

Undoing Degradation: The Attempted “Rehumanization” of Arab and Muslim Americans

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Introduction

The attacks of September 11th, 2001 and the subsequent “war on terrorism” have brought forth increasing attention on Arab and Muslim Americans. While images of Arab and Muslim Americans have long been a part of Western media, the increase of media outlets (such as cable news networks, radio talk shows, internet sites) have contributed to an overall increase in coverage of these groups. Beyond accounts of events in the Arab and Islamic Worlds, the coverage has included discussions of the place of Arabs (immigrants and their descendants) and Muslims in Western society. This has been spurred by the “clash of civilizations” thesis that posits Western and Islamic civilizations constitute different cultures and values that will inevitably come into conflict when in contact. Furthermore, every new event or occurrence related in any way to Islam or the Arab World recharges conversation around the qualities and attributes of those who fall into the categories of ‘Arab’ and ‘Muslim’. Given that the “war on terrorism” is a war without a definite ending, we can expect this discourse to continue indefinitely.

Research on the presentation of Arabs and Muslims in the media primarily has focused on negative and dehumanizing portrayals, which show persons in these categories as essentially different from those in the

“West”. This paper takes an opposite approach by examining recent attempts in the media where writers, politicians, commentators, and organizations have tried to present Arab and Muslim Americans as essentially “like everyone else.”

This paper is not meant as a challenge to those studies that have clearly demonstrated the intensely negative stereotypical depictions of Arabs and Muslims. Furthermore, we do not assert that these images are lessening in severity, number, or impact. On the contrary, by focusing on the extensive attempts to present Arab and Muslim Americans as essentially “human”, this paper underlines the powerful impact that the negative portrayals have had on framing how Arab and Muslim Americans are viewed within US society. In short, because it has become so taken-for-granted and commonsense knowledge that Arabs and Muslims are different (not like *us*), it has become necessary to argue actively against this view. This paper examines these arguments, and whether arguments for a group’s same-ness can succeed.

Degradation of Arabs and Muslims in the mass media

Derogatory portrayals of Arab culture and Islam based on stereotypical characterizations can be found throughout

United States history. The primary view of the Arab and Islamic World depicted in the West has been that of a gathering threat in the form of advancing armies and immigrants. This antagonistic and suspicious feeling extends back to the earliest period of the US (see Allison 2000), and has been rendered as negative portrayals in movies and television (Shaheen 2001, 1997, 1984), literature (Terry 1985), and news coverage (Jahsahn 1989; Jalbert 1992, 1984; Ghareeb 1982; Said 1997). In all of these instances, Arabs and Muslims are presented as a certain formulaic type, reduced to a finite set of characteristics that are consistently emphasized. For instance, in his review of 900 films, Shaheen (2001: 2) has found that Hollywood typically portrays Arabs as “brute murderers, sleazy rapists, religious fanatics, oil-rich dimwits, and abusers of women.”

Research on the presentation of Arabs and Muslims in the mass media has shown how members of these categories are constructed as the “quintessential Other that is fundamentally different from us” (Michalek 1988: 3). In a 1982 interview conducted by Jack Shaheen (2000: 23), James Baerg, Director of Program Practices for CBS-TV, remarked “I think the Arab stereotype is attractive to a number of people. It is an easy thing to do.” He continued to comment on how such a character is easy for the viewing audience to accept; and that it is a useful device to use when an episode is slow, “the same thing as throwing in sex and violence.” The image of Arabs and Muslims is then presented in a very limited, narrow, and finite fashion. Edward Said (1979) refers to this as Orientalism, speaking to the process by which the West manufactured the East (i.e. Orient) and deals with it by: making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, teaching it, settling in it, and ruling over it. Or, as Clarke (1997: 10) explains, “Crucial terms such as ‘East’,

‘Orient’, and ‘West’ become devices for reducing endless complexities and diversities into manageable and falsifying unities.” This attitude toward the ‘Orient’ permeates all aspects of social life and is expressed throughout society’s institutions in terms of how Arabs and Muslims are framed and perceived.

More recently, there has been much debate on whether there is a “clash of civilizations” as proclaimed by Samuel Huntington (1997) between East and West. For Huntington and those who have invoked his argument, class and politico-ideological conflicts will be replaced by conflicts along religious and ethnic/cultural fault lines. This manifests itself today as the clash between the Islamic world and the Western secular world. This is also portrayed as a collision between the forces of modernity (i.e. the West) and anti-modernity or traditionalism (i.e. Islam or Islamic “fundamentalism”). Thus, for Huntington, terrorism is not only the result of a disturbed mind, but more extensively a disturbed culture that manufactures terrorists¹. Subsequent violent reactions against globalization and modernization (e.g. secularism and free markets)² are seen as being rooted in the Islamic and Arab cultures’ backwardness and their inability to integrate modern values into their traditional systems. Hence, the injection of “modernism” into current Islamic and Arabic culture will inevitably lead to their decline. They are, in essence, incompatible.

¹ For a detailed examination and critique of such views, see John Esposito’s *The Islamic Threat: Myth or Reality* (1999).

² It is beyond the scope of this paper to engage a complete inventory of arguments regarding what constitutes modernity and globalization. In short, the authors are referring to a model of development which includes the secular nation-state, privatizing free market economics, and the mass exportation of “Western” pop culture.

The portrayal of Islam and Arab cultures as deficient and antithetical to Western culture has a cumulative effect on how members of these categories are perceived. Harold Garfinkel called this process of negative portrayal the *status degradation ceremony*. In short, he defined this as “Any communicative work between persons, whereby the public identity of an actor is transformed into something looked upon as lower in the local scheme of social types” (1956: 420). It is important to note that this is not simply a matter of belittling a group; but significantly altering the identity and constitution of the group, or what Garfinkel called “the destruction of one social object and the constitution of another” (p. 421).

The extent to which Arab and Muslim Americans have been dehumanized and degraded is evident in the reaction against these groups in the aftermath of September 11th, 2001. For example, a report by the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) stated that they received “1717 reports of harassment, violence and other discriminatory acts in the first six months” after September 11th, along with 325 complaints in the next six months (2002: 29). The American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee (ADC) (2002) received reports of over 600 violent incidents in the six months after September 11th, along with hundreds of calls concerning discrimination. The United States Department of Justice Civil Rights Division investigated over 380 cases of civil rights violations related to the September 11th attacks. Finally, at least twelve deaths were attributed to anti-Arab and Muslim sentiment, where persons *thought to be* Arab and/or Muslim were murdered (in some cases these people were neither Arab nor Muslim). Thus, the consistent and constant negative and degrading presentations of Arab and Muslims have resulted in establishing a widely shared commonsense

understanding that, in the end, casts a cloud of suspicion over, and posits as the enemy, those who are identified as belonging to these categories.

Membership categorization and eternal other-ness

The investigation of how language is used has produced several analytical insights which can help us understand the logic of how meaning is achieved in general and by media purveyors, the focus of our work here. Many of them were developed in the context of membership categorization analysis (Hester and Eglin 1997), explicating the power that categories have in different contexts³. One of those insights was introduced by Harvey Sacks ([1974]1992) regarding the relationship between the category of person and the category of action. He introduced these discoveries through his now famous two sentences, “The baby cried. The mommy picked it up.”, in which he coined the concept: *category-bound activities*. He constructed two viewers’ maxims to help orient to the phenomenon he was describing:

“If a member [of a culture] sees a category-bound activity being done, then, if one can see it being done by a member of a category to which the activity is bound, then: See it that way. The viewers’ maxim is another relevance rule in that it proposes that for an

³ We understand “meaning” to be an emergent, socio-cultural product, achieved by participants in any interaction (This includes interpersonal, speech communication, mass media, etc.), for specific practical purposes, in specific contexts. All meaning is context bound and its construction relies on the participation of interlocutors or presenters for its shape and character. To quote one of our mentors, Jeff Coulter, in this regard, “There is no such thing as decontexted meaning”.

observer of a category-bound activity the category to which the activity is bound has a special relevance for formulating an identification of its doer...If one sees a pair of actions which can be related via the operation of a norm that provides for the second given the first where the doers can be seen as members of the categories the norm provides as proper for that pair of actions, then; (a) see that the doers are such members and (b) see the second as done in conformity with the norm.” (Sacks 1974: 225)

This referred to the kind of relationship that logically exists between the doer of an action and the action itself. So, for example, letter carriers are employees of a postal system, whose work is to deliver or carry the mail to addresses in his/her assigned area of delivery. Now, anyone can ‘carry’ the mail; but not anyone can deliver the mail (i.e., have the authority and the public trust to transport these letters to their individual delivery points). To do so and not be a member of the postal services could result in arrest.

