Being Middle Eastern American: Identity Negotiation in the Context of the War on Terror

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Using in-depth interviews with naturalized U.S. citizens and immigrants as well as autoethnographic data, the author examines the stigma management strategies Middle Eastern Americans deploy, particularly in the aftermath of the September 11th terrorist attacks. He applies the concepts of interpretive practice and accounting to narratives of disrupted encounters in which Middle Eastern Americans were prompted to explain their identities, and classifies the stigma management strategies this group utilizes into five types of accounting: humorous, educational, defiant, cowering, and passing. This article evaluates the strengths and drawbacks of each accounting type for combating stigma and discusses how these findings inform existing scholarship on the social construction of deviant identities and their management in everyday life.

About a year after September 11, 2001, I was in a shopping mall in a northeastern city. For the last thirty minutes, I had been acutely aware of a security guard who had been following me around the mall. I was not completely surprised to see him follow me into the restroom. I was, however, taken aback when he moved closer to me near the urinal and looked over my shoulder as I was urinating. I was not sure what to say or do. I thought, “Is he worried that I am going to contaminate the city’s water supply with my toxic urine?” I felt violated but did not want to cause a scene. So I started singing, “Chances are, ’cause I wear a silly grin the moment you come into view . . .” I had learned the lyrics from a Taco Bell toy that played the song when you squeezed it. I did not really know the rest of the song, but it did not matter, crowing in English seemed to have done the job. The security guard backed off and left me alone for the rest of my time at the mall.

As this story from my own life shows, September 11th and the ensuing period that has been named “the War on Terror” have significantly changed the daily lives of Middle Eastern Americans. For members of this ethnic group, it was indeed “the day that changed everything.” In the days following September 11th, anything seemed
possible, even mass detentions on a scale similar to what Japanese Americans were subjected to after Pearl Harbor. Such fears were so real that on the night of September 11th, I actually packed some of my belongings and essential documents in a small suitcase in preparation for mass detentions. I was, after all, born in Iran and physically resembled the terrorists, whose images were relentlessly displayed in all the mass media.

The extreme measures I feared did not materialize in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks; however, our lives have, in many ways, changed for the worse. In particular, Middle Eastern Americans experience more stereotyping more frequently than before. We are asked to explain our intentions, politics, and personal beliefs, even in the course of the mundane routines of everyday life, such as shopping at a mall. Although prejudice and discrimination against this ethnic group existed for decades before September 11th, the recent intensity and regularity of these demands are unprecedented. As one of my respondents put it, it happened before, “but not with this magnitude, and not with the accusatory tone. . . . Before it was just out of curiosity, and it was incidental, but this is an even more demanding tone of ‘Who are you? And why did your people do this?’”

In this article, I investigate how Middle Eastern Americans respond to these disruptions of their daily routines. My original intention was to use interview data as well as my personal experiences as an Iranian immigrant to show how Middle Eastern Americans manage the stigma of their “spoiled identities” (Goffman 1963), especially in the aftermath of September 11th. While working on the first draft, I told my Iranian friend Ahmad,1 with whom I was having lunch, that I was working on a paper titled “Stigma Management Strategies of Middle Eastern Americans.” He nodded with his head down as he swallowed his food. After a short pause, he asked: “Why ‘stigma?’ What is the stigma?”

I was a little surprised that he failed to see the obvious. I explained, “After September 11th, people from the Middle East, especially Muslims, are treated with suspicion and subjected to ethnic profiling. That’s why we are stigmatized.”

He replied in a matter-of-fact tone. “Not always. Sitting here with you, talking in this school cafeteria, I don’t feel stigmatized.”

I began to wonder if this was a case of what Marx would call “false consciousness.” I tried harder to convince him of the gravity of the situation of Middle Eastern Americans in a post-9/11 world. Ahmad did not disagree with the entire argument, he just refused to see himself as someone with a chronic stigma, or a permanent and enduring negative identity.

My friend convinced me that in some situations the stigma of being Middle Eastern goes unnoticed or is altogether nonexistent for all practical purposes. How do we then empirically study stigma or even know if it actually exists? One way to answer this question is to explore differences or similarities between audience and self-perceptions. In other words, we can compare Ahmad’s self-image with his audience’s perceptions of him and then go on to make certain conclusions about the relation between the two perspectives. For example, we may find that many people do
in fact have negative perceptions of Ahmad, but he is fortunate to enjoy a high self-esteem that shields him from any emotional damage. This line of thinking could tell us a good deal about the mental state of both sides, but it offers less insight into everyday practice, or what people actually do when they interact with one another.

Self or audience perception are not fixed; they change in the course of practice. Similarly, the meaning of “stigma” varies situationally. A friend in graduate school jokingly referred to me as “the swarthy Iranian” (I did not find that funny). My same brown complexion apparently evoked a different audience response when a waitress at a Denny’s told me, “You have such a nice tan!” (To which I smugly replied, “I was born with it.”)

How do I really feel about having a brown complexion? Well, it depends on how it is used. I cannot really discuss it without referring to specific interactions and the social context that made my skin tone relevant. In the same vein, the empirical reality of being Middle Eastern is not just a mental property of the self or audience, but is enacted under the concrete conditions of everyday life. Audience or self perceptions about stigma become experientially meaningful and accessible when articulated in a specific setting and for a particular purpose.

Thus, to appreciate the complexity of Ahmad’s experiences as a Middle Eastern American, it seemed that I needed to attend to situational variations surrounding how individuals define, enact, and cope with stigma in everyday encounters. This article first offers brief discussions of how I conceptualized stigma and everyday practice for the purpose of this study, and then presents my analysis of how Middle Eastern Americans manage their identities in the aftermath of September 11th.

STIGMA AND THE MANAGEMENT OF SPOILED IDENTITY

Numerous studies have highlighted how stigmatized individuals employ various resistance and management strategies in response to negative labels (Cahill and Eggleston 1994; Davis 1961; Evans, Forsyth, and Foreman 2003; Feagin and McKinney 2003; Fothergill 2003; Herman 1993; Karp 1992; Riessman 2000; Roschelle and Kaufman 2004; Snow and Anderson 1987). This body of research treats normal–deviant interactions as an ongoing drama in which the stigmatized try to create positive identities. As they reveal, individuals use various techniques, such as humor and selective disclosure, to either avoid being stigmatized or soften the impact of the stigma on their “spoiled identity.”

