this feeling of having all eyes watching her once she stepped onto the plane and her awareness of all the concerned looks, stares, and feelings of discomfort from fellow passengers as if she was a “threat” was quite tangible, despite being unspoken. Such experiences were perceived as so commonplace for members of these communities that one Sikh man\(^2\) recommended that I consider conducting a study. As he explained, “Southwest is the only airline that doesn’t allow you to pick seats. So, if you really want to hear about a Sikh story you could actually do a study on Southwest.” He explained that since passengers can choose where they want to sit instead of having assigned seats, observing passengers would afford “insight [into] where people are sitting” or, alternatively, choosing not to sit in relation to, say, a Sikh passenger with a turban. Many respondents shared narratives about intensive scrutiny they encountered while going through TSA screenings, indicating that these regulated interactions remain critically important sites of profiling and perceived differential treatment. These more innocuous encounters with fellow travelers, however, suggest that perceptions of threat and suspicion do not necessarily subside after clearing security.

Nonetheless, these looks of suspicion were not unique to airports as were also experienced in other public spaces, from the workplace to local neighborhoods and communities. For instance, as one Sikh man\(^3\) in his 30s shared:

\(^2\) Sikh man, age 52, 1.5 generation, SA_Int11, conducted March 22, 2018.
\(^3\) Sikh man, age 35, 1\(^{st}\) generation, SA_Int1, conducted November 10, 2017.
I live in a community that’s mostly white people, white Americans. So sometimes I get odd looks. I see that cause there’s hardly any brown people there...but that’s just a look, and how much can you communicate from a look? Since – I think the look I get is ‘what is a brown person doing here?’ That’s the sense I get. But that’s about it.

For this respondent, a turbaned Sikh, he perceived these looks as a product of standing out due to his race. However, since there had been “no bad experience which has stood out” to him as a result of these stares, he was able to downplay this experience associated with his visibly distinct appearance and ignore this reaction to his presence in his predominantly white neighborhood.

Meanwhile, other Muslims and Sikhs reported similar experiences in public settings. However, instead of ignoring these reactions, they attempted to defuse others’ feelings of discomfort by engaging in conversation with them. As one Sikh man⁴ in his 50s explained:

> When I was working at a space for [name of company] on the East Coast... I was 18 and the people that I was working with and working for, they never worked with a person like me, right? So, it was more about their expectations, what to expect when we are in a breakroom, you know, what conversation you’re going to have, right? So, I felt similar experience in college. Person sitting next to me in the same class, um I felt it was incumbent upon me to strike a conversation...so

---

⁴ Sikh man, age 52, 1.5 generation, SA_Int11, conducted March 22, 2018.
when you take that initiative, I think it breaks many barriers versus just sitting and not taking the initiative and let it play out in their minds, whatever that is playing out, right?

Thus, even in these casual interactions at work or in school, some respondents felt a responsibility to strike up a conversation in an attempt to break down barriers and mitigate concerns about being near or working “with a person like me” based on assumptions that may “play out in their minds,” despite these concerns never being explicitly articulated. A similar narrative emerged from a Muslim man in his 30s who shared a recent interaction at a grocery store. While waiting in line, he observed the cashier, a “sweet lady,” being very friendly to the customer ahead of him, but felt this sentiment noticeably diminish once he was next to check out. So instead, he decided to reach out and ease her discomfort during the exchange:

[She] starts reaching for the groceries...and before she scans I greet her. I said ‘hi, how’s it going?’ That’s just like a simple thing, ‘hey, how’s it going?’ And not like in a fake way but like actually trying to like bring her comfort. Maybe she’s uncomfortable with the fact that I’m there. Maybe she’s having a bad day. Maybe she had broke up with a boyfriend who’s like a person of color. Who knows what could be happening, right? So, let me give her – let me extend another type of branch, olive branch...but like there was a clear, clear difference in the way I was treated and the way this [previous] lady was treated. Maybe it

5 Muslim man, age 30, 2nd generation, MA_Int13, conducted April 4, 2018.
was a gender thing. I don’t know what it was, but whatever it was in a service environment, you know, like that’s not how it’s supposed to work.

For this respondent, observing disparities in these transactional interactions was both noteworthy and upsetting in a particular kind of way, as someone who had worked in sales for many years and expressed much regard for the value of customer service. He viewed these relationships and interactions as the best site to “gauge where society or a community or a neighborhood is” in terms of how connected or disconnected people are to one another. Nonetheless, in this particular interaction, he employed a similar strategy of being proactive to ensure that those around him felt comfortable. This effort was motivated, in part, by a desire not to “feel different,” but also to preempt potential consequences that may arise if those around him felt uncomfortable or unsafe. This sentiment was echoed by a Sikh man in his 40s who expressed a similar concern about his colleagues at work. He explained that, “I think once you start speaking with people and…once they know you, they interact with you, then they become comfortable. When they don’t know you, I say okay, I’m going to talk to this person.” However, this respondent’s desire to ensure that his coworkers felt comfortable stemmed from an underlying concern about how feelings of discomfort could translate into more concrete forms of exclusion, such as not being approached to work on a team project or not being considered for a promotion.

---

6 Sikh man, age 43, 1st generation, SA_Int4, conducted December 10, 2017.
Thus, these experiences of feeling “othered” in diverse public settings, often in
tacit ways, illuminate some implicit concerns that many Muslims and Sikhs experience in
the workplace and other public spaces. In addition, these experiences of unfair treatment
unveil many community members’ perceptions of others’ discomfort about their
embodied presence in certain spaces, and the felt need to employ strategies to negotiate
this perception – either in terms of ignoring these concerned looks or actively engaging
with those around them to allay their discomforts. And notably, these negotiations tend
to arise most often among those who perceive that they visibly stand out by virtue of their
race, religion, or both.

