Research Brief

Research to Practice Brief: Working with Muslim Couples and Families

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“Islam has always been part of America’s story”

— President Barack Obama, 2009

Muslim Americans are an integral part of America’s fabric. They are dentists, lawyers, accountants, students, teachers; they are young and old; they are immigrants, native born, and everything in between. Since September 11, 2001, the images of Muslims in the media have often been negative and inaccurate. One consequence of this stereotyping is that antagonism towards Muslims has resulted in many Muslims neglecting to seek safety-net services for fear of discrimination.

This brief will help service providers become more familiar with the history and culture of Islam in America, along with Muslim demographics. Providers will learn how to have improved communications with Muslims and how to help Muslim individuals, couples, and families develop healthy parenting skills, healthy relationships, and healthy marriages.

Muslim American History

Muslim men, women, and children from Africa were sold into slavery and brought to the new world. They brought with them the religion of Islam that joined the other monotheistic religions of Christianity and Judaism. (Diouf, 1998). Some scholars estimate that 10% to 20% of slaves brought to the Americas were Muslims.

According to Denise Spellberg’s book Thomas Jefferson’s Qur’an, in 1765, 11 years before composing the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson bought a Qur’an. This was the beginning of his lifelong interest in Islam, and he would go on to acquire numerous books on Middle Eastern languages, history, and travel, taking extensive notes on Islam as it relates to English common law (Spellberg, 2013).

Jefferson sought to understand Islam, notwithstanding his differing personal beliefs and by 1776, Jefferson could imagine Muslims as future citizens of his new country (Spellberg, 2013). His interactions with Muslims, as well as his familiarity with their ways and customs, allowed Jefferson to feel comfortable seeing these new people in America as a part of the fabric of the country.

Significant Events and Organizations in the History of Islam in America

Yvonne Y. Haddad, the author of “A Century of Islam in America,” noted that, beginning in 1875, there were waves of immigrants from various parts of the Muslim world moving to America. These waves brought people from various countries such as Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, Egypt as well as Eastern Europe. Immigrant education and work experience
Mohammed Alexander Russell Webb (1846–1916) was one of the first prominent Euro-American converts to Islam. He established an Islamic mission in Manhattan with a mosque, circles of brotherhood, and reading rooms. Webb was the father of the North American Islamic press and published several booklets and journals, the most famous of them being a monthly called *The Moslem World and Voice of Islam*. Webb was the official spokesperson of Islam at the World Parliament of Religions in 1893 (*Who was Mohammed Webb?*, n.d.).

In 1930, Wallace Fard Muhammad started the Nation of Islam (NOI) in Detroit. Islam was rapidly spreading in America, from streets and meeting rooms to correctional institutions. The NOI gave birth to some of the America’s most famous Muslims, including Malcolm X and Muhammad Ali (*NOI history*, n.d.).

The **Islamic Circle of North America** (ICNA) was established in 1968 as a response to the growing need for a supportive Muslim community in North America. They work to build relations between communities by devoting efforts to education, outreach, social services, social justice, and relief efforts. (*About ICNA*, n.d.)

The **Islamic Society of North America** (ISNA) was founded in 1982 through a joint effort of the MSA, the Islamic Medical Association, the Association of Muslim Social Scientists, and the Association of Muslim Scientists and Engineers. Its goal is to be a unifying Islamic organization and to contribute to the betterment of the Muslim community and society. ISNA is considered the largest Muslim organization in America.

The **Council on American-Islamic Relations** (CAIR) was founded in 1994. It is considered the largest civil rights organization serving the Muslim community. CAIR's vision is to be a leading advocate for justice and mutual understanding. Its mission is to enhance understanding of Islam, encourage dialogue, protect civil liberties, empower American Muslims, and build coalitions that promote justice and mutual understanding (*About Us-CAIR*, 2014).

**Islam is the Fastest Growing Religion in America**

According to the latest U.S. Religion Census released in 2012, the fastest growing religion in America is Islam. The Association of Statisticians of American Religious Bodies compiled the data for the census, and the Association of Religion Data Archives released the results. From 2000 to 2010, the data compiled revealed that the number of Muslims living inside the United States increased by about 1 million to 2.6 million, a stunning increase of 66.7%.
"Islam is the fastest-growing religion in America, a guide and pillar of stability for many of our people..."
— Hillary Rodman Clinton, Los Angeles Times, May 31, 1996

In 2011, the Pew Research Center stated in its demographic of American Muslims that 40% of native born Muslims are Black. The Muslim share of the U.S. population (adults and children) is projected to grow from 0.8% in 2010 to 1.7% in 2030, making Muslims roughly as numerous as Jews or Episcopalians in the United States today (Pew Forum, 2011).