Much of the scholarship cited above is inspired by Goffman’s seminal work *Stigma* (1963), in which he states:

> [When a stranger] is present before us, evidence can arise of his possessing an attribute that makes him different from others. . . . He is thus reduced in our minds from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one. Such an attribute is a stigma. (Pp. 2–3)

For Goffman, stigma is a variable social construct and not a fixed characteristic of the person. Stigma is bound by social roles and expectations and derives its mean-
ing from particular social contexts. An ascribed status or attribute, such as one’s race or ethnicity, is not inherently stigmatizing, but becomes so under a specific set of social rules and social conditions. For example, a number of studies have suggested that recent demographic and sociopolitical trends in North America may gradually lower the rank of whiteness from a preferred racial status to a social stigma (Killian 1985; Kusow 2004; Storrs 1999).

Furthermore, as Link and Phelan’s work (2001) notes, stigma is a multifaceted concept. Accordingly, studies of stigma can be classified on the basis of which aspect of the stigmatization process they emphasize. In this article, I am most interested in the “obtrusiveness” of stigma (Goffman 1963:129) and its “disruption” of daily routines (Harvey 2001). Specifically, I focus on encounters that become “incidents” or “scenes” (Goffman 1959:210–12). In such situations, as the norms of “audience tact” and “disattention” are suspended, the stigmatized individuals find themselves caught in the interactional spotlight, forced to explain themselves to others. From the perspective of the stigmatized, these disruptions are especially significant for their “moral careers”—or how they judge themselves and others over time (Goffman 1962:128). As one respondent put it, in such moments “the thin veneer of civility” is stripped away and negative labels are openly applied and contested.

We can view these instances of identity dispute as occasions for eliciting and producing “accounts.” I borrow this term from Lyman and Scott (1989) to refer to encounters in which a person is called to “explain unanticipated or untoward behavior—whether that behavior is his or her own or that of others, and whether the approximate cause of the statement arises from the actor himself or someone else” (p.112). Thus, we give accounts when confronting an unusual situation or individual. In their discussion of stigma, Evans, Forsyth, and Foreman (2003) note that “understanding the way individuals use accounts to construct positive self-identities, in the face of occupying a stigmatized . . . position, is indeed important turf for social science” (p. 373).

This article examines stigma-related accounts as performances that involve both the substance of everyday experience (i.e., what is being contested or questioned and under what conditions) and the social construction of reality (i.e., how it is presented). This view of stigma is consistent with the symbolic interactionist premise that objects are not inherently meaningful; rather, individuals assign meanings in general, and identities in particular, through interaction. Stigma is realized in the reflexive interplay between social conditions and self-presentation. The meaning and practical significance of stigma is interactionally achieved in everyday encounters. To better highlight this reflexive approach to accounts and stigma, the next section discusses interpretive practice as an analytic framework that attends to both the substance of stigma and its dramaturgical management.

INTERPRETIVE PRACTICE AND ACCOUNTING

“Interpretive practice,” as developed by Gubrium and Holstein (2000), provides a view of lived experience that is faithful to both individual agency and structural
conditions. On the one hand, its emphasis on artful practice echoes the interactionist dictum of “if [people] define situations as real, they are real in their consequences” (Thomas and Thomas 1928:572). That is to say, reality is socially constructed through symbolic interaction. On the other hand, an interpretive practice approach has affinities with the Marxist notion that people “make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given, and transmitted from the past” (McLellan 2000:329). Approaching social interaction as interpretive practice implies that actors are neither completely passive nor autonomous. Instead, interpretive practice focuses on social life as it is empirically manifested in the interplay between artful construction and concrete circumstance. Indeed, Gubrium and Holstein caution against placing too much emphasis on either the conditions or artfulness of everyday practice. In their words, “Being the two sides of interpretive practice, conditions and artfulness are reflexively intertwined so that the reification of one in service to the analysis of the other is virtually impossible” (1997:121).

Following this approach, stigmatizing encounters involve both concrete realities and fluid practices in which actors use language to settle identity disputes. In this sense, stigma becomes a locally-circumscribed achievement. Applying these insights to Middle Eastern Americans’ encounters with those who question their identities, specific cultural resources (i.e., racist stereotypes and fear of terrorism perpetuated by the media) provide the social context for inquiries about Middle Eastern people. However, the outcomes of these encounters are never predetermined; each is an occasion for negotiating the practical meaning of Middle Eastern American identity. Each is replete with its own nuances and artful practices.

SOCIAL CONTEXT AND HISTORY

Accounts are conditioned by structural factors. As Lyman and Scott point out (1989), there are patterned differences between those actors who request accounts and those who have to account for themselves. In their words,

The point with respect to accounts is their right to be requested, their establishment of social identity, and their efficacy to change in accordance with the changing status of the group involved. . . . Situations of account confusion are especially acute when a group in transition from one status position to another is undergoing a collective identity crisis. Racial groups provide numerous examples. Before the 1920s some Japanese in America insisted on their identity as “free white persons” in order to circumvent naturalization and franchise barriers, but found few others would accept this definition of their racial status. (P. 151)

In many ways, the case of Middle Eastern Americans is similar to that of Japanese Americans in the first half of the twentieth century. Political turmoil in the Middle East and terrorism have created an identity crisis for those with ancestries to that part of the world. The negative stereotypes of Middle Eastern Americans (“Arabs” in particular) predate the September 11th tragedies. For example,
An ABC News poll, conducted during the Persian Gulf crisis in February 1991, found 43% of Americans had a high opinion of Arabs while 41% said they had a low opinion. In that poll, majorities of Americans said the following terms applied to Arabs: “religious” (81%), “terrorists” (81%), “violent” (58%) and “religious fanatics” (56%). (Jones 2001:1)

In fact, negative opinions toward Middle Eastern Americans date back at least to the hostage crisis of 1972 in which Palestinian militants took eleven Israeli athletes hostage during the Olympic Games in Munich. The German authorities’ attempt to rescue the hostages ended in a massacre that claimed the lives of all eleven hostages and five of the eight terrorists. Shortly after this event, the Federal Bureau of Investigation launched one of its first national campaigns to interview and deport Arab Americans (Marvasti and McKinney 2004:56). Later, the Iranian hostage crisis in 1979, the first Gulf War in 1991, and the 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center all reinforced negative stereotypes of Middle Eastern Americans. Each conflict was followed by a wave of hate crimes and discrimination. Mosques were vandalized, and people were fired from jobs and assaulted on the streets (Feagin and Feagin 2003:327–30; Marvasti and McKinney 2004:53–60; Schaefer 2006:299–302; U.S. Congress 1986).

