“Knowing One Another”: An Examination of U.S. College Students’ Knowledge and Perceptions of Islam and Muslims

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Abstract

Research on attitudes toward Muslims in Western society is plentiful, more so since the events of 9/11. However, there is a lack of research about perceptions of Islam and Muslims among American college students, even though college campuses are becoming increasingly diverse. The purpose of this study is to explore whether there is a correlation between students’ perceptions and knowledge of Islam and Muslims. Included in the study are the influences of friendships between Muslims and non-Muslims and response patterns by demographic categories (e.g., gender, etc.). The results reveal a positive correlation between knowledge of Islam and Muslims and perceptions of Islam and Muslims. Implications for educational practice and future research are discussed.

Keywords: Islam, Muslim, perceptions, knowledge, college students
Introduction

A great deal of research addresses mainstream Americans’ (largely negative) perceptions of Islam and Muslims (Afridi, 2001; Bridge Initiative, 2015; Council on American-Islamic Relations, 2016; Keefer & Kohut, 2003; Lipka, 2016; Newport, 2006). In addition, there is a growing body of research about the experiences of Muslim college students as they navigate a sometimes hostile terrain (Cole and Ahmadi, 2010; Mir, 2014). However, little research unites these areas of study by exploring the attitudes of non-Muslim college students toward Islam and Muslims (Abu-Rayya & White, 2009; Khan & Ecklund, 2012; Lee, Gibbons, Thompson, & Timani, 2009; Maher, Knox, & DeCuzzi, 2008; and Raiya, et al, 2009 among the exceptions).

To learn more about non-Muslim students’ attitudes toward Muslims and Islam, we conducted a survey to learn more about respondents’ knowledge of Islam and their perceptions of Islam and Muslims. We hypothesized that knowledge of Islam would correlate with more positive perceptions of Muslims and Islam. We then analyzed responses by demographic categories to learn if responses varied according to year in college, gender, race, religious identity, and generation status (i.e., students who identify as the first generation in their families to attend college) in addition to exploring whether non-Muslim students’ friendships with Muslim students correlated with more positive perceptions of Islam and Muslims. After describing our findings, we discuss implications for practice and research.

Purpose of the Study

The primary goal of this study is to investigate American college students’ perceptions of Islam and Muslims. This study explores whether there is a correlation between individuals’ knowledge (basic factual understanding of Islam faith and cultures) and perceptions (opinions and impressions about Islam faith and cultures) of Islam and Muslims. We also consider variations in knowledge and perception of Islam by year in college, gender, race, religious identity, and generation status (students who identify as the first generation in their families to attend college). In addition, we address whether friendship with Muslim students correlates with more positive perceptions of Islam and Muslims. We use our findings to discuss implications for practice and research.

Research Questions

The study seeks to address the following research questions:

- Does knowledge (basic factual understanding of Islam faith and cultures) differ by demographics (year in school, gender, race, religious identity, and generation of college student)?

- Does perception (opinions and impressions about Islam faith and cultures) differ by demographics (year in school, gender, race, religious identity, and generation of college student)?

- Is knowledge of Islam correlated with perceptions of Islam? In other words, does more knowledge equate with more positive perceptions?
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- Is there a correlation between friendship with Muslims and perception of Islam and Muslims?

Setting and Sample

In 2014, participants were recruited in several sections of an introductory computer science class at a rural state university in Pennsylvania. The course was chosen as a recruitment site because it enrolls students from multiple undergraduate majors. This course is a distribution, or general education, requirement or recommended elective for several programs, including business, health sciences, humanities, social sciences, and fine arts.

Conducting this study at a rural institution may serve to fill a gap in the literature, as the limited research on college student attitudes has often taken place at institutions with greater religious, ethnic, and racial diversity (see Khan and Ecklund’s 2012 study at California State for one example). While there are several active student organizations for multiple religious identities, including for Muslim students, there are few Muslim students on this campus. On the other hand, while the number of Muslim students is low, for some majority-population (i.e. white and/or Judeo-Christian) students, even this much exposure to a minority religious population is more than they had before. Conducting the study at a rural state university may then provide insight into how students from dominant populations respond to those “Other” than themselves.