Denying and Downplaying Discrimination

While perceiving discrimination represents a salient experience for many Muslim
and Sikh Americans, some respondents, when asked, did not report experiencing
discrimination personally. Throughout the course of the interview, however, narratives
emerged which were coded as experiences of unfair treatment during analysis due to the
nature of these accounts and how they were described. Given the focus here on perceived
discrimination, both the denial of perceiving these experiences as discrimination and the
act of downplaying or minimizing the experiences of unfair treatment were identified as
findings, given the potential emotional and psychological benefits that may be gained
from denying or downplaying such experiences (see Brown 2001, Crosby 1984, Ruggiero
and Taylor 1997).

These potential benefits of denying or downplaying arose most prominently when
asking respondents about what factor(s) they thought motivated the experiences of
discrimination that they or those close to them perceived. While many spoke pointedly about these experiences in terms of religious discrimination or racism (or both), much more common were explanations that situated these experiences as reflections of others’ ignorance in a very broad sense. This was based on a perception of a mainstream lack of awareness of religious symbols or practices, or even – particularly in the case of Sikh Americans – an unfamiliarity with the existence of the community altogether. This perception, although likely well supported, also appeared to serve a mechanism of coping with discriminatory experiences. As one Sikh man explained while sharing experiences about being called a racial slur by a classmate in middle school, and recalling an incident when his father was called a slur by a school teacher he was fond of:

I always chalk up a lot of these incidences to ignorance primarily. I think that’s just the healthiest way to do it. And [sighs] especially for the interpersonal ones...it’s usually not malicious. Um and ignorance I can tolerate much more than malicious malice.

In this way, perceiving these incidents as a product of ignorance rather than hate or “malice” served as a means of making sense of these interactions and coping with them in a way that was viewed as healthier and, thus, potentially less emotionally and psychologically taxing. Many cited the misperceptions that pervade public rhetoric about Muslims and Sikhs as a central driver of this ignorance, in large part due to the ways in which these communities have been portrayed in the media, particularly since 9/11.

---

7 Sikh man, age 27, 2nd generation, SA_Int9, conducted March 10, 2018.
Specifically, by acknowledging the role of the media in portraying certain images and messages about Muslims and Sikhs, the misperceptions perceived to motivate incidents of discrimination were not seen as solely the fault of the perpetrator. As one Muslim man<sup>8</sup> explained, “I don’t blame them, you know, there’s so much in media.” In this way, he struggled to find fault with individuals’ views or actions, but instead viewed their ignorance as understandable, given the conditions that shape their misunderstanding. Still others attributed experiencing uncomfortable looks or name-calling by strangers as a result of these individuals being “upset” or having a “bad day or something”<sup>9</sup> as opposed to being motivated by religious or racial bias.

Nonetheless, whether respondents perceived experiencing overt, covert, or no discrimination, resonating through each of these narratives was a persistent theme of gratitude. Many respondents expressed this gratitude by sharing how blessed they felt, by thanking God, by describing themselves as “lucky” not to have faced such challenges personally, or grateful that their experiences were not as severe as they could have been. Taken together, these mechanisms of denying or downplaying discrimination acknowledge these incidents of othering yet serve as a means of moderating their effects. This occurs either by attributing their motivation to more innocuous reasons outside the control of the discriminator, or by maintaining a perspective of gratitude that downplays individual-level experiences of discrimination but remains grounded in an awareness of the broader challenges that communities contend with in the current climate.

<sup>8</sup> Muslim man, age 64, 1<sup>st</sup> generation, MA_Int7, conducted January 27, 2018.
<sup>9</sup> Muslim man, age 44, 1<sup>st</sup> generation, MA_Int10, conducted March 4, 2018.
In addition to these instances of denying or downplaying experiences of discrimination, many Muslims and Sikhs shared narratives of their ability to evade such experiences by virtue of being able to pass or “blend in.” For some, this ability to “blend in” was perceived as based on having a lighter skin tone, lighter hair color, the absence of visible articles of faith, or a combination of these factors. Yet this experience of “blending in” was often coupled with or facilitated by others’ uncertainty about their racial and/or religious identities. Many Muslim and Sikh respondents reported contending with racial and/or religious misclassification such that navigating racial and/or religious ambiguity represented a salient part of their lived experiences. And in some cases, this ambiguity afforded some benefits. For instance, as one Muslim woman shared while remembering 9/11 and the dramatic shift she observed in the perception of and treatment towards Muslims at that time:

*I mean I didn’t necessarily suffer much in my daily life because I was, you know, there wasn’t nothing about me – I wasn’t wearing a hijab, I could blend in, right? My parents, they were very afraid...[but] fortunately we didn’t actually physically get attacked. But that’s because all four of us [parents and brother] did not look Muslim.*

For this respondent, her perception of “not look[ing] Muslim” was described in terms of not adorning visible religious markers such as a *hijab*, as well as having a

10 Muslim woman, age 33, 1.5 generation, MA_Int8, conducted February 3, 2018.
Mehta 31

phenotype that enabled her and her family to “blend in.” This association between the visibility (or invisibility) of markers and experiences of misclassification and the ability to dodge unfair treatment was echoed by another Muslim woman\textsuperscript{11} while describing her childhood growing up in Kentucky:

\begin{quote}
I don’t think they [her classmates] knew where I was from...I think that’s why I never got bullied. They just didn’t know what I was. I mean in Kentucky they probably assumed I’m Latino cause I have black hair, but like that’s it, like and cause my mom had like – back then she had brunette hair with like blonde streaks and my dad – like we’re all light-skinned, and we don’t look stereotypically Muslim I guess.
\end{quote}

In this way, physical attributes such as skin tone and hair color are viewed as markers of looking “stereotypically Muslim” or alternatively, evading this stereotype. In addition to avoiding experiences of bullying in school, others acknowledged benefits that “blending in” afforded in the workplace. In fact, the same Muslim woman\textsuperscript{12} who avoided negative experiences after 9/11 described some of these benefits while sharing questions she often receives about her identity:

\begin{quote}
I think part of it may be because I have such a diverse background...you know, we speak a lot of different languages and I’m exposed to a lot of cultures. I actually can semi blend in, so I don’t really stick out like a sore thumb... I mean it’s
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{11} Muslim woman, age 24, 1.5 generation, MA\_Int12, conducted April 2, 2018.
\textsuperscript{12} Muslim woman, age 33, 1.5 generation, MA\_Int8, conducted February 3, 2018.
helpful when it comes to work, and I have to connect with people with diverse backgrounds... but when it comes to identifying myself as one [a Muslim], I think that I’m a little bit of a chameleon.