Like other Americans, Muslims are in need of services that are best delivered by service providers sensitive to their needs and concerns. Familiarity with their history and culture enhances service delivery, as is the case with other American cultural groups.

Understanding the Culture of Muslims

For the purposes of this brief, the term “Muslim culture” includes the diverse Islamic lifestyles of Muslims around the world. It embraces the cultures of Muslims from Africa, Europe, America, and Asia, which includes the Middle East. Each grouping has its own modifications of Islamic traditions, customs, and norms, but there is enough homogeneity to allow a knowledgeable service provider to operate efficiently and comfortably.

Muslim culture emanates from the five pillars of Islam:

1. **Shahadah**: The testimonial that there is no one worthy of worship and there is no deity other than God Himself, Allah, and that Muhammad is His prophet and messenger.

2. **Salat**: Daily obligatory prayers performed five times by every Muslim male and female who has reached puberty.

3. **Zakat**: Charity given from one’s income.

4. **Saum**: Fasting for 30 days during the holy month of Ramadan; a person abstains from eating, drinking, and sexual interactions from sunrise to sunset.

5. **Hajj**: Pilgrimage to Mecca, Saudi Arabia (pictured below); an obligatory journey for those who can afford it, which should be performed at least once. Muslims believe it is essentially a replication of rites first done by the Prophet Abraham and the mother of Isma’il.
Improving Communication with Muslim Clients: Understanding Cultural Nuances

Muslims in the United States are both indigenous and foreign born. The various groupings have their own particular distinctions reflected in their food and dress. One nuance is, when Muslim men and women are in their religious or native dress, a member of one grouping can easily distinguish between the Indonesian, North African, West African, Pakistani, and Arab from Egypt or the Arabian Peninsula. Muslim women influenced by the Arabian Peninsula will often wear black, while Africans will wear bright colors. Their attire and food may be distinct, but their practices of Islam are all sourced from the Qur’an and Islamic law. Nonetheless, their social and religious behaviors may differ because of varied teachings and non-religious influences over the years.

Muslim religious/cultural practices can include:

- Prayer obligations at home, during travel, and in the mosque;
- Wearing the hijab (head covering) for women and modest clothing;
- Refraining from shaking hands with the opposite gender;
- Attending the Friday Jum’ah prayer service;
- Not allowing men or women in the home when the wife or husband is not home;
- Politeness and respect for elders;
- Open deference and honor for parents;
- Dietary restrictions of no pork and adherence to a halal (permissible) or thabihah/zhabihah (religiously slaughtered) diet;
- Refusal of medication containing pork derived gelatin—usually found in capsules;
- Not having dogs as house pets, except sight dogs or those kept always outside the home;
- Celebrating the religious holidays of Eid-ul-Fitr and Eid-ul-Adha; one after the holy month of Ramadan and the other after the pilgrimage of Hajj;
- Removing shoes when entering the home; a norm keeping home free from street uncleanness;
- Using the right hand for eating and drinking;
- Reciting the Muslim call to prayer in the right ear of a newborn baby;
- Trimming the moustache;
- Shaving pubic and armpit hair (males and females);
- Circumcision; and
- Pouring water over private parts after urination.

There are additional customs associated with clothing, food, weddings, and other aspects of Islamic life.
Resources for understanding more about the culture of Islam
www.islamicfinder.com
www.islamicity.com
YouTube Series: Understanding Islam – http://www.youtube.com/user/ahlulbaytTV/videos

How to Improve Communication

The two leaders of an Islamic religious group are Imam (the one who usually leads the prayer and is responsible for the spiritual guidance of the community) and Amir or Emir (the one responsible for the governance of the community). Larger mosque communities may have an executive director or someone from their board of trustees to represent the mosque community to the outside world.

Fridays in general, and Friday afternoons in particular, are not among the best times to conduct business with mosque leaders, as it may conflict with the Friday Jum’ah prayer service. It is the best time for approved announcements.

