

## ***Combating Islamophobia in North America through Intercultural Communication***

*Naomi Ramirez*

*San Diego State University*

I am currently a doctoral student in the Joint Doctoral Program in Education at San Diego State University and Claremont Graduate University with equity and social justice at the core of both the program and my work. Part of my research is centered around the experiences of migrants who reside in Mexico and identify as Muslim, seeking to deeply understand the multiple facets of their lived experiences and how their identities as Muslims influence the ways in which they navigate life in a primarily Mexican-Catholic society. The purpose of my research is to inform intercultural exchange and communication between members of society along the U.S.-Mexico border in order to reduce anti-Islamic sentiment. This article is a summary of a presentation I gave at Universidad La Salle Oaxaca on May 21, 2022 including examples from the United States that demonstrate an absence of cultural awareness, understanding, and tolerance. I draw on the same concepts in order to make suggestions for attendees to become more informed intercultural communicators. Before delving into the summary of the presentation, I will detail the methods I used in order to contextualize its content.

### ***Methods and Location***

To prepare for this presentation, I drew from various sources and used a variety of qualitative methods. Since 2013, I have taken on the role of both observer and participant-observer to examine the growing Muslim populations in Mexico City, Rosarito, and Tijuana. My work initially began whilst conducting research on deported migrants in Tijuana. At that time I found out that there was a Muslim population in Tijuana, so I visited the first mosque established there. From that point, I pursued my research sponsored by a Fulbright research grant. My experience as an observer and a participant observer have simultaneously consisted of taking field notes of my observations, using photographic documentation, having casual conversations, and building connections with the organizers of the four sites that I elected to examine, as they represent the growing population of Muslims in all of Baja California. Additionally, given its

proximity to the border, I decided to only look at the population in Baja California for this work, but there is an increasing number of Muslims throughout Mexico, especially in Chiapas and Mexico City. As local mosques host most of the Muslim community in Baja California, they were used as prime locations for participant recruitment. In this work I also reference Muslim experiences—including my own—in the United States given its close proximity to Mexico, specifically citing cases that demonstrate various manifestations of an absence of cultural understanding and tolerance.

In the past decade, the Muslim community in Mexico has expanded its presence in Baja California by establishing five mosques, two of which have merged into one Islamic center that serves the community of Playas de Tijuana. Two additional mosques are located in Rosarito, Baja California and another in Ensenada. The Muslim community members of the research sites are from diverse international and domestic locations and are mostly migrants. Some have been deported from the United States. Others are from other parts of the world but are waiting in Mexico to cross the border to the United States. Others have made the decision to make a new life in Mexico, arriving from countries such as India, Pakistan, Haiti, Palestine, Morocco, Russia, Kurdistan, Turkey, and the United States. Given the major shifts in political climate and the range of natural disasters displacing thousands of people globally, namely, the previously mentioned countries, the composition of these Muslim groups is diverse and continuously changing. Furthermore, because of its geographic location, these borderland migrants occupy a unique space and are often a highly transitory population, which can make becoming familiar with individuals on a personal level quite challenging. Nevertheless, I pursued my work and found discrimination, lack of knowledge by non Muslims residing near the Muslim communities in Mexico, while in the United States an increase in anti Muslim rhetoric was being spread. As neighboring countries, the United States and Mexico inevitably influence one another. As such, I found it necessary to inform and clarify misconceptions of this population, to prevent the hate from spreading.

### ***My Presentation***

My presentation began with a brief reflection activity. I asked the audience of teachers and scholars the following question: “When you hear the word ‘Muslim’ and/or ‘Islam,’ what images or ideas come to mind?” Participants gave

various responses such as “hijab,” “Ramadan,” “terrorism,” and “Arabs,” while most stayed silent. The answers shared by the audience are common ideas that I have encountered both in Mexico and the United States. This narrow scope of responses begs the question: *How do we unteach stereotypes?* When one is not seen as human, but instead, is “othered” and dehumanized, negative sentiments proliferate with greater ease.