These backlashes were relatively isolated and episodic until September 11, 2001, when systematic discrimination against Middle Eastern Americans received considerable public support. A Newsweek poll conducted shortly after the terrorist attacks, on September 14–15, 2001, indicated that “32% of Americans think Arabs living in this country should be put under special surveillance as Japanese Americans were” (Jones 2001:3–4). Similarly, in June 2002 a Gallup survey of 1,360 American adults showed that “of the five immigrant groups tested [Arabs, Hispanics, Asians, Africans, and Europeans], the public is least accepting of Arab immigrants, as 54% say there are too many entering the United States” (Jones 2002:3).

Since September 11, 2001, accountability has become an everyday reality for Middle Eastern Americans in light of official policies that systematically demand that they explain their every action. Former Attorney General John Ashcroft articulated this state of heightened awareness quite clearly in public addresses by suggesting that if suspected terrorists as much as spit on the sidewalk, they would be arrested (Gorman 2002). The term “suspected terrorists” has become so broadly defined as to include thousands of Middle Eastern men who have been interviewed, arrested, or deported for minor immigration violations.

Interestingly, under U.S. immigration laws, Middle Eastern Americans (officially defined as those with ancestral ties to a region stretching from Turkey to North Africa) are classified as “white.” Indeed, most affirmative action forms specifically instruct people of Middle Eastern descent to identify themselves as “white.” However, the phrase “Middle Eastern–looking” almost always used in connection with a terrorist threat, has come to connote the same meaning as the words “black suspect.” Their official classification as “white” seems to have no practical relevance in everyday life as Middle Eastern Americans are singled out for antiterrorism measures.

In the post-9/11 era, “Middle Eastern–looking” people, men in particular, have
been verbally harassed, physically attacked, and sometimes killed, regardless of their actual nationality or association with Islam or the Middle East. In Mesa, Arizona, an Indian Sikh was shot and killed for being dark-skinned, bearded, and wearing a turban (Delves 2001). The man responsible for this crime also fired shots at a Lebanese gas station worker and an Afghan family. In addition to the rash of indiscriminate violence, in several incidents across the country “Middle Eastern-looking” men were removed from flights after completing all security checks and being seated (Brown 2001). The reason offered in most cases was as vague as the crew not feeling safe flying with them.

Furthermore, the current terror warning system, which is intended to alert the public about potential terrorist attacks, acts as an accounting catalyst. As the level of terror is “elevated,” for example, from yellow to orange, public fears and suspicions are equally increased, and subsequently more Middle Eastern people are forced into the position of account-givers. At the same time, terror warnings call on ordinary citizens to be “alert” and report anything “suspicious”—in a sense, depoliticizing them as semiofficial account-takers. In essence, the terror alert system encourages the suspension of tact and disattention, especially to the detriment of “Middle Eastern-looking” people. To borrow from Goffman (1963), Middle Eastern Americans are suffering “ill-fame” perpetuated by the mass media. In his words, their “public image . . . seems to be constituted from a small selection of facts which . . . are inflated into dramatic news-worthy appearance, and then used as a full picture [of their identity]” (p. 71). Under these circumstances, aspects of one’s life that would ordinarily be considered private are routinely subjected to public and official scrutiny in everyday encounters.

However, the outcomes of such encounters are not uniform or predetermined. As Goffman states (1963), and Gubrium and Holstein develop in relation to interpretive practice (2000), stigma is not the property of a person, but of relationships that always unfold through symbolic interaction. Building on these insights, the stigma of being Middle Eastern American is not external to interactions but is constructed or rejected through interaction, accounts, and self-presentational strategies.

METHODS AND DATA

From May 2002 to May 2004, my wife (a white woman from the southern United States) and I conducted twenty in-depth interviews with twelve male and eight female respondents, whose age ranged from eighteen to fifty-five years. All were either enrolled in college or had earned a four-year degree (at minimum), and lived in three different states (Florida, Pennsylvania, and Virginia). Eighteen were naturalized citizens and two were longtime immigrants who had lived and worked in the United States for over ten years and planned to become citizens. In our interviews, we asked respondents how they managed being Middle Eastern, particularly when facing discrimination. We began our interviews with demographic questions about age, country of origin, and education. We then followed with questions about whether
respondents had experienced any form of ethnic discrimination at work, in school, or in their communities because of their religion, names, accents, appearance, or style of dress. We used probes like “What did you do then?” to encourage respondents to elaborate on their narratives.

Interviews lasted approximately one hour and were taped and subsequently transcribed after obtaining informed consent from the participants. We conducted seventeen interviews face-to-face and three over the phone, and recorded the latter using a speakerphone. The face-to-face interviews took place at the respondents’ homes, places of work, or in my campus office. In order to recruit participants, we used snowball sampling, which is considered especially useful when dealing with a sensitive topic that can best be understood from an insider’s perspective (Biernacki and Waldorf 1981). Respondents were my relatives, friends, and professional colleagues, who in turn referred me to other potential research participants. Three interviews are not included in my sample of twenty because the respondents did not self-identify as Middle Eastern. These three included an African American man married to an Iranian woman, a white woman married to an Iranian man, and an Indian man who mentioned after the interview that he had been harassed for “looking Middle Eastern” even though he does not consider himself Middle Eastern.

The twenty remaining respondents (Pakistanis, Iranians, Egyptians, a Turk, and a Lebanese) self-identified as Middle Eastern American. This method of self-identification is the norm for most studies of ethnicity and race. Even the U.S. census, an ostensibly objective population count, is based on self-identification. In other words, when answering ancestral background questions in the U.S. census, respondents are free to choose from a number of categories (e.g., “Arab or Arabic,” “Middle Eastern,” and “North African”). In fact, according to a census report, from 1990 to 2000 the number of people who self-identified as “Middle Eastern” quadrupled (Cruz and Brittingham 2003).