Thus, being a “chameleon” came with some observed benefits and exemplified the ways in which experiences of discrimination are patterned by how Muslims and Sikhs are perceived by others and, in turn, ascribed into categories, regardless of whether these categories align with their own identities.

However, this ambiguity often means that the boundaries of these categories are blurry and may change depending on the context. In addition, for Sikhs, these categories often cut across racial and religious lines. For instance, as one Sikh woman in her 30s shared when describing growing up in Wisconsin:

*It all depends on who I meet. Um in Wisconsin, it was very much like you’re a brown girl. We don’t know where to place you cause, you know, when you have less interaction with people of different cultures you really don’t know what to identify them as...[but] if they are wanting to judge, they’re quick to label you as brown. You know, your kind of brown, Muslim, Hindu kind of expectation.*

Here we see evidence of categorical lumping across race and religious affiliation, as well as different perceptions around race and ethnicity across context. Since living in Houston, she shared that “a lot of people think that I’m Hispanic,” and her students often

13 Sikh woman, age 30, 2nd generation, SA_Int7, conducted on February 24, 2018.
assume that she can speak Spanish, which she attributes to being a “lighter-colored Punjabi girl.” While the ambiguity around being Muslim, Hindu, or Hispanic is significant, what remains salient across this variation is a perception of foreignness associated with *brownness*. Despite describing a similar ability to “fit in” as many Muslim women who did not cover, it is evident that these respondents are not immune from the consistent, albeit fluid, experience of being “othered.”

Further, while these racialized experiences are patterned by visibility of diverse phenotypic and religious markers, they also differed by *gender* by virtue of the gendered patterns of adorning visible religious markers unique to each faith community. However, these patterns varied across gender differently for each faith community, given that men in the Sikh community more commonly adorn *dastaars*, while the *hijab* remains a more visible religious expression for Muslim women. Thus, for *hijabi* Muslim women and turbaned Sikh men, their inability to “blend in” by virtue of wearing visible articles of faith and “standing out” shapes experiences of discrimination – and the perceived risk of discrimination – in notable ways. As one Muslim *hijabi* woman\(^{14}\) in her 30s explained:

*The first thing I can say is just my hijab, yeah, that is very, very visible, right, so you are declaring [your identity]... you know, our culture is you don’t talk about politics, you don’t talk about religion, but when you have something on your attire that is so much visible for which faith you belong to and if somebody have a*

\(^{14}\) Muslim woman, age 32, 1\(^{st}\) generation, MA_Int4, conducted December 13, 2017.
negative perspective about that faith, they will be less interested to get to know you because they don’t like it.

In contrast, one Sikh woman\textsuperscript{15} explained that experiences of discrimination were a salient part of her everyday life, but in ways that were either directly related to her gender or were conditioned upon her proximity with the men in her life who maintain *dastaars* and beards. As she described:

*It’s not because of who I am, but who I’m with. If I’m with my brother or if I’m with them [pointing to her sons] or if I’m with my dad, [but] not me…this is a gender conversation more than it is a Sikh and non-Sikh conversation… I don’t really get the whole you’re Indian, I’m going to hold it against you thing, or you’re Sikh, I’m going to hold it against you thing yet. But I get it when I’m with them.*

In this way, being with her male relatives who adorned these visible religious symbols would make her own racial and religious identities stand out more by association, even if indirectly. This difference across gender was also observed by Muslim and Sikh men. As one Muslim man\textsuperscript{16} explained when asked if he has any observed differences in the experiences of men and women in his community around experiences of discrimination:

*I think for sure females because, you know, hijab is a very visible thing and it’s more… difficult probably for most Muslim women, you know. And it’s something*
that's not – like you can’t really hide it. It’s a very obvious symbol, so it’s more...I think they’re more a visible target I guess...so they have a lot more pressure.

Alternatively, in the Sikh community, it was the men who more often felt this pressure. As one Sikh man\(^\text{17}\) described, “Yeah, I definitely think there’s a difference between men and women’s experiences. I don’t really know [that] women get shouted at, being called terrorist or ragheads or whatever.” He observed these differences while working with his parents at a gas station and noticing how customers “treated my mom way different that they treated my dad,” turning to her for assistance more often and never calling her names. This sentiment was echoed by another Sikh man\(^\text{18}\) who shared: “I think it’s the turban and the beard that stand out so much that I feel like it has to be a difference experience.” In fact, throughout my interviews with Sikhs, Sikh men reported more experiences of being questioned and inspected at airports, more incidents of bullying in school, and perceived more discrimination – from being verbally attacked to being denied employment or entry into public spaces like restaurants. Even when recruiting respondents at the gurdwara, many Sikh women I met encouraged me to interview their husbands or a male relative instead, due to the amplified challenges they perceive turbaned men have to negotiate in their everyday lives. That said, some Sikh women also wear head coverings or turbans as articles of faith and, in such instances, indicate a greater likelihood of experiencing discrimination. Thus, finding clean,

\(^{17}\) Sikh man, age 27, 2\(^{nd}\) generation, SA_Int15, conducted on May 28, 2018.