The total sample consisted of 106 undergraduate students. Eighty-two percent of the participants were 18 to 21 years old, and 18 percent were 22 to 30 years old. First-year students comprised 23.6 percent of the sample, while 39.6 percent were sophomores, 21.7 percent juniors, and 15.1 percent seniors. Sixty-seven percent were male, and 33 percent were female, a distribution that is not representative of institutional demographics but mirrors enrollment in computer science classes. The racial and ethnic distribution of the participants was 75.5 percent white, 15.1 percent African American, 3.8 percent Asian, 2.8 percent multiracial, and 2.8 percent Hispanic. Seventy-eight percent reported their religion as Christianity, 2.9 percent as Hinduism, 2 percent as Islam, 1 percent as Buddhism, 1 percent as Judaism, and 3.8 percent as “Other.” Eleven percent identified as atheist. Thirty-six percent identified as the first generation in their families to attend college; 44 percent were second generation, and 20 percent were third generation. These numbers aligned (approximately) with institutional demographics, with the exception of gender. This project was approved by the Institutional Review Board for the protection of human subjects.

Instruments and Procedures

One of the authors approached a computer science professor and asked him if he would distribute the survey in his introductory computer science courses. The faculty member distributed two items during class time: 1) a cover letter describing the purpose of the study with an informed consent form, and 2) a survey instrument. After he read the

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1 Henceforth, we will use the term “first generation” student to indicate students whose parents did not attend college.
informed consent information, students who agreed to participate signed the informed consent forms and completed paper surveys. (See Appendix for a copy of the survey.) The response rate was over 90 percent.

**Results**

**Knowledge**

Seven questions addressed participants’ knowledge. (See Table 1: Knowledge of Islam Questions and Scores.) Five of these questions (numbers 7, 8, 9, 11, and 12) were multiple choice. The other two questions (numbers 3 and 10) contained Likert scale response categories ranging from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree.” The composite knowledge score reflected the percentage of correct responses to these questions. Thus, a score of 0 indicated no knowledge of Islam and a score of 100 percent indicated the most knowledge. The composite knowledge score was 44 percent; overall, participants had more incorrect than correct responses.

**Table 1**

**Knowledge of Islam Questions and Scores**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Question and Options</th>
<th>Percentage of Correct Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>I believe that Islam is the fastest growing religion in the U.S.</td>
<td>25.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>I think the Muslim holy day is:</td>
<td>6.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>I think all Muslims live in the Middle East</td>
<td>86.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>I think the name of the Holy Book of Muslims is:</td>
<td>71.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>I believe that Islam is a monotheistic religion like Christianity and Judaism.</td>
<td>40.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>I think the name of the common place for Muslims to pray is:</td>
<td>68.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>I think the region that has the most Muslims is:</td>
<td>5.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Composite Knowledge Score: 44.0%

**Perception**

Seven questions (numbers 1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 13, and 14) addressed participants’ perceptions. (See Table 2: Perception of Islam Questions and Scores.) Negatively phrased questions were reverse coded so that response categories ranged similarly from negative to positive perceptions. The minimum score was 1 (strongly disagree) and the maximum score was 5 (strongly agree). Reliability analysis of these seven questions indicated good reliability and consistency with a Cronbach’s alpha score of 0.746. Responses ranged from
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2.76 through 4.17, with an average response of 3.63. The composite average score indicates neither strong disagreement nor strong agreement. However, the range of responses indicates more nuanced perceptions. The highest scores indicate a perception of Muslims as uncivilized (Question 5) and violent (Questions 1 and 2). The lowest scores show uncertainty about Islamic oppression of women and hatred of the Western world (Questions 4 and 13, respectively).