At the same time, it seems that official designations, which as mentioned earlier classify Middle Eastern people as white, are removed from everyday experience and reflective of colonial divisions of the world. Such geopolitical constructs are founded on exaggerated distinctions between “Western self” and the “Arab/Muslim Other.” From this perspective, terms like “the Near East,” “the Middle East,” or “the Far East” respectively represent presumed degrees of similarity between the “orient” and the “occident” (see Edward Said 1978). The categories of “Muslim American” and “Arab American” are equally problematic because most American Arabs are in fact Christians (AAI 2003). Furthermore, Muslim Iranians and Turks, who are often considered to be Middle Eastern, respectively speak Farsi and Turkish, and thus cannot be labeled “Arab American.” Therefore, asking our respondents if they self-identify as Middle Eastern is methodologically sound and theoretically consistent with the phenomenological emphasis of the present analysis.2

The interview data was supplemented with autoethnographic data from my experience as an Iranian immigrant who has lived in the United States since 1983. For the purpose of this study, autoethnography refers to an orientation that allows the
researcher to use her or his experiences as data in the form of a cultural insider’s personal narratives (Ellis and Bochner 2000; Hayano 1979; Ronai 1992). Admittedly, having an insider status does not invariably work to the researcher’s advantage. For example, Kusow’s research with Somali immigrants in Canada (2003) shows that his insider status raised questions about the researcher’s objectivity and aroused suspicion among respondents. In the present case, working with family and friends meant that I had pre-established rapport with my respondents. Rather than concealing my personal background information, I actively used my ethnicity and personal experiences to foster existing relationships with my interviewees and empathize with their troubles.

My data collection took the form of “active interviewing” (Holstein and Gubrium 1995), a process in which both the participants and the researcher contribute to meaning-making. My own experiences frequently entered the discussion as I tried to use my insider status to solicit data and put my respondents at ease. For example, on several occasions I followed a respondent’s story with, “You know, that happened to me once.” Conversely, sometimes my respondents involved me in their stories by saying, “I’m sure you know what that’s like.” As work by Mauthner and Doucet (2003) and Lincoln and Denzin (1994) suggests, the subjective stance of autoethnography allows me to locate myself in the data, analysis, and writing of this research. My presence in the text reveals to the readers my epistemological and emotional investment in the topic. In short, I am in the text because I am personally affected by the stigma of being Middle Eastern.

I represent my own and my respondents’ accounting for stigma in narrative form to highlight the contextual and existential quality of these experiences. Because the stories I analyze here are reconstructions of normal–deviant encounters, they are subject to retrospective distortions. Having said that, retrospective accounts of accounts have been the primary source of data in many studies of stigma management. Encounter narratives are the norm in the sociology of stigma for both practical and theoretical reasons. Practically, it is difficult to position oneself as a researcher to observe stigma management firsthand. Researchers would have to shadow the stigmatized through their daily routines to isolate specific stigma-related encounters. Theoretically, a person defines stigmatization experiences largely in retrospect. It is after reflecting on an encounter that a person might say, “I am/was stigmatized” or “I resist/resisted stigma in this way.” Additionally, similarities between my respondents’ accounts suggest that their narratives are not random fictions but reflections of a patterned experience.

Middle Eastern individuals presented or accounted for their selves in disrupted social encounters or “incidents” (Goffman 1959:212). Accounting practices took mainly five forms: humorous accounting, educational accounting, defiant accounting, cowering, and passing. Analyzing these accounting strategies enables us to vividly grasp the interplay between artful self-presentations and obdurate social conditions. Each constitutes a different interpretive practice individuals use to establish a situationally practical and useful Middle-Eastern self.
Humorous Accounting

When questioned about their ethnic identity, respondents sometimes use humor as a way of shifting attention away from the stereotypes that threaten their identities. In this way, they use humor as a diversion technique (Taub, McLorg, and Fanflik 2004). Consider, for example, how Ali accounted for his Middle Eastern–sounding name.

Ali: Sometimes they do; sometimes they don’t. Sometimes, if they haven’t met me or if they are sending me correspondence, they think it’s a lady’s name and a lot of correspondence comes in Ms. Ali [last name]. They think I’m either Alison or something like that. Nowadays, when my name comes up [in face-to-face contacts with clients], I use my sense of humor. For example, when they can’t spell my name or ask questions about it, I say, “I’m the brother of Muhammad Ali, the boxer.”

Ali’s deliberate use of associations with the famed boxer places his name in a cultural context his account-takers are familiar with. In this type of accounting, individuals use humor to establish a common ground or “facilitating normalized role-taking” (Davis 1961:128).

Another respondent, whose first name, Ladan (the name of a flower in Persian), brings up unwelcome and troubling associations with the notorious terrorist Osama Bin Laden, tells this story about how she used humor with an inquisitive customer.

Ladan: Where I work [at a department store] we all wear nametags, with the name Ladan very clearly spelled out L A D A N. And this old couple, they approached me and I was very friendly with them—I usually chitchat with my customers. And he started asking me all these questions like, “You’re so pretty, where’re you from?” [I respond,] “I’m from Iran.” [He says,] “What?” [I repeat,] “I’m from Iran.” So he asks, “What’s your name?” And I say, “Ladan.” So he bent down to read my nametag and he just looked at me with a funny face and asked, “Are you related to Bin Laden?”

Ladan: No, he was not. But I did joke back to him and I said, “Yes, he’s my cousin and actually he’s coming over for dinner tonight.” [She chuckles.]

Ladan: Yeah, I do, because otherwise, if I don’t turn it into a joke or a laughing mood, I get upset. I get really, really offended.

Ladan: When this guy realized my name is Ladan and I’m from Iran, he changed his attitude. He became reserved and he even went one step backward. When I noticed he was uncomfortable, I completed the transaction with his wife and let them leave as soon as they wanted.

In this case, Ladan’s use of humor does not necessarily result in the proverbial “happy ending,” or a clearly discernible resolution. The customer turned away and ended the interaction. Whether Ladan remained stigmatized by this encounter or
whether the customer walked away feeling that he successfully applied the stigma is unknown, perhaps even for the participants involved in the interaction. What is clearer is that Ladan’s account allowed her to highlight the ludicrousness of the account-taker’s assumptions and his right to solicit an account. Here, the way of speaking shapes the substance of the identity. Ladan is not giving a specific and accurate account of who she “really” is, but is using humor to construct an encounter-specific account that implicitly questions the account-taker’s right to ask her questions about her identity.

I also use humor to account for my name. The following encounter took place on election day (November 14, 2002) at a voting precinct in a small town in Pennsylvania where I went to cast my vote in the midterm elections. The encounter begins with the examination of my photo identification.

Election Supervisor: Okay . . . this is a hard one! [squinting at my driver’s license] You’re ready? [alerting her coworker] It says Amar . . . It’s A . . .