\(^{18}\) Sikh man, age 35, 1\(^{st}\) generation, SA_Int1, conducted on November 10, 2017.
gendered patterns within this sea of nuance becomes challenging given the ways in which expressions of faith differ by gender and may be perceived differently based on the type of symbol and the type of body wearing those symbols, as reflected by the potential disparities between Sikh women who wear scarves or turbans and those who do not. Nonetheless, the centrality of these visible, outward articles faith in patterning experiences of discrimination suggests a clear interplay between visibility and racialized experiences.

*Perceived Effects of Discrimination: Shaping “Choices”*

While perceived discrimination was largely patterned by the visibility of racialized markers, even among respondents who had not perceived personal experiences of discrimination, many shared narratives of a relative or close friend who had, and several reported knowing someone closely who had been the target of an alleged hate crime. Thus, the knowledge of others’ experiences signaled an awareness of the salience of this issue at a community-level, in addition to an awareness of the risk of being discriminated against by virtue of membership into their religious community. Thus, even among respondents who perceived an ability to “blend in” and dodge discrimination, the perceived risk of being discriminated remained a salient experience that shaped many Muslims and Sikhs’ behaviors and life “choices.”

In this way, both perceived experiences of discrimination and the perceived risk of experiencing discrimination patterned certain “choices” for Muslims and Sikhs in their daily lives. For some, these decisions centered on critical aspects of their lives such as
their place of employment, ranging from becoming an entrepreneur to moving overseas for work after repeated layoffs. As one Sikh woman\(^{19}\) explained:

*My dad moved here to Houston [in the 1960s] and then he kept getting laid off because of his pagg (turban)...he’d get a job, you know, they’d bring him onboard, do everything, then they’d give him, you know, the grooming policy and say okay, you have to cut your hair. And he’d say no, so then he’d get fired from yet another job.*

With a family to support and limited job stability due to his decision not to conform to the company’s grooming policy by removing his turban, her father bought a small business in a very different field to his previous line of work, with this new venture affording economic opportunity that otherwise seemed out of reach. This “choice” in response to the structural conditions of the time reflects the endurance of some of the challenges Muslims and Sikhs Americans have faced, decades before 9/11. Yet 9/11 remains a critical turning point for many community members that continues to garner emotional reactions when reflecting on the sudden wave of hostility that arose in the immediate aftermath of the tragedy. As one Muslim man\(^{20}\) shared:

*I mean I remember. I was like scared to go out of my house, like right after...September 11\(^{th}\), like I felt like somebody is going to shoot me like the minute I walk out of my house, like people were so geared up against Islam and

\(^{19}\)Sikh woman, age 44, 2\(^{nd}\) generation, SA_Int2, conducted November 22, 2017.

\(^{20}\)Muslim man, age 43, 2\(^{nd}\) generation, MA_Int6, conducted January 25, 2018.
like it was so bad, you know. And I could feel that...like two days later I went out
and I would see people like staring at me when I stopped at a traffic light...and
you can tell it's a weird kind of scary stare.

While negotiating the intensity of the climate, he also lost his job. And while he
admittedly could not “pinpoint” what motivated this decision, he found it difficult not to
attribute it to discrimination given the timing and the workplace conditions that preceded
his dismissal. At the time he was working for an oil company doing software
development, and as he recalled:

He [my boss] just completely changed after September 11th. With me his behavior
changed...he just turned into like a different person and everything I was doing
was all of a sudden not good [laughs]. And so within a really short period of time
I lost the job. And I was like – that kind of hit me pretty hard, cause everything
was perfect until then. And there was a Hindu guy who worked with me and he
was perfectly fine...[so] I felt it was just like a very religious oriented kind of
decision. And so at that point I kind of – I actually took a job in Saudi Arabia
[laughs]...I felt so much – so upset and discriminated and I was like maybe I need
to kind of be in a Muslim country again or something.

While this respondent was a second-generation Muslim American of diverse
Middle Eastern decent, he spent a significant part of his childhood in Saudi Arabia and
attended school there for much of his life. Thus, he welcomed the opportunity to escape
the heightened discrimination he was experiencing, as well as escape the stress of
increased surveillance. He reported being “followed by the FBI,” receiving phone calls
and being questioned repeatedly. And he suspected that the FBI reached out to his boss, which may have been associated with this observed shift in his behavior. Thus, while he perceived his termination to be both racially- and religiously-motivated, describing his boss as a racially “inclined kind of guy” and observing the differential outcome of his Hindu colleague, he feared the implications of the federal government’s suspicions even more. Thus, the choice to relocate to Saudi Arabia largely centered on the stress of this entire experience. As he explained, “that’s why eventually I decided to leave to like to go work overseas. I was like this is just too much stress, you know…24/7 surveillance.” He believed that this “harassment from the government” he was experiencing was largely predicated on his extensive travels to diverse corners of the Muslim world over the years, inspired by a personal desire to explore his faith but resulting in concerns that he might be “a terrorist or something.” While he ultimately returned to the Houston area, these experiences significantly shaped his sense of belonging in the US given how his race and religion became a cause for institutional and interpersonal suspicion.

In addition to patterning choices around employment, the perceived threat of experiencing discrimination also appeared to shape engagement with institutions. For instance, one Muslim woman\textsuperscript{21} who migrated to the US from Kenya as a teenager shared her parents’ concerns around pursuing their pathway to citizenship after 9/11. As she explained:

\textsuperscript{21} Muslim woman, age 33, 1.5 generation, conducted on February 2, 2018.
9/11 really did ruin my life and my brother’s life because after that, you know, we had been new to America, so we were still in the immigration process. And going through – coming from Kenya…I experienced bombing. The embassy bombings happened in ’98 when I was in Nairobi... so I had already been impacted by the, you know, whatever this new terrorism thing that was coming up. But I think it was different in America because now I wasn’t the victim. Now I was the perpetrator...we felt guilty for being Muslim. We felt scared for being Muslim and... being immigrants. And so that influenced how our immigration process was processed, and also my parents because they were very afraid... they actually decided not to go through with certain steps that they needed to go through...[and now] we are still suffering because my parents decided it was safer for us...[not to] go through the process that we needed to go through.