### ***Framework: Intercultural Communication***

After the reflection activity, I then shifted the discussion to the subject of intercultural communication. Intercultural communication is a symbolic, interpretive, transactional, contextual process in which people from different cultures create shared meanings (Lustig & Koester, 2007:46). These shared meanings are heavily impacted by how people are perceived and how much effort one puts into being a culturally informed person. The initial question we need to ask is: Why does intercultural communication matter? For many, the response is an obvious one, but when it comes time to put it into practice, many do not implement intercultural communication or cultural relativism in their daily lives or in interactions with others. Within this context, understanding the differences and similarities between people is of particular importance; without the skill to make that distinction, many problems can potentially arise. Often, the presence of misconceptions will impact the potential to achieve positive interactions.

The goal of intercultural communication is to reach an understanding of a person’s deep culture. This deep level of culture, in part, consists of core beliefs, ethics, notions of fairness, and worldviews (Hammond, 2015). Few people manage to reach understanding of deep culture although they may believe that they are practicing intercultural communication. Many people take the time to inform themselves about surface-level culture, which consists of basic characteristics such as traditional foods, the celebration of holidays, important traditions, and music (Hammond, 2015). While these aspects of culture are very important, simply learning basic culture characteristics does not allow for the necessary connection to truly reach a place of understanding, tolerance, mutual respect, and peace. In order to reach important levels of understanding, a deeper examination of what people hold dear to their identity and culture is required. When a deep level of consideration and understanding is achieved, it fosters an emotional impact that allows people to build trust with one another (Hammond, 2015).

### ***Contextualizing Misunderstandings of Muslims***

The next portion of my presentation focused on the work “The Criminalization of Muslims in the United States, 2016” by Kaufman (2019) as it further helps explain the (mis)perceptions that people hold about Muslims in the United States. This work is a grounded theory study, meaning that data centers participant voices. The author collected data from 144 participants from diverse economic, religious, and racial groups. The theoretical background of the study is based on three concepts: criminalization theory, racialization, and orientalism. Criminalization is a “procedure deployed by society as a pre-emptive, harm-reduction device, using the threat of punishment as a deterrent to anyone proposing to engage in the behavior causing harm” (Crime, 2021). As cultures change and the political environments shift, societies may criminalize or decriminalize certain behaviors, which directly affects crime statistics and social perception of crime, deviant behavior, and who is and “should” be considered a criminal.

Regarding racialization, Kaufman argues that “Muslims are imagined to be a racial group” (2019, p. 523). As such, Muslims are specifically racialized far beyond the homogenization and subordination that other racial groups face (Kaufman, 2019). Despite Islam being a religion in which *all* people are able to participate, accept, and believe, followers within this religion are often viewed as a racial threat.

Lastly, Kaufman refers to orientalism, a popularized notion that oriental people are inferior, underdeveloped, sly, and untrustworthy—asserting that orientalism is produced by the Western gaze (2019). The author found that Muslims were discussed as a threat to public safety among participants—namely as a problem to be solved only with legal processes that identify and treat them as criminals. Simply put, Muslims were spoken of as a problem to be fixed. Kaufman’s research found that Muslims are also perceived not only as dangerous bodies, but also oppressive and hidden bodies. In this study, Muslims were found to be categorized in the same way Latinos or Black people are grouped, meaning that the general understanding and conversations regarding this group are framed racially, when in reality Islam is only a religious group with followers from all racial and ethnic backgrounds. This finding reveals a significant problem with misconceptions and a lack of understanding that Muslims face on a daily basis.

A critical need for intercultural communication regarding Muslims is readily identifiable within my research, as intercultural communication is predicated on deeper understanding. When intercultural communication is absent, consequences can vary from slightly uncomfortable situations to violent ones—and may even result in tragedy. To further exemplify the consequences of inefficient intercultural exchanges and understanding, a review of real cases of anti-Islamic sentiment in the United States over the last decade followed.