I wait, silent and motionless, as the three old women probe my ID. I fear that any sudden movement might send people running out of the building screaming for help. “Speak!” I scream in my head. The words finally roll out of my mouth:

AM: You know, my dad gave me a long name, hoping that it would guarantee my success in life. [They laugh.]
Election Supervisor: Well, you must be a doctor because you sure sign your name like one.
AM: [I cannot resist] Actually, I am a doctor . . . So maybe my dad had the right idea after all.

In this case, I use humor as a method of introduction, a way of constructing an identity for the occasion that gives more weight to how one speaks rather than what one speaks. It was not clear to me what they thought about me, but I sensed that they were still puzzled—I had to account for who I am. The immediate substance of my identity was not in question—they had my photo identification in front of them and most likely could tell from my swarthy appearance that I was not a native Pennsylvanian. Instead, humorous accounting allowed me to shape the broad contours of my identity for the occasion. Namely, I was able to communicate that I come from a “normal” family that aspires to the universal notion of “success in life,” that I am aware that there are concerns about my identity, and am capable of responding to them in a sensible way.

In humorous accounting, the substance of the account is incidental and is deliberately trivialized. The account-giver acknowledges the demands of the encounter while simultaneously undermining the legitimacy and the urgency of the request for an account. How the account-giver handles the substance of the matter shapes the identity in question.

Educational Accounting

Sometimes accounting takes on a deliberate pedagogical form. In such cases, the account-giver assumes the role of an educator, informing and instructing the
account-taker about relevant topics. This strategy of “normalization” (Goffman 1963) combats stigma by correcting stereotypes. Unlike humorous accounting, educational accounting centers on the informational substance of the account.

In response to suspicions and antagonism from his neighbors, a Pakistani Muslim, Hassan, conducted a sort of door-to-door educational accounting:

After September 11th, I walked the street the whole week and talked to every single one of my neighbors. . . . And one of my neighbors—his brother was in Tower Two and he got out, and his mother was there and she was furious with Muslims and me. And we were there for three hours, my wife, my kids, her [the neighbor], her son and her other son that came out of the World Trade Center—he had come down by the time the buildings came down. And I was like, “Look, that’s not Islam. That’s not who Muslims are. Ask your son, what type of person am I? What type of person is my wife? Do I oppress my wife? Do I beat my wife? Have you ever heard me say anything extreme before?” . . . They all know I don’t drink, they all know that I pray five times a day, they all know I fast during the month of Ramadan. At the end of Ramadan, we have a big party and invite everyone over to help celebrate the end of fast. This year, they’ll all probably fast one day with me so they can feel what it’s like.

Hassan’s approach is proactive; it addresses potential questions before they are explicitly asked. In some ways, this form of educational accounting is similar to what Hewitt and Stokes (1975:1–3) call “disclaimers” or a “prospective construction of meaning” that individuals use in an attempt to avoid being categorized in an undesirable way. In this example, Hassan tries to transform the relationship between him, as an account-giver, and the account-takers who suspect him of being an “evildoer.” Unlike humorous accounting, where account-givers deliberately trivialize cultural stereotypes, educational accounting explicitly and diligently addresses them in order to debunk them.

Account-givers have to give considerable attention to deciding which inquiries are worthy of an educational account. For example, an Iranian respondent, Mitra, indicates that she filters inquiries about her culture and identity before answering them:

If they ask about the government or the senate over there [Iran], I don’t know anything about it. I know who the president is, but they ask me about the senate or the name of the senator over there, I don’t know. Since I don’t know I’m not going to get involved. I’ll say I don’t know or I’m not interested. If they say, “Oh, you are from that country!” or “You are from the Middle East and you are a terrorist,” those kinds of comments I’m not going to get into. I’ll just say, “No, I’m not.” But if they ask me about the culture I’ll tell them, “Alright,” and inform them about it—as much as I know.

Although inclined to assume the role of an educator, Mitra is unwilling or unprepared to respond to every question. Part of her educational accounting strategy involves evaluating the degree of her expertise on the subject and the tone of the questions. As she says, if the account-taker begins with accusations, such as “you are a terrorist,” the only reasonable reply might be to deny the accusation and end the interaction.
Educational accounting was a common strategy for Middle Eastern Muslim women in my sample, especially those who wear the hijab.\(^3\) Many of them were approached by strangers who asked questions such as “Isn’t it hot under there?” “Does that come in many colors?” “Why do you wear that?” “Are you going to make them [referring to the ten- and twelve-year-old girls who were standing in a grocery store line with their mother] wear it too?” These women were literally stopped on the street by strangers who asked questions about the hijab, sometimes so directly as to constitute rudeness. My respondents reported that whenever time and circumstances allowed, they provide accounts of their religious practices and beliefs. Some of these answers include “I wear it because it is my culture,” “I wear it so that you won’t stare at my body when you are talking to me,” or a more flippant response such as, “It’s cooler under my scarf than you think.”

Similarly, as a Middle Eastern sociology professor, I am often asked by my students to explain a wide range of topics about the region and Islam, from customs and culture to the mindset of terrorists. Like Mitra, I evaluate each question before providing an account. For example, a student in an undergraduate criminology seminar began every session with a trivial question about Iran, such as “Do they have trees over there?” At first, I provided a detailed educational account whenever asked to do so, even for seemingly inane items. Given the limited time I had to cover the assigned readings, later in the semester it became necessary to remind the students that I was not paid to educate them about the Middle East. The topic of the course was crime, specifically, the criminogenic aspects of American culture. In place of my personal instructions, I recommended a trip to the library for references on the Middle East and Iran. In this case, educational accounting became unfeasible because it diverted attention from the task at hand.

**Defiant Accounting**

When prompted to provide an account, Middle Eastern Americans sometimes express righteous indignation. I call this defiant accounting. Similar to humorous accounting, the account-giver exerts agency by challenging the other’s right and the rationale to request it. However, whereas humorous accounting entails indirect and fairly conciliatory objections to stigma, in defiant accounting the stigmatized make explicit demands for counter explanations from the “normals.” For example, consider how Alham, a young Iranian woman, describes her experiences with a coworker.

She [the coworker] would tell me, “I don’t know which country you come from but in America we do it like this or that.” I let it go because I was older than her and we had to work together. . . . But one day I pulled her aside and I told her, “For your information where I come from has a much older culture. And what I know, you can’t even imagine. So why don’t you go get some more education. And if you mention this thing again—‘my country is this, your country is that’—, I’m going to take it to management and they’re going to fire you or they’re going to fire me.” And that was it.
Alham does not provide an account to repair the interaction or to restore it to a state of equilibrium. On the contrary, she explicitly seeks to challenge the conventional format of the encounter. Instead of aiming for consensus, defiant accounting foregrounds conflicting viewpoints and signals the account-giver’s objection to the entire affair. The interaction is explicitly focused on the fairness of the exchange between the account-giver and the account-taker.