This means, in analytical terms, that the person category *letter carrier* is category-bound to the action category *to deliver*. Other commonsense examples include: police officers arrest and voters elect, “where the doers can be seen as members of the categories the norm provides for [such] actions”. In other words, there are conventional rules operating which allow us to hear/view that police officers are members of a category which enables them to arrest and that voters are members of a category which enables them to elect; and that they engage in these activities in conformity with the established norms of the society. This is the logico-programmatic boundedness, free from intent or motivation, that Sacks wanted us to pay attention to.

Categories of persons and of activities are used every day in conversation and in other

environments of communication. As this work addresses media productions, we pay particular attention to the uses of media purveyors. Also, we focus upon the categorization practices engaged in with regard to describing Arabs and Muslims and their activities. For example, when (print or broadcast) reporters in the corporate media use the categories ‘Arab’ and ‘Muslim’ in their stories, they invoke the logic of a pre-existing set of categorial relationships, not ones which have the status of those we have already discussed, i.e., police officers and voters, but ones which are prejudicially constructed to have only the semblance of those relational and bounded properties. As abundantly documented elsewhere, the negative stereotypes attributed to Arab and Muslim peoples by the mainstream corporate media have been so thoroughly inculcated in institutions in the United States and in the minds of the people that we can speak of these established ways of thinking and seeing as pre-existing. As such, when non-critical thinkers consider matters relating to Arabs and Muslims, they fall into the traps of negative stereotypes and prejudicial conclusions. Accordingly, we have often heard/seen the categories ‘Arab’ and ‘terrorist’ used together. To most non-critical people, these categories go together just fine. But what do they mean together? Are they logically connected? Do they follow established norms? In the context of a society which has established negative appreciations for these people, there is a sense that understanding Arabs and Muslims as terrorists makes perfect sense. In other words, even if the idea that “Arabs and Muslims are terrorists” is ridiculous and unfounded, if the idea is advanced to the non-critical hearer/viewer, due to the tremendous power of the propaganda machine, that is what they are nonetheless.

So, what has happened? Is this the category-boundness Sacks was writing about? No.

There is no logical boundedness between the person categories 'Arab' and 'Muslim' and the activity category 'terrorist'. The connection is artificial and created through the lens of intolerance and racism; hence, it is false. This means that there does not exist any conventional relationship between the categories Arabs and Muslims and the activity of terrorism. This is true of any ethnic or racial group: there is nothing intrinsic in these groups which render any of their activities predictable or of any particular character. Such a claim is *prima facie* nonsense. However, this does not prevent the tremendous power of propaganda to override this truth and create contrary appreciations of these groups. Such constructions have been given another name: *transitivity*, whereby the activity category is transferred to the person category and is taken incorrectly to have the same logical status (see Jayyusi 1984).

Allow us to demonstrate this transitivity outside of our present context. If a person categorizes a man as having an effeminate gait and, based upon this description of his walk, further categorizes him as being a homosexual, the person is engaged in the achievement of transitivity. This means that the connection that he has created is artificial and a distortion of the commonsense practices people engage in. Walking with an effeminate gait has nothing to do with one's sexual orientation; however, prejudicial connections can replace logical connections to produce such appreciations of people. Analytically speaking, this practice represents the distorted and artificial creation of understandings which seems to follow the logic of Sacks' concept of category-boundedness but which does not. So, just as walking with an effeminate gait does not make a man a homosexual, so too being Arab or Muslim does not make one a terrorist.

The logical problem lies in the fact that indeed "terrorists" engage in "terrorist acts". That is precisely the logical point here. In other words, homosexuals engage in sexual relations with members of the same sex; that is what makes them homosexuals; that is the category-bound activity, not walking with an effeminate gait. People who engage in acts which are categorized by the mainstream media as terrorist are terrorists to those who are uncritical about their information consumption. Once someone or some group of people is uncritically categorized (labeled) as terrorist, the action category (transitivity) logically follows, but is understood as being bound. Whether the claim that "Arabs and Muslims are terrorists" is well founded or not does not matter in the context of a corporate media which can spin anything to produce the desired public sentiments required at the moment. Also, when most people are non-critical in their consumption of media productions, the transitivity logic takes hold. Their use is routine and taken for granted. This is partly why these discussions can seem to be superfluous or unnecessary. However, when such categories are used in particular contexts in which they invoke certain stereotypes or artificial boundaries, these practices become problematic.

Also, the connection, the *boundedness*, between the person category and the action category is a logical one, independent of intent or motivation, although often reporters know very well how these connections work and use them subtly to connect action with certain people. With our example, we have "terrorists" (Arabs or Muslims) who engage in "terrorist activities." Once the connection is made it is difficult to un-make, as the more it is heard and seen the more the connection is taken-for-granted. This kind of connection is routine in the corporate media in the U.S.

To place this discussion in present contexts, consider the current usage of the categorical phrase, “War on Terrorism”, initially directed toward Afghanistan and now toward Iraq, with Syria and Iran possible candidates as well. This phrase, routinely used by the U.S. Administration, along with the various stages of alert, has the effect of frightening large segments of the public, resulting in an increasing desire for security which then becomes the justifications for military action. The countries that are seen as primarily responsible for terrorism are also those inhabited by Arabs and Muslims. Thus, terrorism as an activity becomes transferred solely to Arabs and Muslims. And these countries are populated by Arabs and Muslims.

The commonsense upshot of this rhetoric (the categorizations) is that Arabs and Muslims are terrorists because the United States is “waging war on terrorism” in their countries (Afghanistan and Iraq), meaning that their countries are the source of terrorist activities and that the doers of terrorism are terrorists. If one believes what the members of the U.S. Administration say, then the category-bound logic seems plausible. However, if the U.S. Administration claim is only propaganda which serves its intentions and purposes, then the transitivity logic which resides in the rhetoric becomes observable and recognizable. Hence, acts which could otherwise be understood as ones of self-defense or frustration are now understood as acts of terror. With a substantial majority of the population in the United States being non-critical consumers of corporate media presentations, which are routinely advancing the image that Arabs and Muslims are terrorists, chances are very good that they will accept those media presentations at face value and will understand that any activities Arabs and Muslims engage in are terrorist in character.

This was made very clear by the U.S. Administration’s reaction to the “suicide bombing” attack at a military checkpoint in Iraq which resulted in the death of four U.S. Marines. On March 29, 2003, Major General Stanley A. McChrystal, the vice director of operations for the military’s Joint Staff, told reporters, “It looks and feels like terrorism.” On March 24, Pentagon spokeswoman Victoria Clarke speaking of Iraqi “deceptions” during the war said “some liken it to terrorism.” Finally, on March 25, White House spokesman Ari Fleischer also on the Iraqi tactics and strategies stated, “it tells you that we’re really dealing here with elements of terrorism inside Iraq.” However, Fred Kaplan (2003) of www.slate.com, using the definition of terrorism as supplied by the U.S. State Department,⁴ notes on April 1 that, “any attack on armed troops in wartime cannot, by definition, be terrorism.” While these Iraqi tactics (such as feigning surrender or any act that endangers civilians) violate rules of military engagement as laid out in the Geneva Conventions, they do not constitute terrorism. In the end, the extent to which these acts are *actual* acts of terrorism is not the primary issue. Rather, the important point is that these acts are *hearable* as acts of terrorism. The transfer of Arab and Muslim actions as terrorism makes the claims of the U.S. Administration that much more hearably valid, even when they are factually inaccurate.