Communication Tips

Establishing a relationship with clients starts with effective verbal and non-verbal communication (Slack, 2013). Follow these tips to improve your communications with Muslim clients:

1. Greet your client with a smile, and offer a handshake to same sex clients. To those of the opposite sex, it is not offensive to ask, “Do you shake hands?” Greet children/spouses/companions as well. Ask for the correct pronunciation of clients’ names.

2. Make eye contact with same sex clients. Do not be offended if eye contact is not made or if little eye contact is made from opposite gender clients.

3. Ask open-ended questions.

4. Do not interrupt; listen to what they have to say.

5. Determine if a translator is necessary and do not proceed until one comes as it may frustrate yourself or the client.

6. Explain things in simple terms and ask questions to be sure clients understand.

7. If you need forms completed, explain the forms and ask if they need help completing them. Do not assume because clients can speak English that they can also read and write it or vice versa.

8. Offer information or other resources that you think may be helpful or of interest. Reiterate that you are there to help.

9. Always offer your card or contact information to each person and let them know they can call, text, or email you if they have questions or other issues to discuss.
10. Do not compare them with other Muslim clients and say things such as, “Well, my other Muslim clients did...."

11. Attempt to understand Muslim culture, which will allow you to better assist clients in achieving their goals.

12. Accept that there may be mistrust. The rise in “Islamophobia” has many Muslims wary of people outside of their communities. Don’t take it personally. Demonstrating respect and concern for your client will build trust.

**Communication and Conflict Resolution Tips for Couples**

These culturally appropriate tips are helpful for service providers to use with Muslim couples:

- Discuss issues openly and freely; involve family when necessary and appropriate.

- Encourage couples to seek guidance from Islamic parenting sources before having children and while raising children.

- Encourage couples and families to identify halal (permitted) coping mechanisms in the family. For instance, couples can take a walk to talk about the day or go to the Mosque (Masjid) for at least one prayer. They can read the Qur’an individually or together (11 Tips, n.d.).

Prophet Muhammad said: “The best amongst you are those who are best with their families, and I am the best amongst you because I am the best with my family.”

In his writings on gender issues in Islam, Dr. Jamal Badawi, a distinguished professor and member of the Fiqh Council of North America, acknowledges that the issue of gender equity is important, relevant, and current. Debates and writings on the subject are increasing and are diverse in their perspectives.

The Islamic perspective on the issue is the least understood and most misrepresented by non-Muslims and, at times, by some Muslims as well. The predominant local cultural practices in different parts of the world and the actions of some Muslims tend to reinforce erroneous perceptions of the Islamic perspective. These problems are enhanced by the tendency to treat some juristic interpretations as if they were identical with Islam (Badawi, 1995).

While there are differing perspectives on equity, there does appear to be consensus regarding the hierarchy in Islamic familial duties that is guided by both religious teachings and cultural traditions. Within this hierarchy, each individual has their own responsibilities: Allah is the overall guardian, while men are the guardians of the family, and women are guardians of their husbands’ houses and offspring.

![Image of a Muslim couple]

This hierarchy, however, does not preclude the father from directly taking care of the children. Islamic texts confirm this: "No father can give his child anything better than good manners."

Indeed, the empirical data associated with father involvement confirm “that if fathers are more involved [sic] in different activities with the children they are much better in social,
cognitive and academic achievement than those children’s fathers [who] are not involved in their care” (Fatima, n.d.). Co-parenting is strongly encouraged. However, mothers have primary rights and responsibilities for the care and rearing of their children. In cases where custodial rights have to be determined, both religious and cultural tenets give the mother a basic right to have custody of the children if they are prepubescent or below “the age of discernment.”

When doing group work make each person in the group feel welcomed and wanted. Extend greetings of peace to Muslims if you are unfamiliar with the Arabic phrase “As salaam alaikum,” which means ‘peace be unto you’. Do exercises that allow each person to speak and share in a safe space environment. Do not allow anyone in the group to be made fun of, ridiculed, embarrassed, or bullied for his or her culture or faith. Be attentive to the needs and concerns of everyone in your group, including people who may seem different because of their culture or religious beliefs.

Keep your group on topic and do not allow it to digress to religious/political/cultural issues that will not be answered in your group. If you are providing food, make sure there is something for everyone to eat. Be aware of any vegetarians, those with food allergies, and those who do not eat pork.

Normalize the differences you may have in the group by explaining that America has become a melting pot of cultures and faiths. The Statue of Liberty welcomes everyone; in fact, many people born in America have accepted new religions. Learn a little bit about each of the individuals, couples, or families in your group so you know best how to serve them.