Account-givers are especially likely to use defiant strategies when they find the request for an account unfair. Specifically, ethnic minorities who are subjected to profiling may become defiant in response to the practice. For example, when I learned that, unlike myself, my white colleagues were not asked to show ID cards upon entering the campus gym, I felt justified in becoming defiant. In one instance, while pulling out my ID card from my wallet, I asked the woman at the front counter why my white faculty friend, who had just walked in ahead of me, was not asked to present an ID. She explained that she had not noticed the other person entering or she would have asked him to do the same.

This encounter highlights the unpredictability of defiant accounting for both parties involved in the interaction. At its core, this strategy counters an account request with another: they ask for my ID and I ask why I should be the only one subjected to this rule. In turn, the other side presents its account and so on. This chain of accounts and counter-accounts could result in a formal dispute. Though it is possible that in some cases, when confronted, the account-takers simply back down and cease their efforts, it is just as likely that they intensify their demands, especially when they are backed by policies or other public mandates.

Defiant accounting is a risky approach that can either shield the account-giver from a potentially humiliating process or generate additional requests and demands. In some cases, defiant accounting can become a type of mass resistance, as with African Americans and the passive resistance component of the civil rights movement of the 1960s.

Cowering

Stigma, particularly when endured for a long period, can cause a person to engage in what Goffman (1963:17) calls “defensive cowering”: the stigmatized simply go along with the stereotypical demands of the setting in order to avoid greater harm. With cowering, artful practice and agency take a backseat to external conditions. In encounters of this type, the stigmatized person is virtually powerless in the face of rigid demands of the setting.

Since September 11th, I have been very conscious of this fact when flying. Although I am certain that I have been singled out for security checks, I fear that objecting and confronting these practices would lead to additional hardships (i.e., a direct confrontation with law enforcement agents in which they have the greater authority and likelihood to win). For example, while traveling domestically, my thirteen-year-old daughter (whose mother is white American but has my Middle Eastern-sounding
last name) and I were sent to a separate security line for a “random” screening. From my daughter’s perspective this was “a good thing” because it meant going to a shorter line, but for me being searched was both humiliating and threatening. The following is an account of this incident.

I approach the security gate with my daughter. She goes through. From several feet away, I see them searching her backpack and running a wand over her body as she stands there, still with her arms raised. I am next. I empty my pockets and put the contents on the conveyer belt. A security officer waves me through the gate. The damn thing beeps.

Security Officer One: Whoa! Back up! [I slowly walk back and await further instructions.]
Security Officer One: Walk through again. [The machine beeps again.]
Security Officer One: Undo your belt and turn over the buckle. [She runs the wand over my belt and my waist.]
Security Officer Two: There’s a wallet on the conveyer belt. [My wallet was on the other side of the gate on the belt. They had not run it through the x-ray machine because it was not placed in a plastic pan.]
AM: That’s my wallet. [Fearing someone might take my wallet, I walk back through the gate to retrieve it.]
Security Officer Two: Jesus Christ! You can’t do that!
AM: I meant to get my wallet.
Security Officer Two: Why did you leave it on the belt?
AM: I thought I was supposed to put it there.
Security Officer One: Why didn’t you put in a plastic pan?

I raise my shoulders to indicate my confusion. They stare at me, stare at each other, shake their heads and sigh. I am then told sit on a metal chair, take off my shoes, and raise my feet.

Security Officer Three: Now stand up. [He runs the wand between my legs and down the front of my torso.] Turn around. [He scans my back.] Okay, put on your shoes.
AM: Can I get my wallet now?
Security Officer Four: No, we have to search it. [She pulls out the content of the wallet, searches every pocket, and hands it back to me.]
AM: Can I go now?
Security Office Four: [Apparently looking for someone to give her approval] Go ahead.

I rejoin my daughter. She smiles at me and we move on.

During this incident, I assumed any kind of “talking back” would draw further unwanted attention and possibly result in hours of interrogation—and a missed flight. I later asked an airline representative at the ticket counter why my daughter and I were so frequently selected for “random” screenings. She responded that we were in fact profiled by a computer program and, for reasons of national security, the airline could not tell us what specific criteria were used for singling us out. After hearing this, I replied, “Thank you for taking the time to speak with me. I am not trying to be difficult, but I think the system is flawed . . . but I am happy to help with whatever it takes to make everyone feel safe. Thanks again.”
In another incident, shortly after September 11th, my wife and I were browsing in a video store in Florida. A little boy (maybe about five years old) who was walking in front of us with his parents began frantically tugging at his mother’s shirttail with his eyes firmly fixed on me. When his mother finally looked down at him and asked, “What?” the boy said, “Mommy . . . I thought they were all in jail!” The boy’s parents looked at me and pulled their child away. I tried very hard to smile, but my wife was outraged and wanted to confront the parents. I advised against it, fearing that a full-blown confrontation would only highlight and give credibility to the stereotype expressed by the boy.

Similarly, when a man driving by in his truck yelled at me “Ragheads go home!” I had no opportunity to account or choose an accounting strategy. The incident was too shocking, too threatening, and too quick for me to rationally decide on an accounting strategy. I just cowered and tried to make sure the driver did not have the chance to run over me.

My interviewees spoke of similar incidents when they were dumbfounded by the sheer incivility of the attack. For example, a Pakistani man recalled being thrown out of an elevator on a college campus by a student who stated he did not want to be in the same space “with people like him.” Several female respondents reported being verbally harassed or physically attacked. One was pelted with spitballs when she was in high school, another reported that her friend’s scarf was pulled off by a teenage boy at a grocery store, and another was repeatedly yelled at—“Go home!”—by people in passing cars as she walked to her office on campus.

What these incidents have in common is that they severely limit the agency of the stigmatized; in most cases, the best possible performance is cowering, which is more about “saving body,” or one’s physical safety, than “saving face” (Goffman 1959, 1963). In the biographies of the stigmatized, such overt acts of discrimination, however isolated, have great significance as “turning points” or “epiphanies” (Denzin 1989) that define the self as deviant and powerless in relation to normal others.