Any act of violence committed by Arabs and Muslims is terrorist by virtue of Arabs and Muslims *being* terrorists. Similarly, violence committed by non-Arabs and

⁴ Terrorism as defined by the U.S. State Department is “premeditated, politically motivated violence propagated against noncombattant targets by subnational groups or clandestine agents, usually intended to influence an audience.”

Muslims are not likely to be viewed as terrorism because it is an activity principally bound to the categories of Arab and Muslim. Not being part of those categories then potentially exempts persons from being considered terrorist (even though their actions fall in line with conventional definitions of terrorism). Despite the fact that there is nothing inherent in being Arab or Muslim that automatically results in committing terrorist acts, the categories of Arab and Muslim are commonly perceived of as being connected to the activity of terrorism, along with other stereotypical descriptors such as backward, oil-rich, misogynistic, fanatical, etc.

The pervasiveness and strength of these beliefs and perceptions can be seen in the structure of arguments that counter these attitudes. To undo the degradation of Arabs/Muslims with negative characteristics, two general tactics have been used. The first attempt involves *undoing* the category transitivity from the negative activities by demonstrating that persons who are in these categories are not in fact predetermined on the basis of their membership to engage in the activities in question. By injecting activities that may have been seen as *category-exclusive*, these strategies effectively re-humanize Arabs and Muslims in the eyes of others. The second strategy involves demonstrating that people who are in these categories are “just like us.” This is done by linking Arab and Muslim Americans to activities thought to be bound to our categories. This approach attempts to provide a bridge between categories through shared activities and traits identified as being positive and admirable

In many ways, this can be viewed as an attempt to reinsert aspects of normal-ness or human-ness in groups (i.e. Arabs and Muslims) that are seen as devoid of this character. The process of undoing

degradation involves rebutting commonsense notions and practical reasoning through highlighting those behaviors that are seen as positive and preferred. This also involves respecifying behaviors that are believed to be category-bound as exclusive to that category, as well as adding new behaviors to the category as being bound to it. In both ways, undoing degradation is meant to provide a new commonsense of the category through observable behaviors. In a sense, behaviors that already were observable are rendered seeable through their inclusion in the category.

The goal of the following paper is not to evaluate the success of this venture. Nor is its aim to determine whether in fact such steps were necessary or warranted. Finally, the paper does not seek to impute motivations for the tones that emanated from the media and government officials. Rather, the paper will examine the structure of these arguments for the humanness of Arabs and Muslims, and based on this, consider the taken-for-granted assumptions and understandings regarding what constitutes being Arab and Muslim.

Excerpts and analysis

A corpus of data was gathered through media outlets and organizational materials primarily from right after September 11, 2001 until March 2003 and the invasion of Iraq. Materials were collected from newspapers, television and radio transcripts, organization documents and press releases, internet news and commentary sites, and political press releases. We focused primarily on articles examining Arabs and Muslims in the United States, including Arab Americans and Muslim Americans. We currently have examined over 142 pieces of data.

In the course of examining the data for this paper, the authors identified three general sets of strategies that were employed in the attempt to undo degradation. These strategies are:

- Demonstrating the existence of positive behaviors among Arab Americans and Muslim Americans;
- Explaining the presence of negative behaviors among some Arab Americans and Muslim Americans (as well as Arabs and Muslims);
- Establishing equivalency (or just-like-us-ness) between Arab Americans, Muslim Americans, and mainstream Americans.

As will be shown in the media excerpts presented here, these three strategies are used individually and in concert with one another. It must be stressed that the strategies identified here emerged from our readings of the data, and were not overtly asserted as strategies by those engaged in the process of challenging prejudicial attitudes and stereotypical characterizations. Furthermore, this list is not meant to be exhaustive or exclusive. It is simply meant as a heuristic to highlight the primary ways in which people go about undoing degradation. The excerpts presented here reflect examples of how these three strategies are used, sometimes individually and sometimes in concert with one another. In both cases, the strategies are meant to challenge commonsense notions of the categories ‘Arab’ and ‘Muslim’. Our purpose here is not to assess how successful these attempts are; but rather to understand how these attempts are constructed.

Demonstrating positive behaviors

In this section, we examine how ‘positive’ behaviors are used to demonstrate the worthiness, and in many instances the just-

like-us-ness, of Arab and Muslim Americans. Of course, the word *positive* is very loaded in terms of being highly variable depending upon the context, group norms, expected preferential practices, etc. We use the term not to delineate specific practices that in every instance can be viewed as positive, or as if being positive was an inherent characteristic to the practices themselves. Rather, the word ‘positive’ refers to how they are used in the context of the talk itself. These practices are raised as if they are examples of behavior that should be looked upon in a positive light. Thus, it is not our judgment that these practices are positive; they are positive in the judgment of the speakers.

This section is divided into different subsections based on general themes used in the presentation of positive behaviors. Specifically, we delineate the following categories of positive behaviors: 1) being law-abiding; 2) having a family; 3) being in the military. This obviously is not an exhaustive list, and various other behaviors are intertwined into the excerpts given here. At the same time, in our examination of our data, these three themes were highly prevalent. This is understandable given the general mood in American society regarding Arab and Muslim Americans. Groups that are being degraded often are accused of being disruptive to the social and civil order, being cultural amoral, and having loyalties that are detrimental to the nation. Thus, by claiming that the group is law-abiding, is family oriented, and is patriotic, these claims can be challenged. This is demonstrated in the following excerpts.

Law-abiding

Excerpt 1: From *The Today Show* (NBC), “Jim Zogby of the Arab American Institute discusses his concern of Arab-Americans

being scrutinized because of the attack.”
(September 13th, 2001)

- 1 Katie We should mention, Jim, that
2 there are seven million Muslims
3 living in the...
4 Jim Yeah.
5 Katie ...United States, law-abiding
6 citizens, who are productive
7 members of our society.
8 Jim Right. And 3 and 1/2 million
9 Arab-Americans. The president
10 has two in his cabinet, and there
11 are six in Congress, and--and my
12 kids on college campuses. And
13 stories we've gotten already of a
14 15-year-old boy beaten up in
15 Los Angeles and fights in
16 Dearborn, Michigan, and a kid
17 attacked at a campus in North
18 Carolina. These--these are things
19 that shouldn't happen, but
20 because of the--what--what your
21 numbers were showing with--
22 with--with Tim a--a moment
23 ago, the pent-up anger is coming
24 out. The problem is, it's taking--
25 it's taking a form of a--of a kind
26 of bigotry that's no different than
27 the bigotry that caused the
28 violent attacks in the first place.
29 It shouldn't.
30 Katie And it...
31 Jim It shouldn't be used against
32 innocent Arab-Americans.

The first excerpt has to do with questioning the mistreatment of people who are “law-abiding”. The sequence begins with the assertion that there are “seven million Muslims” and “3 and ½ million Arab-Americans” living in the United States, who are “law-abiding citizens” and “productive members of our society” (lines 2-9). It continues with the observation that there are Arab Americans serving at high levels of the government (lines 9-11). It is even said that there are Arab Americans on college campuses (line 12).

The expressions of the positive attributes of Arab Americans and Muslim Americans (law-abiding productive members of society) are juxtaposed to apparently random attacks against members of these categories. The reason for these attacks⁵ is given as bigotry borne out of anger. In fact, Jim Zogby states this bigotry “is no different than the bigotry that caused the violent attacks in the first place.” (lines 26-28). Thus, persons who perpetrate attacks against innocent Arab (and Muslim) Americans are acting on a misdirected and unfounded hatred *just like* those who attacked the United States on September 11th. Furthermore, Arab Americans and Muslim Americans are innocent victims *just like* other Americans.