A Dreamer, she considered herself “very fortunate” since she and her family were not physically harmed after 9/11. However, the amplified fear of seeing others around her assaulted and the concern of how others may react to them motivated her parents’ decision not to pursue a legal pathway to citizenship and resulted in the “lasting effects” she felt for both herself and her brother, as their citizenship status and their capacity to work in the US remain in a precarious status. Thus, as these narratives exemplify, the perceived risk of discrimination – whether in addition to or in the absence of direct experiences of discrimination – have had an effect on both interpersonal interactions and interactions with institutions, which may have lasting consequences on life chances.

That said, for others, these “choices” entailed conscious decisions around more subtle, but tangible aspects of their everyday lives such as their dress and self-
presentation in diverse public spaces, motivated by concerns about the perceptions of those around them. Some examples include a Sikh woman in her 30s expressing concerns about wearing a salwar kameez (Indian attire) in settings outside of the gurdwara, or a Muslim hijabi woman in her 70s expressing discomfort about traveling alone in her local area and electing not to go without her husband. These reactions reflected concerns that each admitted did not exist before 9/11, nor were predicated on specific incidents of discrimination personally encountered. Instead, they were conveyed as precautionary steps that could readily be taken to avoid potential incidents. These precautions extended to other settings such as airports, with some Muslim and Sikh men expressing a heightened consciousness around shaving their beards before heading to the airport, or Muslim women electing not to wear a hijab specifically while flying.

Yet these preemptive steps were not limited to choices around what to wear, how to look, or how to behave at a given place and time, but also surfaced for some long-term decisions around career choices. An example of this emerged in an interview with a Sikh woman\textsuperscript{22} in her 30s who shared her dream of becoming a flight attendant – a dream that arose in high school very shortly before 9/11. As she explained:

\textit{See for me I never chased money. For me I’ve always wanted to do what was fun and exciting cause you – you know what I mean? And I’ve always loved traveling. And flight attendants, they don’t make that much money...but I didn’t care, and that’s what I wanted to do. And I had finally – finally made up my mind}

\textsuperscript{22}Sikh woman, age 33, 2\textsuperscript{nd} generation, SA_Int13, conducted April 5, 2018.
Mehta 42

and I was so excited…I was so excited to travel the world, and then it [9/11] happened, and I was like no, I can’t do this.

When I prompted about what motivated her to reach this decision about no longer pursuing this path, she explained that there were:

A couple things. Number one, it’s unsafe. It’s very unsafe. And number two, would they even hire me cause I’m brown, you know what I mean? I just remember thinking…the universe is telling me not to do this. Cause I’m really big on like – how should I say this? Like I made a decision to become a flight attendant and a couple days later 9/11 [happened], and so for me that’s like a sign of no, you shouldn’t be a flight attendant.

Thus, while she saw this as a “sign” that this particular path was not meant to be, she also expressed concerns about her personal safety, in addition to whether she would even be considered for the position because of her race. And these concerns emerged despite being one of the several respondents who did not perceive experiencing unfair treatment. Thus, it is not only direct experiences of discrimination that shape the everyday lives of members of these communities, but rather the perceived risk of being discriminated against that can pattern life choices and life chances – from seemingly innocuous decisions about wearing certain clothes in certain spaces to lasting choices around such issues as career paths and pathways to citizenship.

Perceived Risk and Engendering Resilience through Religious Identity Construction

Although concerns about the perceived risk of discrimination and fears about safety resonated with many Muslims and Sikhs, many of these “choices” made were
often viewed as adaptations that allowed them to remain resilient in their beliefs, identities, and ambitions but in ways that were perceived as more amenable to this broader goal. For instance, the Sikh woman whose father struck out on his own and began a new business did so in the spirit of not wanting to sacrifice a salient facet of his identity. And the Sikh woman who decided against becoming a flight attendant did not let go of her passion for travel, talking at length about her year-long world tour that she had recently returned from. And for the Muslim man\textsuperscript{23} who reported losing his job and negotiating intense FBI surveillance, he explained how his religious identity “evolved” and, in fact, strengthened in the face of being challenged:

\begin{quote}
In my case like it actually made me look deeper into my identity and my religion and my understanding of it...when this all happened it made me really like think...does this – the stuff that they’re saying [about Islam], you know, I mean the perceived threat that they have, is it a real threat? Where does it stem from? Is it based on a... deviated, corrupted version of Islam or is it – is that really Islam? Or what is real Islam, you know what I’m saying? Like so that made me really like search deeper for answers...so I feel it helped me really reach a better understanding, a deeper understanding.
\end{quote}

Such narratives around gaining more resolve in one’s religious identity while negotiating experiences of discrimination emerged frequently and resonated for both Muslim and Sikh respondents. For some, this expression of resilience seemed to reflect

\textsuperscript{23} Muslim man, age 43, 2\textsuperscript{nd} generation, MA_Int6, conducted on January 25, 2017.
not only the individual-level significance of their faith, but also a sense of resistance against a climate that situated their collective identities and communities as under threat. As a Sikh woman\textsuperscript{24} in her 40s articulated:

\begin{quote}
I think it’s hard personally when some of our friends have to go through that [experiencing discrimination], and it really hits them hard on their Sikhi because it’s like, ok, I stand out because of this. If I didn’t look this way, I wouldn’t have to deal with it. And, unfortunately, I believe that we can’t control other people, but if we start giving up on what we believe in, then they’ve already won.
\end{quote}

In this vein, the felt sense of resilience in the face of the challenges that Muslim and Sikh Americans contend with in their everyday lives may reflect a desire to resist losing a central dimension of themselves that “they” – the perpetrators of these incidents – hold negative sentiments toward. And this sense of resilience, motivated by the incidents of bias and hate that members of these communities observe, hear about, or experience directly, appears to undergird a desire to assert one’s faith more visibly and intentionally, despite the potential risks that may arise from this assertion.