Passing

The goal of passing (Goffman 1963) is information control and the concealment of stigmatizing attributes from “normals.” As an accounting strategy, passing means eliminating the need for an account (see Lyman and Scott 1989:126–27). How individuals present their identity can potentially eliminate the need for accounting altogether. My respondents accomplished passing by manipulating their appearance. The stereotypical image of a Middle Eastern person roughly translates into someone with dark hair, large facial features, swarthy skin, non-European foreign accent, facial hair on men, and veils and scarves on women. Faced with these stereotypes, some respondents consciously altered their looks to avoid any outside marker that might associate them with these stereotypes. Self-presentation (Goffman 1959), especially attention to clothes and grooming, is an equally important consideration.
for successful passing. For example, wearing jeans and being clean-shaven draws less attention and leads to fewer occasions for accounting.

Some Middle Eastern Americans try to pass by trading their own ethnic identity for a less controversial one. The simplest way to do this is to move to an ethnically diverse region. The respondents who live in South Florida stated that one reason they did not experience negative episodes of ethnic accounting is because they are perceived as Hispanic. For example, an Iranian woman was asked what kind of Spanish she was speaking when she was having a conversation with her teenage daughter in Farsi at the mall. Another Iranian man tried to pass as Italian by placing an Italian flag vanity license plate on his car. As a general rule, my respondents displayed Western or patriotic symbols (e.g., an American flag) at work, in front of their homes, or on their cars to avoid ethnic accounting. After September 11th, my neighbors gave me an American flag to place outside my apartment. As he put it, “This is for your own safety.” In a sense, patriotic symbols are accounting statements in their own right and act as “disidentifiers” (Goffman 1963:93) that help separate “loyal Americans” from suspected terrorists.

Another strategy for passing is to give an ambiguous account in response to ethnic identity questions. For example, asked about his country of origin, an Egyptian man stated that he was Coptic (a pre-Islamic Egyptian culture). He noted that uninformed account-takers typically find it too embarrassing to ask follow-up questions, pretend to know what “Coptic” means, and drop the subject altogether. Iranians create this kind of ambiguity by stating that they are Persians (the designation of ancient Iran). Another way to circumvent accounts is to name one’s city of birth instead of country of birth. I once told a college classmate that I was from Tehran. To my astonishment, he asked, “Is that near Paris?”

Changing one’s name is another way to pass. Some respondents change their Muslim names (e.g., Akbar) to typical American names (e.g., Michael). When asked why he changed his name, Ahmad explained that he was tired of people slamming down the phone when he made inquiries about jobs. Some change from widely known ethnic-sounding names to lesser known ones as in the change from Hossein to Sina.

Passing strategies pose their own risks for the stigmatized. In particular, the media have constructed passing among Middle Eastern Americans as an extension of the “evil terrorist plot.” After September 11th, it was widely reported that the hijackers were specifically instructed to wear jeans and shave their faces to pass as native born ethnics. Therefore, rather than being viewed as a sign of cultural assimilation, Middle Eastern Americans’ conspicuous attempts at passing can be cast as a diabolical plan to form a “sleeper cell” or to disguise “the wolves among us.” These days, when I go to an airport, I am very conscious of how much passing would be considered legitimate. Trying to conceal too much information about oneself can arouse suspicion. In fact, I sometimes wear my gold medallion with its Allah (Arabic for “God”) inscription conspicuously on the outside of my shirt to indicate that I am not attempting to “misrepresent” myself or deceive anyone.
CONCLUSIONS: INTERPRETIVE PRACTICE AND STIGMA MANAGEMENT

The interpretive practice model used in this study combines the interactionist concepts of accounts and stigma management with the structural emphasis on concrete social conditions. This analysis focuses on accounting as an interpretive process for establishing situationally specific ethnic identities. Rather than treating stigma as an objective reality, I examine the interpretive practices individuals use to establish or dispute stigma and stigmatized identities.

I reject a more objective conceptualization of stigma in part because, as noted by Riessman (2000), such an approach exaggerates the influence of the dominant culture. Instead of considering the myriad ways would-be targets challenge or altogether dismiss stigma, the objective view takes for granted the reality of stigma and proceeds to analyze its management, concealment, or consequences for the stigmatized. As a result, Goffman’s original stipulation on the situationally variable and interactionally embedded nature of stigma is lost. Lost also is the understanding that, at least according to Goffman (1963), stigma is a tentative reality project. As he states, “The normal and the stigmatized are not persons but rather perspectives. These are generated in social situations during mixed contacts” (p. 138). Therefore, stigma, the stigmatized, and stigmatizers become meaningful within specific social interactions. The assumption that stigmas are obdurate qualities of particular groups of people might contradict empirical evidence, or the actors’ own experiences.

The case of Middle Eastern Americans’ spoiled identities suggests that two sets of empirical observations have to be incorporated into the analysis. One the one hand, there is the reality of the so-called War on Terror and pervasive fear of terrorism, both of which have made Middle Eastern Americans “legitimate” targets of scrutiny in everyday life. Similarly, the political turmoil in the Middle East directly affects their lives in the United States, so much so that there is almost a direct correspondence between the volatility of the region and the instability of Middle Eastern identities in the United States. Every terrorist attack, every hostage taking, and every virulent speech issued from the Middle East triggers a corresponding wave of public scrutiny in the United States. These are the conditions, but how do we get at everyday practices? How do Middle Eastern Americans cope in real life situations? Answering these questions requires wearing a different analytic hat, so to speak.

One way my respondents and I cope with these conditions is by being adaptable and fluid with our self presentations. We do not enter daily interaction as members of a stigmatized group. Many of us are devout Muslims who practice our religion proudly despite stereotypes and the negative press. To suggest that we are narrowly defined by the stigma of being Middle Eastern is an empirically unfounded claim. It is equally problematic to imply that the majority of Americans are engaged in a mass stigmatization campaign. On a general level, my analysis is informed by the idea that ethnic difference is variable and interactionally achieved (Garfinkel 1967), and suggests that Middle Eastern Americans use a range of interpretive practices to
define their ethnic-national identities in the context of everyday life during the War on the Terror.

My respondents and I experience being forced into positions where we have to account for our ethnic identities. What triggers these accounting encounters (e.g., genuine interest, fear, or malice) is of secondary relevance. As C. Wright Mills (1939) suggests, the motives for these encounters are themselves situated and discerned in the course, and in the language, of the interaction. In these encounters, account-givers and account-takers monitor each other at every turn and respond accordingly. I have labeled this type of interaction accounting encounters, and have underlined some of the self-presentation strategies Middle Eastern Americans use as they account for their identity (humorous, educational, and defiant accounting, cowering, and passing). Similar questions could be developed about account-takers and the strategies they use to ask for accounts (e.g., how they respond to humor or confrontation in their identity inquiries).