Now remember, these kinds of expressions are not a matter of truth-value, i.e., they are not presented as evidence of living within certain normative guidelines; but rather, they are assertions of these kinds of practices which count as demonstrations of being like someone who would not conventionally be

⁵ A report by the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) stated that they received “1717 reports of harassment, violence and other discriminatory acts in the first six months” after September 11th, along with 325 complaints in the next six months (2002: 29). The American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee (ADC) received reports of over 600 violent incidents in the six months after September 11th, along with hundreds of calls concerning discrimination. The United States Department of Justice Civil Rights Division is currently investigating approximately 380 cases of civil rights violations related to the September 11th attacks. Finally, at least twelve deaths were attributed to anti-Arab and Muslim sentiment where persons *thought to be* Arab and/or Muslim were murdered (in some cases these people were neither Arab nor Muslim). A 2003 report by CAIR reports that anti-Muslim incidents in the US are up 70%, and hate crimes are up 121%.

identified as other than like “any other American”. So the invocation of the analytical construct category-bound activity is correct because, for this activity, for this set of people, the application of the category “American” is conventionally appropriate.

Excerpt 2: From “A day to wait, and pray; at the immigration service, Arab men face their uncertain futures.” Richard Leiby. *The Washington Post*, January 11, 2003. Pg. C01.

1 Abdo, looking confident in a Ralph Lauren
2 Chaps jacket, is a 41-year-old airport shuttle
3 driver from Virginia. He isn't expecting
4 trouble: He obeys the law, pays his taxes and
5 has filed the necessary paperwork for an
6 upcoming hearing on his expired visa. He's
7 planning to depart for a California vacation
8 this week with his wife and child. He surveys
9 the unsettled faces of the men in the room.

Here is an excerpt in which an Arab man, Abdo, who “obeys the law, pays his taxes” (line 4), “has filed the necessary paperwork for an upcoming hearing on his expired visa” (lines 5-6). In this way, Abdo is portrayed as a person to whom law-and-order is important. He is doing the required things to contribute to the establishment of a moral social order. Obviously, we are not privy to Abdo’s entire life, and therefore cannot be sure whether he obeys all laws all the time. However, the claim of obeying the law is buttressed by the examples of “pays his taxes”⁶ and “filed the necessary paperwork.” He has even planned “a California vacation this week with his wife and child”. These are all activities that people in the U.S. engage in; so, Abdo is no different from any

⁶ Paying one’s taxes is a common theme invoked when persons are trying to convey their belonging as a citizen of the US. In fact, Arab American entrepreneurs have been accused of *not* paying taxes and using the resulting profits for illegal purposes (see David 2005).

other American. He is a hard-working, decent man, who cares for his family by providing for them and he also goes on vacation. What could be more American than that? His conduct is commensurate with that of other decent Americans; so, he is confident that he will be treated accordingly and without “trouble”.

These are activities which are proposed by the reporter as ones that can be argued to be essential ones in American society, ones upon which this country was based. Again, the concept of category-bound activities can be invoked to demonstrate the kind of connection that the reporter is making. If one can see that obeying the law, paying ones taxes, taking care of expired visas, and going on vacation are activities that Americans engage in, then it is fitting that people who engage in them can be seen as Americans. And, *a fortiori*, this is true for any person, including Arabs. This makes perfect sense. However, the reporter observes that Abdo “surveys the unsettled faces of the men in the room”. In other words, even if the logic of the situation, which is reported as being grasped by Abdo, is expressed, other presumably Arab men in the room are not convinced. This is not surprising in the face of decades of anti-Arab media propaganda. However, an attempt to reestablish a sense of connection on the part of the men in the room to “being American” by the reporter is clear.

Having a family

One of the conditions that seems to be proposed most often in these kinds of assertive discourses by Arab and Muslim Americans is the fact that they have a family. The category ‘family’ carries with it a sense of civic responsibility (i.e., part of its many logical properties). Family men are not conventionally the kind of men who engage in activities related to terrorism. On

a commonsense level, this operates to inform readers and listeners that there should be no fear of people who have families because, presumably, they would not engage in anything which could jeopardize the well being of others or their family members. The importance of family to Muslim Americans is strongly conveyed in this advertisement funded by the *Council on American-Islamic Relations*, a Washington, DC-based non-profit civil rights and advocacy group.

Excerpt 3: From a *Council on American-Islamic Relations* advertisement (March 16th, 2003)



WE'RE AMERICAN AND WE'RE MUSLIMS

MY NAME IS AMINAH KAPADIA, and I'm a wife, a mom and a student. I'm studying for a Masters degree in education, and I volunteer at our children's school, where I'm also active in the PTA. I was born in Philadelphia, to Puerto Rican parents, and have lived in the United States my entire life. My husband, Zubin, is from India, but has called America home for more than thirty years. He's an attorney and former economic officer for the U.S. Department of State. Now he spends his time running a consulting firm and coaching our sons' T-ball and soccer teams.

Like many Americans, my husband and I face the challenge of raising our children in an unpredictable world. That's why the basic principles of our religion, like tolerance, justice and devotion to family, are a central part of our lives. As the Prophet Muhammad told us, "The best of you is he who is best to his family. None of you will have faith until he wants for his brother what he wishes for himself."

We believe the security of our nation is dependent upon the strength of our families, and Islam teaches us the values that provide that strength.

WE'RE AMERICAN MUSLIMS

CAIR
COUNCIL ON AMERICAN-ISLAMIC RELATIONS

Number five of fifty-two in the *Islam in America* series.
To learn more about the series, visit www.americanmuslims.info

The appeal in this photograph is obvious: how could a terrorist look like this? While it may be true that people are sometimes not what they seem, all of this works at the level

of commonsensical expectations. Terrorists are depicted as shadowy characters, described as having knives or guns or having facial expressions which make people cringe with fear. The people portrayed in this advertisement, on the other hand, present a classical family portrait, smiling, loving, caring and together. The image portrays the kinds of images and (family) values that are commensurate with the archetype of what it looks like to be "Americans."

The category 'family' is of most import here, especially since the Prophet Mohammad himself is advanced as evidence to her claims. Indeed, the affiliative categories build the picture of the family concept: wife, mom, student, volunteer, PTA, husband, coach. The wife is "born in Philadelphia," "America is our home" and dad was an "economic officer for the US Department of State". What is more, they adhere to the "basic principles of (Islamic) religion": tolerance, justice, and devotion to family.

Furthermore, the mother is the one highlighted in the text of the ad, which is contrary to commonsense notions of Muslim women as subservient and thoroughly disempowered and domesticated. Everything presented in this text, in fact, serves to combat commonsense stereotypical notions of Muslims. Both parents are well educated, civically involved, and are entirely devoted to their family. Interestingly, neither parent is Arab (the mother is American of Puerto Rican ancestry and the father is Indian). Both parents place themselves and their family into the category of American *just like any other American*. In fact, the title of the ad, "We're Muslims and We're Americans" speaks to attempting to establish equivalency (which will be discussed later).

It is the use of these categories which creates the context of what family means and which expresses the appeal that she and the members of her family are just ordinary Americans. It is also interesting that the spokesperson for the family be the mother, also an American kind of tradition, i.e., “mom and apple pie”. All of these categories work to construct a bond between the members of this family and those of any other family in America, thereby demonstrating that the activities of this family are similar to, if not the same as, those engaged in by other typical American families. American families look like this and not like something else. If we, the family depicted, look like that too, then why all the fuss and prejudicial actions? Images and discourse such as these posters arguably work to destroy simultaneously destroy negative commonsense categories and construct positive ones, thereby achieving the undoing of degradation.

Military service

The giving of one’s life in the course of serving in the military is known in the US as “the ultimate sacrifice.” Military members are seen as the primary source of liberty and democracy, the safeguards of “the American way of life.” Memorial Day is a national holiday when the country remembers the service of persons in the military, and recalls past and on-going wars. Since all branches of the American military are volunteer-based, serving in the military often is seen as a selfless expression of patriotism and duty to the country. Serving in the military then is perhaps the greatest expression of “Americanism” and patriotism. It is also one of the behaviors most frequently pointed to by Arab and Muslim Americans when trying to demonstrate their worth and value to the US. This is demonstrated in the following excerpts.