For others, this experience of their religious identities becoming strengthened did not always derive from direct experiences of discrimination, but rather concerns for the safety and wellbeing of those around them. As one Sikh woman\textsuperscript{25} in her 30s explained:

\begin{quote}

\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{24} Sikh woman, age 40, 2\textsuperscript{nd} generation, SA_Int12, conducted on March 25, 2018.
\textsuperscript{25} Sikh woman, age 30, 2\textsuperscript{nd} generation, SA_Int10, conducted on March 18, 2018.
It strengthened my identity. It also challenged me mentally because although it didn’t – like the stereotypes or like the comments being made and the safety concerns didn’t really impact me, there was still – I’m a middle child so I’m like very protective of everyone around me. So making sure like no one messes with my brother...and then speaking up and like, letting those that can make a difference.

By seeing herself as someone who could speak up and “make a difference” to protect those around her, this respondent found a heightened resolve and meaning in her religious identity, even when confronted with being challenged “mentally” by the perceived risk of discrimination or hate incidents affecting those closer to her. Similarly, as a young Muslim woman explained:

*The night that Trump got elected I called my dad crying and I was like dad...you need to stop going to the mosque all the time. You need to like – you need to not be so open a Muslim. Don’t pray at work... I don’t want you to like, you know, get assaulted...[and] he’s like, “hey, it’s going to be okay...I’m never going to stop being proud of who I am, but you need to understand that there’s some things that we just have to deal with.”*

This pride her father had in his Muslim identity, resonated deeply with this respondent, a college student in her early 20s, in ways that shaped how she saw herself, what it meant to be Muslim in the Trump era, and how she subsequently navigated the amplified

26 Muslim woman, age 21, 1.5 generation, MA_Int9, conducted February 15, 2018.
contestation she perceived around her and her family’s Muslim identity that she initially feared after the 2016 election, particularly through activism on her campus. Thus, this sense of resilience that was felt and asserted by many community members was not necessarily engendered in the face of direct, personal experiences of discrimination, but rather an awareness of the risk of being discriminated against or being assaulted by virtue of a core aspect of their identity, and the resilience of those around them. While this resilience was often represented as a sense pride expressed regarding one’s religious identities, for some, this pride was also expressed in terms of the heightened significance they perceived of key religious symbols, as a direct result of the racial meaning imbued within these symbols. For instance, while reflecting on the ways in which 9/11 impacted his personal faith, one Sikh man explained the amplified respect he had for the dastaar and those who wore one. As he shared: “it gave me more pride in people in the community, those who were showing their beliefs so courageously in the face of this violence, literally risking their lives.” For this respondent, the courage he observed in his fellow Sikh community members who adorn this symbol even in the face of the risks not only amplified his own sense of pride in his Sikh identity, but also the religious significance and meaning of this racialized symbol.

Blending in vs. Standing out: Constructing Racialized Religious Identities

Taken together, emerging from these narratives was a felt negotiation between blending in and standing out, sparked by a tension between wanting to mitigate the risks

27 Sikh man, age 27, 2nd generation, SA_Int9, conducted March 10, 2018.
associated with being perceived as Muslim, Sikh, or even an ambiguous racialized “other” and wanting to express this salient aspect of one’s identity visibly. This constant negotiation between blending in and standing out undergirds a mechanism through which community members construct their religious identities and imbue these identities with both religious and racial meaning. In fact, many Muslims and Sikhs, including those who expressed benefits from their ability to “blend in,” conveyed a strengthened desire to assert their religious identity, despite the potential risks that they were keenly aware could arise by doing so. For some, this desire was expressed by beginning to adopt visible religious symbols that they had not previously worn. For instance, one Muslim woman shared her experience immigrating to the US from Bangladesh in her early 20s, and explained what motivated her to begin wearing a hijab upon arriving in the US:

So, my name is – it’s not a Muslim name. It’s not an Arabic name. Most of the people have – who are like born Muslim they have Arabic name. And I don’t know, but it’s something that I wanted to have…that was self-identity for me to wear a hijab, to distinguish myself, you know, my inner self, that I am a Muslim.

While none of her relatives back home in Bangladesh wore a hijab, her decision to cover as motivated by a desire to distinguish herself as Muslim and assert this important aspect of her identity, since she perceived that her religious identity was not evident by her name. However, this choice was also motivated by her arrival in the US after 9/11. Thus, her decision to begin wearing the hijab also stemmed from an awareness that she

28 Muslim woman, age 32, 1st generation, MA_Int4, conducted December 13, 2017.
was now both American and Muslim, but in order to express her “inner self” and not minimize the Muslim half of this duality, she adopted this external symbol to make this aspect of her identity more visible not in spite but because of what this identity represented in post-9/11 America.

This amplified desire to stand out as Muslim was also motivated by her deepened understanding of Islam since arriving in the US. As she explained, the “Islam that we have in different parts of the world are very cultural-based. Islam here [in this US] is very knowledge-based.” This longing to seek knowledge rather than accept cultural practices at face value was described not only as a product of being in the US, but also being in the US post-9/11. The heightened contestation perceived after 9/11 inspired many community members to embark on a self-reflective journey to contemplate what it meant to them to be Muslim, what their faith represented, and the extent to which they wanted to embody this aspect of their identity. This desire to research one’s faith and reflect on these core questions became a recurring theme for many Muslim and Sikh respondents. In fact, as one Muslim woman explained:

My religious identity was not maybe directly challenged but... four years ago I started a self-reflection journey to see what my religious identity was...I think it was because I was living in America where for years I kept hearing, you know, such negativity about Muslims, but without really any conscious thought, have always identified myself as Muslim...[so] I felt like there was a disconnection

29 Muslim woman, age 33, 1.5 generation, MA_Int8, conducted February 3, 2018.
between what I considered myself and what the society and others thought of what Muslims were, you know, and it really upset me, and so I wanted to figure out like...I didn’t think I was a bad person, so I didn’t want to be part of “a bad religion.” So, I decided to look into the religion, understand it and see if it was bad so that I could make a decision for myself as to whether I would continue calling myself a Muslim or not.