Table 2

Perceptions of Islam and Muslims Questions and Scores

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Question and Options</th>
<th>Results</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>When I hear the word Muslim, I think of terrorist.</td>
<td>4.17 (SD=1.06)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>I believe that Islam encourages violence.</td>
<td>4.04 (SD=0.92)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>I believe that Islam oppresses women.</td>
<td>2.76 (SD=1.04)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>When I hear the word Muslim, I think of the word uncivilized.</td>
<td>4.34 (SD=0.86)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>When I hear the word Muslim, I think of normal people.</td>
<td>3.88 (SD=1.12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>I believe that Islamic beliefs inflame Western hatred.</td>
<td>2.80 (SD=0.73)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>I believe that most Muslims are anti-modern.</td>
<td>3.40 (SD=1.03)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Composite perception score: 3.63

Analysis

Only two participants were Muslim. Because the focus of the study was on non-Muslim perceptions, their responses were removed before calculating the average score for knowledge. Only nine students reported their race as Hispanic, Asian or multiracial; they were collapsed into a category of “Other.” Similarly, the nine students who reported their religion as Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism and other were categorized as “Other.” The majority of students reported their race as white and their religious identity as Christian.

The average score for knowledge of Islam was 44 percent, indicating generally poor knowledge. Of the seven questions included in this section, students were most likely to know that Muslims live in places other than the Middle East and least likely to know that South Asia is the region with the most Muslims. (See Table 1.) The average score for perceptions was 3.63 with a range from 2.76 to 4.17, indicating slightly positive perceptions. The highest score was for Question 1 (“When I hear the word Muslim, I think

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2 This decision was not grounded in assumptions about Muslims’ knowledge and perception of their own religion, which would provide an interesting contrast to other participants. We simply decided to focus this study on non-Muslim perceptions.
of terrorist”), while the lowest was for Question 4 (“I believe that Islam oppresses women”). Negatively phrased questions were reverse coded.

To investigate the effects of participant background characteristics on knowledge, a series of one-way between-group analyses of variance were conducted (See Table 3: Knowledge of Islam by Background Characteristic.) The results indicate a statistically significant effect of gender and religion on knowledge of Islam. The results show that males are more knowledgeable than females (Eta squared = .051). Atheist students were more knowledgeable about Islam than Christian or “Other” students (Eta squared = .112). However, Christian students’ mean score was higher than “Other.” Year in college, race, age, and generation in college showed no statistically significant effect on composite knowledge.

Table 3

Knowledge of Islam by Background Characteristic

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Background Characteristic</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>η^2</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5.464</td>
<td>.051</td>
<td>.021*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>.056</td>
<td>.001</td>
<td>.945</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religion</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6.289</td>
<td>.112</td>
<td>.003*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3.538</td>
<td>.034</td>
<td>.063</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year in College</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>.988</td>
<td>.029</td>
<td>.402</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generation of College</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>.687</td>
<td>.014</td>
<td>.505</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To investigate correlations between knowledge and perception, Pearson product-moment correlations were calculated. The Pearson product-moment correlation analysis indicates a medium positive correlation between the variables composite knowledge of Islam and Muslims and composite perceptions of Islam and Muslims, with greater knowledge of Islam and Muslims associated with more positive perceptions (r = 0.309, n = 99 and p = 0.02).

Forty-eight percent of participants said they had a Muslim friend (Question 15). The relationship between friendship with Muslims and perceptions of Islam and Muslims was investigated using a Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient. There was a weak, positive correlation between the two variables, r = .287, n = 103, p < .01. An independent sample t-test was conducted to compare perceptions of Islam and Muslims scores between participants who have Muslim friends and those who do not have Muslim friends. There was a significant difference in perceptions of Islam and Muslims scores between those who do not have Muslim friends (M = 3.451, SD = .560) and those who do have Muslim friends (M = 3.798, SD = .610; t (97) = -2.947, p = .004, two-tailed).
Discussion

This study indicates a positive correlation between “knowledge of Islam and Muslims” and “perceptions of Islam and Muslims,” a correlation noted by others (Keeter & Kohut, 2003). Given the correlation between knowledge and perception, it appears that providing opportunities for students to gain better understanding of Islam is an important and worthwhile pursuit. Having Muslim friends also appears to relate to improved perception of Islam and Muslims. Observing correlation in these areas, of course, does not mean that the findings can claim causation.