Excerpt 4: From Karen Branch-Brioso “Muslims in the US military reassert their patriotism.” *The Tribune* (Port St. Lucie/Fort Pierce, FL) (April 3rd, 2003)

1 Allis belongs to the Association of Patriotic
2 Arab Americans in the Military. The group
3 was formed by a Marine gunnery sergeant
4 whose uncle found himself shunned after
5 the terrorist attacks on Sept. 11, 2001 - until
6 he posted in his business a photograph of
7 his nephew in full military regalia.
8 As the nation wages war against Iraq, a
9 Muslim nation, many of the thousands of
10 Muslims in the U.S. military find
11 themselves questioned again.
12 "I don't feel like we're at war with another
13 Muslim nation. We're at war against a
14 dictator and his evil government," said
15 Allis, who is on standby for deployment to
16 Iraq. "I felt like I was going to fight against
17 a dictator who killed other Muslims."
18
19 At latest count, 4,070 active-duty members
20 of the U.S. military list Muslim as their
21 religion: 1,940 in the Army; 869 in the
22 Navy; 744 in the Air Force; and 517
23 Marines. But organizations such as the
24 Patriotic Arab Americans in the Military
25 and the American Muslim Armed Forces
26 and Veteran Affairs Council believe the
27 number is closer to 10,000. There are about
28 1.4 million troops.

The title of the Association of Patriotic Arab Americans in the Military (APAAM) speaks to the organization’s focus. The website of the organization (www.apaam.org) states that the organization was formed in response to September 11th and the intense negative backlash against Arab Americans. Serving in the US military is presented as evidence to demonstrate one’s patriotism. Also, an Arab and Muslim like “Marine gunnery sergeant” (line 3) can also “fight against a dictator who killed other Muslims” (lines 16-17). So, being an Arab and/or a Muslim does not limit one’s critical faculties such

that one cannot see the wrong-doings of other members of the same religion or ethnic ancestry. As a result, Muslim and Arab Americans can also fight against those who, according to the US administration, are a threat to the US. A logico-practical upshot of such categorization practices is that these people, also members of the military and sworn to uphold the constitution of the US, deserve respect. This is demonstrated in the Uncle in the story avoiding harassment by posting a picture of his nephew, who is serving in the military, in his store (see lines 4-7). A bond is created between serving in the military and supporting one's country, *just like everybody else*.

It is not only that there are Arab and Muslim Americans in the military; but there are many such members. These numbers are highlighted in lines 19 – 27, and estimates put the total number of Arab and Muslim Americans in the military at around 10,000. Like other members of the military, Arab and Muslim Americans are part of the Armed Forces who are committed to protecting our nation. If we can place our trust in the US military to protect our shores, and many of those in the US military are Arab and Muslim Americans, why should people treat them any differently from other members of the military just because they are Muslim and of Arab ancestry? This question is raised in Excerpt 5 from the CNN news show "Live Today":

Excerpt 5: From CNN Live Today. "To be American." (October 24th, 2001)

1	Unidentified	It just kind of rings a
2	male	question in my head. Am I
3		really an American or not? It
4		is kind of hard to think
5		about. Do I have the same
6		rights as, like, an American-
7		born, or do I have different
8		rights because I'm Arabic?

9	Crowley	The question rings not just in
10	(voice-over)	his head, but across the
11		generations.
12	Unidentified	My grandfather came here in
13	male	1896. I'm a veteran. My
14		brothers are veterans, and
15		yet I feel like I am not – you
16		know, I have not found my
17		rightful place in America.
18		When do I become an
19		American?

In connection with the military theme, the category *veteran* is invoked. This is an interesting use of military service in that the person speaking has not himself served in the military. Rather, his father and brothers are veterans. Nevertheless, this is given as enough evidence to substantiate his claim that he should be considered American. Thus, being a veteran or having served in the military is a patriotic umbrella that should (in the view of the speaker) encompass himself as well. While he may not have served in the military, his family has and this contribution is enough to guarantee himself membership in the category *American*. However, the question still arises in the minds of some in American society as to whether or not having served in the US military, and being a veteran, is enough for Arab Americans and Muslim Americans to become "an American." Again, according to the speaker, serving one's country should be more than enough to be regarded as a member of that country and "found [a] rightful place in America" (lines 16-17).

There are many men and women, who were not born in the U.S., but who have served in the U.S. military whose Americanization is in question. Indeed, the very status of citizenship is embedded in that question. Can veterans rightfully take on the category 'American'? That is one issue for this analysis; that is, taking on the category 'American' *because* certain proposed criteria

or prerequisites are met; such as having served in the U.S. military. We can hear said for example that, “What more could anyone ask than to put ones life in harm’s way to prove allegiance to any nation state?”

However, here is a situation in which this man’s family has been in the U.S. since 1896. This means that he was born in the U.S. and has ancestors in this country; yet he does not feel that he has “found [his] rightful place in America”. Is the fact that someone is Arab what precludes him/her from being accorded the same rights as someone else? As we all know, the U.S. does not represent any specific ethnic group; but rather a mixture of cultures from all over the world. How is it that some of those people feel a sense of belonging and others do not?

Of course, we also know that racism is a fundamental feature of this culture; the foundation of this country is predicated on it. Black Africans have been discriminated against in the U.S. from the beginning. Brown people have also suffered in this way. Is it simply that Arabs are brown people that they have less and have access to less? Or is it because of a campaign of negative propaganda for many years that works its way into the mind of the culture and makes it implausible that black and brown people (including Arabs) could take on membership in the category “American”? And this, in spite of the fact that black and brown people do the same things white people do, e.g., serve in the military and become veterans; but, for some reason(s), they are unable to become American. What is it about being an American that seems so elusive? What are the criteria? What are the rights of passage? When have you done enough so that you can have the same rights as other Americans? Surely, having served in the military should be, all by itself, enough to gain the right to be called an American, indeed a true American!

Having a professional job

One’s occupation is a well known component of one’s social status. While earnings is an important component of how the status afforded to an occupation, perceived prestige is also highly important. Thus, while manual laborers can earn more than college professors, the college professor is higher in terms of status and prestige. The hierarchy of jobs is seen in the color-coding scheme associated with certain types of work, such as in blue collar for manual labor work, white collar for professional or managerial work, and even pink collar for work associated with women. Furthermore, one’s job is of great importance to one’s identity in American society. Upon meeting someone for the first time, the question, “What do you do for a living?” is frequently asked. Having a job associated with high prestige is frequently given as evidence of positive traits. This is shown in the following excerpts.

Excerpt 6: From “Islam is Peace~ Says President”. Remarks by President George W. Bush at Islamic Center of Washington, DC. (September 17, 2001).

1 America counts millions of Muslims
2 amongst our citizens, and Muslims make an
3 incredibly valuable contribution to our
4 country. Muslims are doctors, lawyers, law
5 professors, members of the military,
6 entrepreneurs, shopkeepers, moms and dads.
7 And they need to be treated with respect. In
8 our anger and emotion, our fellow Americans
9 must treat each other with respect.

The categories used by George Bush in this excerpt are a litany of professions that should generate “respect” in “our fellow Americans”. The 1989 occupational prestige scores for some of these categories demonstrates the level of prestige associated

with them in the public mind (see Nakao and Treas 1990). For instance, physician received a rating of 86.05, making it one of the most highly prestigious occupations. Lawyers similarly received a high rating of 74.77. Law professors likewise have a lot of prestige with a score of 73.51. This is compared to manual labor occupations that typically received ratings in the range of twenties to forties. At the very least, these ratings demonstrate how the professions listed by President Bush are perceived in general, underlining the point that by linking Arab and Muslim Americans to them, the status of Arab and Muslim Americans hopefully is enhanced.