Resources: Parenting/Co-Parenting

Effective Islamic Parenting – www.Effectiveislamicparenting.com


Parenting Advice and Tips for Muslim Parents – www.Outstandingmuslimparenting.com

Strengthening Relationships for Muslim Individuals, Couples, and Families

Working with Muslim individuals, couples, and families can be an exciting and rewarding experience. Many immigrants are anxious to adopt American values and seek services that enhance their Islamic culture rather than contradict its practice. They want to feel welcomed in the country that boasts itself as the home of the free and the land of the brave. Many indigenous Muslims also want services that enhance their practice of Islam rather than contradict it.

Being respectful of their faith and culture is a great way to start. Resist scheduling appointments on a Friday afternoon, the time for the weekly obligatory Jum’ah prayer for most Muslims. If the appointment will require an extended amount of time, offer clients a place to pray.
Strategies for Integrating Healthy Marriage and Relationship Education into Existing Services

Levels of Integration

Healthy marriage and relationship education skills can be integrated into existing service delivery systems in different ways, based on an agency’s strengths, needs, and capacity. There are three primary levels of integration:

**Level 1: Basic Engagement** – Place brochures for local healthy marriage workshops in reception areas; hand out healthy relationship tip sheets to all clients.

**Level 2: Partnerships** – Identify community partners for client referrals; bring relationship education programming onsite for clients.

**Level 3: Full Integration** – Have trained staff or volunteers offer relationship education at career centers as part of job readiness programs and foster parent in-service training or workshops for co-parenting individuals (Slack, 2013).

Partnerships with Masjids and Islamic Community Organizations

Meet with the Imam and head of the Women’s Committee to educate them about your services. Depending on when you start, the holy month of Ramadan (30 days of fasting and feasting for Muslims) is an excellent time to go to the Masjid or Mosque to present information about programs and services. People flock to their places of worship each evening to break the fast together as a community. Many places invite community members to share in this experience and introduce programs and services. There is usually a full house, and this can be a great opportunity to meet people who may be potential clients as well as people who may refer others to your services. Ramadan is the ninth month in the Islamic calendar and lasts for 29 to 30 days based on sightings of the moon. Muslims fast from sunrise to sunset and abstain from food and drink, as well as sexual relations, during the daylight hours.

Connect with local chapters of nationally recognized Islamic organizations such as:

- Islamic Society of North America (ISNA) – [www.isna.net](http://www.isna.net)
- Islamic Circle of North America (ICNA) – [www.icna.org](http://www.icna.org)
- Muslim Alliance in North America – [www.mana-net.org](http://www.mana-net.org)
- U.S. Council of Muslim Organizations – [www.uscmo.org](http://www.uscmo.org)
- Council on American Islamic Relations (CAIR) – [www.cair.com](http://www.cair.com)
- Islamic Relief – [www.irusa.org](http://www.irusa.org)
Glossary of Common Arabic Words

Adhan: Call to prayer
Allah: God
Eid: A day of festivity; major religious holiday
Halal: Permissible by Islamic law
Hijab: Used by Muslim women to cover their hair
Imam: Spiritual leader
Janazah: Funeral
Jum’ah: Friday prayer service
Khimar: Another name for hijab
Kufi: A cap worn by some Muslim men
Masjid: Place of worship, Arabic word for Mosque
Qur’an: Islam’s scripture
Ramadan: The month of fasting
Sharia: Islamic law
Tayammum: Cleansing before prayer that does not require water
Wudu: Washing before prayer

Conclusion

Muslims are an integral part of America’s fabric and deserve services that are culturally sensitive. Serving them appropriately indicates the community is willing to help them and encourages Muslim families in need of services to seek help.

Keep a few things in mind to improve services to Muslim families:

- Muslims come from a variety of countries with unique and distinct cultures.
- American converts to Islam include both whites and Americans of color.
- Muslim cultural practice may be distinct from Islamic religious practice. The latter reflects correct application of the religion; the former may be a socialized norm.

When in doubt, ask. It is always more appropriate to ask respectful questions than to make inappropriate assumptions.

“America and Islam are not exclusive and need not to be in competition. Instead, they overlap, and share common principles of justice and progress, tolerance and the dignity of all human beings”

– President Obama, 2009
References


Who was Mohammed Webb? (n.d.) Retrieved from http://www.webbfound.org/about/#alexander

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www.HealthyMarriageandFamilies.org

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