Although the categories discussed here overlap in some ways (e.g., humor can be educational), they do represent distinct modes of responding to identity challenges. Each represents certain possibilities and limitations for the stigmatized. Specifically, humor can normalize deviant–normal relations and relieve social tension, but at the same time humor can have a “minstrelization” effect (Carling 1962, cited in Goffman 1963:110). In particular, self-deprecatory humor can cast the stigmatized in the role of someone who lacks self-respect and is not to be taken seriously. Furthermore, transforming discriminatory encounters into humorous ones could create the impression that the stigmatized have not been severely harmed by a stereotype, thereby implying that those who cannot laugh at such abuses are overreacting.

Educational accounting can be effective in correcting misconceptions and changing public opinion. Unlike humor, educational accounting grants stereotyping and discrimination the solemnity they deserve. It treats both the account-giver and -taker as rational actors who can enter a mutually beneficial dialogue. The drawback is that it burdens the stigmatized with a constant state of preparedness requiring them to explain themselves in an articulate and diplomatic way. Educational accounting takes time away from job-related tasks or leisure. With rare exceptions, when professional duties and the accounting demands coincide (such as this article, for example), the work of answering for one’s ethnic background and religion could become a considerable chore. At the same time, educational accounting casts the stigmatized in the role of “cultural ambassador” (Jacobs 1999), for which they may not be prepared. Even the most learned account-givers have a relatively limited knowledge of the endless cultural topics that come up in the course of ethnic identity accounting.

Some stigma management strategies actually “further spoil one’s identity” (Roshchelle and Kaufman 2004:26). This can certainly be the case with defiant accounting, which has the advantage of providing a sort of immediate psychological relief for the stigmatized, a sense of finally being heard. However, as discussed earlier, defiant accounting poses serious risks for Middle Eastern Americans, who are
already suspected of being militant and fanatical. Thus, such a reaction may reinforce the very stereotypes they are trying to overcome. Additionally, militancy can increase one’s “differentness.” In Goffman’s words, “the individual may find that his very efforts can politicize his own life, rendering it even more different from the normal life initially denied him” (1963:114). The extreme alternative to defiant accounting is cowering, which entails resigning oneself to the limitations of the spoiled self and abandoning any attempt at having an active role or voice in the interaction.

Finally, passing aids the stigmatized by concealing potentially damaging information. For example, after my daughter was called an “Iraqi terrorist” on the school bus, I asked how anyone found out about her being Middle Eastern. She explained that facing her schoolmates’ insistence on knowing where she was “really” from, she finally told them she was “half Iranian.” Apparently, her classmates did not know or care that there are significant differences between Iranians and Iraqis. After this incident, I instructed my daughter to tell her friends she is an “American.” In this way, I hoped to help her disidentify with the stigma of “Iraqi terrorist.” This incident highlights how passing creates “ambivalence” or “oscillation of identity,” making one able neither to “embrace his group nor let it go” (Goffman 1963:106–8). In the case of Middle Eastern Americans, passing as “an average American” means making forced choices between attachments to one’s native culture, on the one hand, and the conveniences of not being different, on the other.

What these accounting strategies share is that they are all attempts at salvaging spoiled identities in disrupted routine interactions. My respondents indicated that they measure the quality of their lives by the number of disruptions they face (i.e., a good day means not receiving unwanted attention). It is true that most people experience some type of “incident” or “scene” in their daily lives, but it is also true that most find “their predicament . . . much less charged and more easily set to rights” (Davis 1961:132).

In addition to its economic effects, stigma also forces its targets to become excessively and constantly conscious about themselves, others, and social interactions in general (Goffman 1967). A poignant example of this heightened state of consciousness is illustrated in my encounter with another shopper at a Wal-Mart store in Florida.

We were both waiting in a checkout line. The woman, who was momentarily distracted by a tabloid cover, looked up at me abruptly and asked, “Where did you come from?” I hesitated for a second, wondering if I should try to pass as “an average Floridian,” but ethnic pride took a hold of me. So I stuck out my chest and blurted, “I am Iranian.” She responded with a perplexed look, “I mean, how’d you get in front of me in this line?” I did not know what to say after that. I just kept my head down, paid for my items, and left the store. I did not look back out of embarrassment.

Although laughable, such encounters could have the unfortunate effect of further alienating and weakening the account-givers’ bonds with “normal” society. Ultimately, no accounting strategy is a suitable substitute for social interaction unencumbered by stereotypes and the acts of discrimination they engender.
At a different level, this article also hints at the onerous emotional labor (Hochschild 1983) unwilling account-givers have to perform in order to cope with stigma. I believe that examining stigma as interpretive practice has clear political implications. As Gubrium and Holstein put it, interpretive practice “presents the recognition that we could enact alternate possibilities or alternative directions. . . . If we make visible the constructive fluidity and malleability of social forms, we also reveal a potential for change” (2000:503). Like most studies of deviance and stigma, my work is intended to humanize myself and my respondents, but beyond that, I hope for social change. By voicing my own and my respondents’ perspectives, I want to inspire my readers to initiate new interpretive practices. Ultimately, this article is a purposeful account in its own right that aims to change negative perceptions and hurtful practices.

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NOTES

1. Most names have been fictionalized to protect the identity of the respondents. Where it is necessary to use an actual first name, every effort has been made to disguise other personal identifying information about a respondent.
2. Theoretically, Israeli Americans could be included in the broader ethnic grouping of Middle Easterners. In particular, Sephardic Jews have much in common with their Arab neighbors and friends. However, in the context of the War on Terror, non-Jewish Middle Easterners are the primary targets of public scrutiny. At the same time, the modern anti-Semitism inflicted on Jews has different origins and is qualitatively different from what Arabs and other Middle Easterners experience. Thus, although the two groups are culturally similar, for the purpose of this article, they are experientially different in everyday life. It should be noted that Sephardic Israelis are sometimes mistaken for “Arab terrorists.” The same can also be said about Hispanics who “look Middle Eastern.” An analysis of these various groups’ public self-presentations would shed considerable light on how the War on Terror has helped or hindered inter-ethnic relations.
3. Hijab is the Islamic word for modesty in dress that applies to both men and women. In the case of many Muslim women living in the United States, this means wearing a scarf that covers the hair and the neck, as well as wearing loose-fitting garments so that the outlines of the body are not exaggerated.

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