While there is nothing intrinsic about being a doctor or lawyer or, for that matter, a member of any other profession that requires respect, Bush appeals to “our fellow Americans” to “treat each other with respect”, because “America counts millions of Muslims amongst our citizens”. Conversely, there is nothing intrinsic about being a member of such professional categories that requires that people not respect someone. Why should this pious invocation on the part of Bush be made? After all, it should stand to reason that “fellow Americans...treat each other with respect”, regardless of their profession or their religious affiliation. This is one of the fundamental precepts of the Founding Fathers. So, why make a point of invoking it in this context? Again, a concerted effort is being made, on the part of politicians and media purveyors, to reestablish or reassert that Muslims are not bad. In fact, we should see them as positive members of the culture and treat them as such. Again, this seems necessary because of the history of negative press with regard to Muslims. This is accomplished, as depicted in this report, by reminding us that there is a connection between citizenship and respect; that citizenship is manifest in a multiplicity of

ways, including practicing a profession and being “moms and dads” and that respect is a natural outcome of such practices, even in the case of Muslim citizens. This positive representation on the part of Bush may come late in the day; and, in light of the violence perpetrated upon members of the Muslim communities in the U.S., including beatings, assaults, and murder, it is a minimal intervention. Reminding the reader of these crimes against Muslims is important because, in such a context, even the most callous of politicians must appeal to the citizenry to curb such widespread profiling.

A similar theme can be seen running through Excerpt 7, taken from the *Los Angeles Times*. In this excerpt, various professional occupations are listed as those who are once Iraqi immigrants who now consider themselves American.

Excerpt 7: From Faye Fiore “‘No third way’ for U.S. Iraqis.” *Los Angeles Times*. (December 26, 2002).

1 This diverse and undefined population
 2 includes business and military elite who
 3 were ruined by Iraqi President Saddam
 4 Hussein and want their due. There are
 5 recent refugees who fled from his rule after
 6 the Persian Gulf War and want to go home.
 7 There are the bankers, physicists, doctors
 8 and investors, well-educated American
 9 citizens who came here decades ago and
 10 have no intention of ever moving back --
 11 the products of two cultures who go to
 12 mosques and movie theaters, eat pizza as
 13 often as kebabs and send their children to
 14 American schools during the week, Arabic
 15 school on Sundays.

Linked with the professions of “bankers, physicists, doctors and investors, well-educated American citizens” is the addendum that Iraqi Americans have a strong dislike for Saddam Hussein. This positions them in line with the current Bush

Administration policy of regime change in Iraq. Being well-educated gives them the authority to be sound judges of the policy and its worth. We can imagine whether persons who were not well-educated but supported this policy would be seen as persuasive advocates. So, we should pay closer attention to the testimonies of these particular members of the elite core of Iraqis because they “were ruined by ... Hussein”, making them enemies of Hussein and perhaps friends of the U.S. This helps to build a case for Bush against Hussein, while having the appearance that he is applauding the collective achievements of Iraqi Arabs. It is interesting that it is not mentioned that many Arab citizens, Iraqi and otherwise, who have M.A.’s and Ph.D.’s in mathematics, computer science, physics, medicine, etc., are driving taxis in major cities in the U.S., because they have little or no opportunity to practice their profession in this country, too often a result of the exclusionary racist and extreme ethnocentric attitudes which thrive in this country. But, they are citizens who go to the movies and eat pizza, just like everyone else.

Accounting for the presence of negative behaviors

This section will discuss some examples of attempts to explain or mitigate the presence of negative conduct on the part of Arabs and Muslims, in the name of Islam, as though it is necessary to do so because they are only known to perpetrate evil because they are not trustworthy and that they are the first we should think of when some atrocity or malevolent act has come to our attention. As we can quickly ascertain, many atrocities worldwide have been perpetrated by members of religious organizations, from cults to major religions, in the name of those religions. Whether it be the Crusades (or current invocations to the deity by the Bush Administration), the Jihad, or the practices

of the Jewish State, all have and do claim to have “God on their side”, while they massacre and pillage. Admittedly, these acts have been engaged in by the more extreme members of such religions; however, we can recall some of the cries by ordinary people to kill these or those people because they have been vilified and demonized and rendered evil; hence, Reagan’s “Evil Empire” or Bush’s “Axis of Evil”. Propaganda of this nature is pivotal to gaining mass support for dreadful acts of terror, which would otherwise be recognized for what they are, and not abhorred. So, again because we have a history of depicting Arabs and Muslims in particularly villainous ways, there seems to be a need to reframe or mitigate certain activities on their part which are incorrectly understood to be bound to them. Hence, we see attempts to marginalize those who do engage in those kinds of activities by claiming that those people are extremists or are outside of the mainstream of the religious group, on the fringe or those people are not true Muslims or they do not understand that Islam is a religion of peace.

We can observe in this context that the artificiality of transitivity is operating: there is nothing about being a Muslim or adhering to the precepts of Islam that makes anyone a terrorist or anything approaching such categorization. Yet, there seems to be a necessity to debunk any connection of this kind because of the sustained villainy against Arabs and Muslims. Consider Excerpt 8 below:

Excerpt 8: From *All Things Considered* (National Public Radio). “Acts of Violence against Arab-Americans in the US.” (September 17, 2001). Rick Karr reporting.

1 Reporter Worshipers at the mosque say
2 that if indeed the terrorists
3 justified their strike with some

4 interpretation of Islam, it's
 5 certainly not an Islam that they
 6 recognize. Gassan Amein(ph) is
 7 a worshipper at the mosque, and
 8 a Bay Ridge businessman.
 9 Mr. I really do not understand how
 10 Gassan these people think or how they
 11 Amein use Islam, such a peaceful, such
 12 a beautiful religion. I
 13 understand my religion very
 14 well, and I can tell you that my
 15 religion does not encourage or
 16 does not allow anybody to do
 17 such an act.

This excerpt demonstrates the common theme that those who commit acts of violence in the name of Islam are not real Muslims. The commonsense understanding of Islam among large sections of the US is that it is a violent religion, and therefore those who are Muslims must be violent as well. To undo this equivalency, either side of the equation must be shown to be false. If many Muslims are portrayed as peaceful, then Islam must be a religion of peace (or cannot be a religion of violence per se). Likewise, if Islam is shown to promote peace, then real Muslims should be peaceful as well.

A problem of course arises when persons who claim to be Muslims commit acts of violence in the name of Islam. It is difficult to assert that Islam is a religion of peace when persons who are Muslims are not acting in a peaceful way. There are two primary tracts that can be taken to solve this dilemma. First, the violence can be rationalized in some way such that the persons committing the violence are absolved of primary responsibility. In other words, they can be shown to be prompted to violence by some other action outside of their control (e.g. some form of self-defense). Second, the persons who commit the violence can be shown not to be real Muslims, and to be operating outside of

Islam. This is the approach taken in Excerpt 8. Mr. Amein maintains that “I really do not understand how these people think or how they use Islam, such a peaceful, such a beautiful religion.” He further states, “I can tell you that my religion does not encourage or does not allow anybody to do such an act.” Persons who commit acts of violence in the name of Islam therefore are not Muslims.

This same approach can be seen in the following two excerpts:

Excerpt 9: From Sara Steindorf. “An American, a Muslim, a teen: What’s it like to be a follower of Islam in the United States today?” *The Christian Science Monitor* (November 6, 2001).

1 “I have the same religion as the Sept. 11
 2 terrorists,” Feda says, “but the terrorists
 3 make it completely different.... They stretch
 4 the ideas of Islam, and think their attack was
 5 justified because it was a jihad [holy war]....
 6 But really, killing innocent people is not a
 7 jihad - nor is it even allowed in Islam.”

Excerpt 10: From Akbar Ahmed. “I’ve spent my life trying to repair the image of Islam.” *The Independent*. (September 20, 2001).

1 Yet the actions of the hijackers had nothing
 2 to do with Islamic theology. The killing of
 3 innocent civilians is specifically forbidden
 4 in the holy Koran. Killing a single innocent
 5 individual is like killing all of humanity, the
 6 Holy Book warns. The actions of the
 7 hijackers may have had nothing to do with
 8 Islam, but the consequences and causes of
 9 their actions has everything to do with how
 10 and where Islam will be going in the 21st
 11 century.