Thus, while this respondent did not necessarily have a personal experience of discrimination that “directly challenged” her faith, the pervasive rhetoric she heard in the US that cast Muslims in a negative light motivated a self-reflective quest to understand what Islam as a faith truly represents and research religious teachings to help her determine whether this was a faith that she wanted to continue affiliating with. In time, this journey prompted by the rise in anti-Muslim sentiment she observed after 9/11, ultimately strengthened her faith. As she went on to explain:

*It did actually strengthen it... as the animosity has grown, so has my resolve to really highlight who I am... so now I proudly say I’m Muslim and I tell it to everybody who’s listening, and I tell them ask me if you have questions, meet a Muslim. I kind of take it upon myself, one, to strengthen myself in my religion cause I realize it’s that important to me...and second of all, it gave me the ability I have to stand up for myself... I can’t keep quiet anymore. When I sit in a room and people are bashing Muslims, I am going to let them know [that I am Muslim]. Bash me to my face. Let’s see what you’re going to say. And I think I’ve gotten to that point because I’ve crossed the line. You know, you start with fear, you get to*
Thus, this desire to stand out and proudly assert her Muslim identity was coupled with a felt need to stand up for herself and defend a salient aspect of her identity. In fact, this respondent shared that she wanted to begin wearing a hijab, but eventually elected not to due to her family’s concerns for her safety. While she makes a point to wear a hijab at the masjid as a way of practicing her faith, these concerns expressed by her family and the tension felt around what spaces are considered safe to express her faith visibly exemplifies this negotiation embedded in identity construction – all of which is undergirded by the racial meaning ascribed to her religious identity and what it represents to those around her.

This awareness of the racial meaning ascribed to certain religious articles and practices was similarly expressed by a Sikh man\textsuperscript{30} who immigrated to the US from Punjab at a young age. Shortly after arriving in California, he cut his hair and stopped wearing a turban, but continued to attend the gurdwara and participate in regional Sikh youth camps. For years, he felt that members of the community did not think that he was really a Sikh because he did not keep his hair. However, after 9/11, many of the friends who he viewed as being very strong in their Sikh faith began cutting their hair, out of fear of the potential consequences of standing out - and raised questions for him as a teenager about what it really meant to be Sikh. Thus, the climate of fear he perceived that shaped

\textsuperscript{30} Sikh man, age 30, 1.5 generation, SA_Int8, conducted on February 24, 2018.
the religious expression of those around him deepened his curiosity about Sikhism. He
pursued this curiosity by questioning faith leaders and doing a lot of research on his own,
and ultimately deciding to keep his hair and wear a turban again. As he reflected on his
personal journey, he shared some of the benefits he perceives wearing a turban affords:

*It made me value the dastaar because at the end of the day I felt like that’s what
the pagg (turban) was about...you don’t have to face the duplicity of people. It
becomes very clear who’s okay with talking to you and who’s not okay with
talking to you. Life just gets very simplified, and then it’s up to you to decide how
you want to interact.*

In this way, the respondent was aware of divergent reactions people may have upon
seeing a man with a turban and has found wearing a *dastaar* as a means of negotiating
race and racialized experiences by enabling others’ perceptions of him to become more
overt and, thus, easier to navigate. Thus, for some Muslims and Sikhs, this negotiation
between *blending in* and *standing out* rendered a desire to begin adopting visible
religious symbols that enabled them to assert their religious identities in a meaningful
way. Yet for others who shared this desire to but were negotiating personal and family
concerns associated with wearing specific religious symbols, religious identities were
also asserted in other ways. For instance, some described wearing certain cultural
markers (i.e. clothing or jewelry) which they perceived signaled an association with their
religious tradition, while others expressed being intentional to share their religious
identities verbally (i.e. through conversations in the workplace with colleagues). And
still others described their service work, voluntarism, or even chosen career paths as a
means of feeling connected to a core religious commitment of serving others, enabling
them to assert their religious identity through these efforts. Thus, this felt negotiation signals a keen awareness of the racial meaning that has been ascribed to these diverse religious and cultural symbols, while the construction and assertion of religious identities is also racialized by virtue of a climate that, for many Muslims and Sikhs, has strengthened the salience and meaning of core religious values.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

The recent and durable rise in hate crimes against Muslim Americans has sparked increasing concerns about the pervasiveness of Islamophobia in the US, and the lasting consequences of enduring anti-Muslim sentiment on American public and political life. However, examining hate crime statistics alone limits an understanding of the myriad of ways in which Muslims and other minority communities in the US experience structural and interpersonal discrimination, which represent critical ways in which racism and Islamophobia shape lived experiences and life chances. Thus, drawing on theories of racialization, I contribute to the growing literature on Islamophobia by examining how South Asian and Arab Muslim and Sikh Americans perceive experiences of discrimination, the effects of these experiences on their everyday lives, and how such experiences shape identity construction.