In order to demonstrate the range of anti-Islamic sentiment that often results in chaos, violence, humiliation, and even death, I provided examples—beginning with my own personal experiences. As previously stated, some anti-Islamic sentiment can be manifested on a smaller scale, through micro-aggressions toward individuals, such as multiple luggage and body inspections *after* you've already passed the security checkpoint at an airport. For others, the consequences of this anti-Islamic sentiment can reach violent, tragic, and even deadly levels. When I was researching various Muslim populations in Baja California in 2013, I experienced several instances of aggressive, hateful behavior at the hands of institutions meant to protect me as a citizen of the United States. For example, one day when I was crossing into the US through the San Ysidro border, I was sent to secondary inspection. What followed were actions that I can never erase from my memory. I was handcuffed, marched in front of hundreds of border crossers, humiliated, and detained for six hours with no justification. I was later released without apology or explanation, then was forced to face more negative attitudes from border patrol agents. My husband was subjected to even worse treatment; on at least ten separate occasions he was handcuffed and detained at the border, each time for at least 8 hours. At the very least, he was given an explanation for his detention—his name, Mohammed, was the reason he was subjected to this criminalization and dehumanizing treatment. It was not until the FBI investigated and intervened to clear his name that these excessive forms of policing the innocent ceased for my husband.

Another negative personal experience I had took place at my university when I applied for a prestigious international scholarship to conduct research in Mexico. In my personal statement, I had mentioned that I was Muslim, as it directly influenced my decision to want to research Muslim populations. During

one of the interviews, I was instructed to write “moderate Muslim” instead of just “Muslim”, as not doing so would jeopardize my selection, because failing to mention “moderate” somehow implied, for the scholarship committee, that I am an *extremist* or *radical* Muslim. At that time, I had to make the difficult decision to either give up the opportunity for this scholarship or proceed as instructed. I edited my essay to state “moderate Muslim.” I was awarded the scholarship, but at what cost? The dignity lost with that decision never returned.

Misunderstandings, ignorance, and hate intensify negativity within intercultural exchanges. Unfortunately, the world has seen many examples of how these attitudes can mobilize, turn violent, and end in tragedy. In 2015, Deah Barakat, his wife, Yusor Mohammad Abu-Salha, and her sister, Razan Mohammad Abu-Salha were brutally executed by their neighbor, simply for being Muslim. In 2017, Marq Perez set fire to the Victoria Islamic Center in Texas. In 2019, one man crazed by hate for Muslims killed 51 Muslims and injured several others in Christchurch, New Zealand. In the same week as the New Zealand massacre, in Escondido, California, another mosque was set on fire and vandalized with words of hate that referenced the New Zealand massacre. These tragedies all exemplify moments in which intercultural communication and understanding are completely absent and are replaced with ignorance and hate.

### ***Significance, Recommendations, and Future Studies***

Based on my own research, I have yet to uncover any scholarly works from the United States that properly address the existence, the impact, or the lived experiences of the current Muslim population along any of the border regions of US and Mexico, and throughout Latin America. Because this research question aligns with several disciplines, this study and my future research will contribute to interdisciplinary studies, public policy, education, migration studies, Latin American studies, public health, religious studies, and global studies. This research will inform research that analyzes student experience, migrant experience, violence, racism, racialization, and criminalization, and will also strengthen future student engagement in transborder, border, and migration research as it expounds upon literature regarding Muslim populations and their mobility, mission, and lived experiences.

I wish to conclude this paper in the same manner that I ended my presentation in Oaxaca: with a recommendation. For all individuals that aspire to grow intellectually, I recommend a process of regular self-reflexivity. I also challenge readers to think deeply about the many ways in which anti-Islamic sentiment and actions can be counteracted and prevented. For all individuals, educators, and community members, I strongly recommend that each person keeps an open mind, listens, focuses on commonalities, educates themselves, shares knowledge, and spreads love. These actions can help minimize hate toward any group and will provide a deeper understanding of cultures, which creates a foundation for appropriate, effective, and respectful exchanges among different cultural groups and individuals.

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