In Excerpt 9, Feda does not challenge that the September 11th terrorist are Muslims. However, she challenges their interpretation

of Islam, fashioning them as extremists who “stretch the ideas of Islam” (lines 3-4). She also raises the issue of *jihad*. The popular understanding of *jihad* is that it means “holy war.” This is but one potential translation. Literally, *jihad* means “struggle”, or the struggles that one goes through in trying to live a righteous life according to the tenets and prescriptions in Islam. In the context of violence, *jihad* can mean struggle against oppressors (which is where the connotation of holy war originates). The multiple ways in which *jihad* can be interpreted means that there is the potential for people frankly to get it wrong and misinterpret its meaning and use. This is what Feda is asserting, underlining her claim by stating, “killing innocent people is not a jihad - nor is it even allowed in Islam” (Excerpt 9, lines 6-7). Those who kill “innocent people” (another phrase open to interpretation) are not following Islam.

Excerpt 10 repeats this pattern. Again, we are told that “The killing of innocent civilians is specifically forbidden in the holy Koran” (lines 2-4). We also are told that “The actions of the hijackers may have had nothing to do with Islam.” (lines 6-8). The hijackers are referred to as “hijackers,” and not “Muslims.” The use of this category is rooted in the activity of this group of people: namely, hijacking. Hijackers take planes through violent means; Muslims do not. They cannot be referred to as Muslims because their actions contradict those advocated by Islam. Regardless of this fact, the author fears that because people will see them not as “hijackers” but as “Muslims,” “the consequences and causes of their actions has everything to do with how and where Islam will be going in the 21st century” (lines 8-11). For Muslims, it is clear that the hijackers and other terrorists do not represent Islam. For non-Muslims who carry with them mainstream commonsense understandings of Islam, these violent

individuals are the embodiment of Islam. To change this perception of Islam, they must be made aware of peaceful Muslims.

Establishing equivalency

One way to mitigate any difference or disparity in the conduct of people or their public perception is to liken them to any other member of the society, thereby establishing equivalency. If it can be successfully argued that members of certain groups, Arabs and Muslims, who have been vilified for decades in films and television, that they are, in some significant way, “just like any other American”, then, groundwork can be laid for the possible transformation of public perception of members of those groups. So, how can Arabs and Muslims be likened to any other American? It turns out that there are several ways, some of which we include here in the following excerpts. They can range from invoking justice, to the expression of anger about the attacks on 9/11, to the condemnation of terrorism by Arab governments, to having a family and praying for victims of such attacks and having good neighbors. The concept at work here is that of category membership; that is, if one can demonstrate in some manner that members of a particular category of persons, e.g., American, conduct themselves in certain manners (and this includes activities, attitudes, piety, having a family, having good neighbors, abhorring war and terrorist attacks, etc.) and, if one can demonstrate that those manners of conduct are commensurate with one’s own, then, equivalency can be established and can help mitigate any verbal attacks which presuppose a false or artificial connection to those other activities which are so rightfully criticised. These expressions of disconnection serve to separate one from all those presupposed and artificial attitudes about one’s religion, family values, and other connections to the mainstream culture.

We argue, then, that these expressions are part of the process of shedding degradation, thereby establishing grounds for public perception to be altered in favor of a more positive appreciation of Arabs and Muslims.

Expressing sorrow and outrage at September 11th

In the aftermath of September 11th and the ensuing war on terrorism, many Americans followed the dictum laid out by President Bush on November 6, 2001, “You are either with us or you are against us in the fight against terror.” For Arab and Muslim Americans, there was a pressing need to demonstrate that they are not only *with us*, but that they *are us*. An alliance *with us* is very different from an allegiance *to us* in that alliances can be temporary while allegiances are meant to be lasting. Thus, Arab and Muslim Americans needed to demonstrate their sorrow, anger, outrage, etc. at these attacks similar to the rest of the US. If Arab and Muslim Americans are one of them, they should share in the goals of the terrorists. If they are one of us, they would not. In the following excerpts, we will see how being with us is demonstrated.



Excerpt 11: From *60 Minutes* (CBS). “America’s Arabs.” (November 25, 2001). Ed Bradley Reporting.

- | | | |
|---|--------------|-------------------------------|
| 1 | Ed Bradley | How do you feel about the |
| 2 | | terrorists who attacked the |
| 3 | | United States? |
| 4 | Unidentified | Just like any other American. |
| 5 | Woman | Any person who commits an |
| 6 | | act like this needs to be |
| 7 | | brought to justice. |

This is an interesting exchange between Ed Bradley, reporter for the television news show *60 Minutes*, and a Muslim American woman who resides in Dearborn, Michigan (which has one of the highest concentrations of Arab and Muslim Americans in the US). Ed Bradley poses the question “How do you feel about the terrorists who attacked the United States?” The very question itself creates the possibility that this woman may feel differently from everyone else. This was not a common-place question asked of everyone after September 11th. Anecdotally-speaking, one could poll any number of Americans and find virtually no one who was asked this question in such a way that calls into question whether they were shocked, outraged and deeply saddened. Similarly, the same questions are not posed to members of other groups when violence is done in the name of their group. For instance, Irish Americans are not asked how they feel about bombings conducted by the Irish Republican Army; white Christian Americans are not asked how they feel about cross-burnings or other acts of intimidation committed by white supremacist groups; Jewish Americans are not asked how they feel about acts of espionage committed by other Jewish Americans or Israelis against the US. Thus, members of these groups are not (currently) seen to be culpable of the actions committed by members of their membership group. However, Arab and Muslim Americans are put on the defensive and must demonstrate that, in the words of the woman being interviewed, they feel “Just like any other American” (line 4).

Condemnation of the September 11th attacks from Arab and Muslim Americans was widely called for in American society, as if the absence of outright condemnation indicated a tacit approval of the attacks. Countries in the Arab and Islamic Worlds were required to come out with condemnations, as were Arab and Muslim American organizations in the US. This is demonstrated in the following excerpt.

Excerpt 12: From Joint Arab-American, Muslim-American⁷ Press Release. (September 12, 2001).

1 We condemn in no uncertain terms the
2 horrifying attacks on the World Trade
3 Center and the Pentagon on September 11.
4 We are shocked and angered by such
5 brutality and share all the emotions of our
6 fellow citizens about these attacks, which
7 target all Americans without exception. We
8 firmly believe that there can be no
9 justification for such horrible acts. We join
10 with the nation in calling for the
11 perpetrators of this terrible crime to be
12 brought swiftly to justice.

The issue of pointedly condemning the September 11th attacks is clear in this statement, released the day after the attacks. The press release also demonstrates the attempt to establish a sense of us-ness between Arab and Muslim Americans with other Americans. Lines 5-6 speak of sharing “all the emotions of our fellow citizens.”

⁷ The organizations that signed onto this press release include the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee (ADC), Arab American Institute (AAI), American Committee on Jerusalem (ACJ), American Muslim Alliance (AMA), American Muslim Council (AMC), Center for Policy Analysis on Palestine (CPAP), Council on American Islamic Relations (CAIR), and Islamic Institute.

The attacks “target all Americans without exception” (line 7). This was a common refrain after September 11th, with people pointing out that Arab and Muslim Americans were victims of the attacks, thereby establishing a sense of collectivity through shared victimization. The press release addresses the issue of rationalization and justification of the attacks, and firmly rejects it. Finally, the press release shows that Arab and Muslim American “join with the nation” (lines 9-10), further demonstrating that “we are with you.” We see more of this work of transforming the *intergroup* to the *intragroup* in the following section.

Transforming *us* and *them* into *we*

This final section addresses the sociological distinction between those who are members of a group and those who are *other*; the *us/them* dichotomy. This is not a frivolous matter: people in all cultures organize their understandings of local, regional, national and global events and issues as well as personal impressions, prejudices, and notions, apart from other socio-cultural-ideological conventions, according to this dichotomy. This is quite correct and natural; all cultural development includes an ethnocentrism which guides members’ conduct according to the values, beliefs, norms, etc. of any culture. However, at times, this can develop into an extreme form which regards anything or anyone who does not have membership can be seen as, not only different, but unwelcome in its milder forms and may involve disdain or hatred or even violence in its more virulent forms. This extreme ethnocentrism is not natural nor correct. Conduct of this nature serves to separate those outsiders from members in inappropriate ways and to establish hostile relations with anyone *sans* membership.