Ultimately, findings suggest that discrimination is a salient experience that many Muslims and Sikhs perceive, with such experiences emerging in a myriad of ways across diverse settings and largely associated with the visibility of markers of difference, such as phenotype, hair color, and religious articles. Nonetheless, some Muslims and Sikhs perceive an ability to “blend in” by virtue of having less visible markers of difference
such as having a lighter skin tone, lighter hair color, or the absence of certain religious symbols. While this ability to racially pass afforded these respondents a means with which to evade direct experiences of discrimination, many negotiated a tension around eschewing the potential benefits associated with blending in with a desire to stand out and actively assert a salient aspect of their religious identity, despite of the perceived risks of doing so. Underlying this complex negotiation between blending in and standing out was an awareness of the broader socio-political climate which situates their collective identities as under threat, and imbues racial meaning into the religious symbols, experiences, and identities of members of these communities. Thus, it is not only direct experiences of discrimination that shape the everyday lives of members of these communities and the construction and assertion of their religious identities, but rather an awareness of the broader social and political conditions that shape their racialized experiences.

Thus, this study finds evidence that supports previous work (Selod and Embrick 2013, Zopf 2018) examining racialization as a “layered process” whereby race operates alongside religion, ethnicity, national origin, name, and other signifiers of identity to pattern how religious and ethnic minority groups are racialized. However, my findings build on these previous studies by moving past a discussion only of how racialization is patterned and perceived, but rather incorporates a consideration of how racialization is negotiated. More specifically, this study contributes an analysis of how race is understood and negotiated through religion for members of these racialized minority groups for whom religion is a salient dimension of their identities. In addition, this study
demonstrates how *racialization prompts meaning-making* which, for some Muslims and Sikhs, amplifies the salience and assertion of their religious identities.

Findings largely suggest significant overlap in the ways in which Muslims and Sikhs perceive discrimination in their everyday lives, affording empirical support to previous work that theoretically posited shared racialized experiences among members of these communities (Considine 2017, Love 2017, Mishra 2016, Singh 2015). One key point of departure, however, emerged between Muslim and Sikh experiences such that perceived experiences of discrimination varied by gender, but in different ways across each faith tradition. Experiences of discrimination were patterned by visibility of physical markers in both communities. However, given that men in the Sikh community more commonly adorn *dastaars* and the *hijab* remains a more visible religious expression for Muslim women, differences emerged in terms of turbaned Sikh men and *hijabi* Muslim women having a higher likelihood of facing discriminatory encounters. That said, conducting a comparative study of Muslims and Sikhs and observing this asymmetric pattern across gender may problematize notions of gendered Islamophobia (see Perry 2014, Jasperse et al. 2011) and prompt future research that examines the role of how gender operates across minority religious traditions more critically.

Despite the contributions of these findings, some limitations remain. Given the sampling strategies employed and the decision to recruit respondents directly from religious communities, the sample for this study may represent, as Flyvbjerg (2006) would describe, the “most likely” community members to hold a salient religious identity. In other words, this sample may not reflect the views of Muslims and Sikhs in the US who may be less involved or less networked within a particular *masjid* or
gurdwara, respectively, and, thus, the generalizability of these findings may be limited due to concerns of selection bias. In addition, while this study focuses on the experiences of Muslim and Sikh Americans in Houston, affording valuable perspectives from community members in this vibrantly diverse urban center, the site selection of the study also limits the generalizability of these findings. In addition, given the focus of this study on the relationship between perceived experiences of discrimination and identity construction, an examination of how the context of Houston itself may be operating and shaping the construction of social identities was not incorporated within the scope of this research.

Future work could involve a comparative study of Muslim and Sikh experiences in different cities or geographic regions, as such a comparison would afford a means with which to foreground a consideration of contextual factors that may also be integral and underexplored in this process. Further, as Love (2017:67) explains, “the crux of structural racism becomes evident only when examining the effects of a constellation of factors, including discursive elements along with policies and practices. Structural racism results from the amplifying combination of hate crimes, bigoted statements, microaggressions, and governmental and corporate policies that – intentionally or not – reinforce racial disparities.” Thus, future work ought to engage more closely with the myriad of other factors that collectively undergird this enduring (and damaging) social phenomenon.

Nonetheless, this study contributes toward an understanding of the ways in which perceived experiences of discrimination, in addition to the perceived risk of being discriminated against, can have significant implications on shaping life “choices,” the
construction of racialized religious identities, and the assertion of these identities in diverse aspects of public life. In so doing, this study also contributes insight into the myriad of ways discrimination can be perceived and experienced and, specifically, the ways in which even the anticipation of experiencing discrimination may have additional consequences that are largely underexplored. The perceived risk of experiencing discrimination that many Muslims and Sikhs negotiate may not only have effects on shaping the types of strategies employed to navigate these experiences, but also may have potential health consequences on levels of stress and other measures of physical and mental wellbeing. Thus, there may be ways in which diverse dimensions of discriminatory experiences may have consequences that current measures of discrimination, particularly in survey research, may not be able to capture (see Brown 2001). Further, these findings contribute to burgeoning scholarship on Islamophobia and the racialized experiences of religious minorities (Canikar and Selod 2018, Kibria et al. 2018, Zopf 2018) by contributing insights into the critical role of religion in the racialization process not only in terms of how certain forms of religious expression may pattern ascription into racial categories, but also how religion may serve as a critical frame through which Muslim and Sikh Americans negotiate race and engender a sense of agency and meaning while contending with race.
Notes

1. Some scholars have expressed concerns about the validity and reliability of measures of *perceived* discrimination due to the uncertainty regarding, as Pager and Shepherd (2008:183) explain, the “extent perceptions of discrimination correspond to some reliable depiction of reality” since such experiences may be “misperceived or overlooked.” Nonetheless, perceived discrimination remains a salient empirical measure across subfields and, within the scope of this study, serves as a means of gauging how meaning around such experiences are shaped by the perception of such experiences.
References

*Traumatology* 15(9):48-63.


Coleman, Nancy. 2017. “On Average, 9 Mosques Have Been Targeted Every Month This Year.” CNN, August 7.


North, Anne. 2017. “The Scope of Hate in 2017: This Week in Hate.” *NY Times*, June 1.