With regard to our investigation, as articulated before, the effects of extreme ethnocentrism are already established in the American culture against Arabs and Muslims, regarded as outsiders. What we are trying to appreciate is the process of reestablishing a civility with those non-members, an attempt to mitigate the degradation already in place, seemingly because of an awareness of the fact that any conduct by anyone is not a result of membership in any one or another culture. Accordingly, if there is something, some practice or attitude, which can be seen as like us, then there could be some basis to argue that those non-members should be acceptable to us and able to be integrated into our milieu. As the several excerpts below demonstrate, there are multiple ways to achieve, each with the aim of showing “we are just like everyone else”.

Excerpt 13: From Brian McGrory. “Another Face of Patriotism.” *The Boston Globe*. Pg. B1. (September 18, 2001).

1 He was born in the USA, as Bruce
2 Springsteen would say, a 32-year-old
3 Honda-driving software engineer who lives
4 in a rented apartment in one of those
5 cookie-cutter highway-side developments
6 called Shrewsbury Commons.

7 He's a fully inducted, taxpaying member
8 of this wonderfully inclusive club we call
9 America, where all stripes, all colors, all
10 shapes, and all sizes abound. On paper
11 anyway, he's a regular, ordinary guy.

This story demonstrates in various ways that the subject of the story, Vikrim Chhabra (an Indian Sikh) “is a regular, ordinary guy” (line 11). An outcome of September 11th was the targeting of anyone who bore any resemblance to the Arab or Islamic Worlds. This meant that Indian Sikh men, who wear head coverings and beards, were seen as adherents to or followers of Osama bin Laden (even though bin Laden is a Muslim

and Sikhs are neither Arab nor Muslim). To demonstrate that he is “a regular, ordinary guy,” we see numerous American themes and traits, including liking the musician Bruce Springsteen (an American icon), paying taxes (and thereby being a member of “this wonderfully inclusive club we call America”), driving a simple car, and living in non-descript housing. He is therefore no different from anyone else.

We can see the same points being made by Arab and Muslim Americans as well, shown in the following excerpts.

Excerpt 14: From Elizabeth Lorente. “Fear Inhibits U.S. Arabs, Muslims.” *Bergen Record (New Jersey)*. (March 26, 2003).

1 Khalid and other Muslims who have been
2 vocal about their opposition to the war and
3 the post-Sept. 11 arrests have worked
4 tirelessly to convince their community of its
5 rights to speak out.

6 “It is more important now than ever to
7 speak up for our rights,” Akhtar said. “We
8 are taxpayers, we are Americans. We love
9 this country. We care as much as other
10 Americans about safety and security here.”

Excerpt 15: From Robert Knox. “Moving Beyond the Stereotypes of Islam.” *The Boston Globe*. Pg.1 Globe South. (February 3, 2002)

1 “We are just like everybody else,” Al-Zaim
2 said. A member of Duxbury's Planning
3 Board, Al-Zaim said his purpose in taking
4 part in the first “overview” session on Islam
5 was to “let people see me as they will see
6 you or the next-door neighbor. I have
7 nothing to hide. I coach soccer. I go to work
8 like everyone else every morning, I sit in
9 traffic, I pay taxes and I participate in local
10 government. I want to break the lack of
11 knowledge.”

Both excerpts attempt to demonstrate that Arab and Muslim Americans are like other Americans, and in fact *are* American. In Excerpt 14, “Khalid” balances his opposition to “the war” and the arrests of Arab and Muslim Americans after September 11th with his support for America. He states unconditionally “We love this country,” and “We care as much as other Americans about safety about security here” (lines 8-10). Furthermore, we see the recurrent theme of paying taxes as the basis for membership in the category of American (lines 7-8). Being a member of the American club, Khalid feels empowered in “speaking up” for one’s rights (or freedom of speech), which is a well established American guarantee enshrined in the First Amendment of the US Bill of Rights (notwithstanding the adoption of the Telecommunications Act of 1996, the USA PATRIOT Act, the Homeland Security Act, and other acts of Congress in the history of the US which at various times have curtailed the freedom of speech).

In Excerpt 15, Al-Zaim states “I pay taxes and I participate in local government” (lines 9-10). Al-Zaim, in conducting educational seminars on Islam, wants to “let people see me as they will see you or the next-door neighbor.” In establishing that he is in fact like everyone else, he lists a number of behaviors that he enacts on a daily basis, including “I coach soccer. I go to work like everyone else every morning, I sit in traffic, I pay taxes and I participate in local government.” These kinds of expressions and claims are appealing to the common sense faculties of other Americans to see that people are really alike no matter where they come from. The demonstration of integration into American life is critical when making such arguments, to appeal to sameness, or at least similarity. As the saying goes, “It is what you do and not what you say that people pay attention to”. Only

then can one make a case for claiming that the ‘us/them’ can be collapsed into the ‘we’.

Conclusion

This paper demonstrates attempts to portray Arab and Muslim Americans in a positive way, thereby contradicting the commonsense understandings of Arabs and Muslims in the American mind. As a result of transitivity, category-bound behaviors have been created via prejudicial and stereotypical depictions of the categories Arab and Muslim that by and large depict Arabs and Muslims in intensely negative ways. As a result, persons categorized as Arabs and Muslims are seen as bound to committing negative behaviors by virtue of their membership of those categories. In order to undo this construct, persons have actively embarked on creating alternative depictions meant to reflect more accurately Arab and Muslim Americans by changing our understanding of the categories Arab and Muslim. We have outlined three primary ways of doing so:

- 1) showing positive behaviors by Arab and Muslim Americans;
- 2) accounting for the presence of negative behaviors committed by Arabs and Muslims;
- 3) establishing categorial equivalency between the categories Arab and Muslim with the category American.

It is not clear how successful these attempts will be because of the entrenched nature of the commonsense understandings of the categories ‘Arab’ and ‘Muslim’. Anyone attempting positive portrayals, dismissing negative examples, or showing that *they* are like *us* is battling against hundreds of years of stereotypical portrayals, which has gained in intensity during the last forty years. These portrayals have been present across all forms of media, and have become nearly ubiquitous due to the increasing number of

media outlets. Therefore, there is much to battle against. The stories that we examined are a mere drop in the bucket when compared to the vast array of stories, movies, characters, etc. that support the negative perceptions that dominate American society. As the “war on terrorism” continues, these perceptions continue to receive support.

Furthermore, it is not clear whether you can render visible that which is already there to be seen. It should be obvious that not *all* Muslims and Arabs (and by virtue Muslim and Arab Americans) are terrorists. It should be obvious that Arab and Muslim Americans are law-abiding, tax paying, civic minded, family oriented, well-educated, productive members of American society. This raises the question as to why all of this needs to be said if it is indeed witnessable to anyone who is willing to look? The primary answer is that the obviousness of all of this is belied by the commonsense categories of Arab and Muslim. As a result, the many positives are rendered virtually invisible, the few negatives are amplified, and the divide between *us* and *them* widens. We are therefore not overly optimistic that these strategies will have their intended effect. Many groups have been rehabilitated in the American mind, including Japanese Americans, Jewish Americans, and Irish Americans. At the same time, African Americans, Native Americans, and Arab Americans still maintain a place of dubious distinctions.

Future research should expand the analysis presented here in both breadth and depth. Given space restraints, we have only been able to scratch the surface of the various strategies presented. More needs to be done to examine them in greater detail, as well as examine whether there is any effect. Also, research should be done to see how these strategies have been used in other locations

and periods of history to different groups. It is our belief that these strategies have been similarly employed. A longitudinal and historical analysis may demonstrate how these strategies have and have not worked, and what needs to be done to replace prejudicial with logical connections. Essentially, we are discussing how to reclaim a group’s humane-ness, or their re-humanization. By increasing our understanding of this process, we are interested in not only reclaiming the humane nature of othered groups, but in the process developing the latent humane nature (or humanism) of those who are engaged in othering.

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