Knowledge

Between five and eight million Muslims live in the U.S. (Lipka, 2016). However, most Americans do not know much about Islam (Afridi, 2001; Bridge Initiative, 2015; Kaya, 2007; Newport, 2006). Within the context of increasing Muslim student populations in higher education, in the nation, and across the world, higher education institutions face the challenge of addressing false perceptions about Islam and Muslims.

The study indicates that the average score for knowledge of Islam is very poor for non-Muslim college students (44 percent). The reasons for limited knowledge about Islam and Muslims are multiple and complex. Some argue that Americans are generally uninformed and apathetic about international politics and social policies (Horwedel, 2006). Another possible explanation for poor knowledge pertains to students’ prior education. Many may come from school systems in which their exposure to Muslim people is limited or lacking altogether; many schools also lack discussion of Islam and world faith traditions (Moore, 2005). At multiple levels (school, district, and state), there has been resistance to and censorship of Islam material in the curriculum (Council on Islamic-American Relations, 2016; Starrett, 2009). While there is research on best practices in teaching about Islam (Demirer, 2007; Douglass, 2002; Kenan, 2005; Kaya, 2007; Lucus & Block, 2008; Moore, 2005; Moore, 2006), school personnel still face challenges and resistance.

Perception

While there is little scholarship on student knowledge and perceptions of Islam, many studies have explored attitudes of the general population (Bridge Initiative, 2015; Council on American-Islamic Relations, 2016). Some argue that negative perceptions are influenced by media coverage of terrorist attacks and little or no coverage of Muslim leaders’ condemnation of such attacks (Jackson, 2010).

Of course, negative perceptions of Islam in the U.S. predate the terror attacks of the twenty-first century, and Muslims are not the only minority group to encounter negative stereotyping and perceptions. Sides & Gross (2013) speculate on the types of stereotyping faced by Muslims. They found that non-Muslim survey respondents tended to stereotype Muslims negatively as a threat and positively in terms of competence and intelligence: This combination makes non-Muslims more fearful of Muslims than of other groups who might be perceived as equally hostile but not perceived as competent (e.g., racial or ethnic minorities of low socioeconomic status), or highly competent but not a physical threat (e.g., east Asian students who are stereotyped as a “model minority”). Our findings on student
perceptions support Sides and Gross’s theory, given student responses on Islam and violence and Islam and terrorism.

Many stereotypes of Muslims are grounded in views on the treatment of women in Islamic cultures and societies (Afridi, 2001; Gottschalk & Greenberg, 2009). U.S. polling data indicates that attitudes toward and knowledge of Islam and Muslims are largely the same between men and women (Keeter & Kohut, 2003). In this study, male respondents were slightly more knowledgeable than their female counterparts. Given the skewed gender representation, with two-thirds of participants being male, it is difficult to interpret findings regarding gender. This may be an area for future study.

Role of Friendships

Our study indicates that having Muslim friends and acquaintances correlates with more positive perceptions, a finding supported in other studies (Brockett, Village, & Francis, 2009; Lee, Gibbons, Thompson, & Timani, 2009). In this study, 48 percent of participants reported having a Muslim friend; other researchers have found that 40 percent of Americans report being personally acquainted with Muslims (Bridge Initiative, 2015). This study supports other research that has found that having friends and/or acquaintances in an “outgroup” reduces prejudice toward that group (Hunter & Elias, 1999; White, et al, 2009).

Implications and Suggestions for Educational Practice

Colleges and universities are offering more religious studies courses (Maher, Knox, & DeCuzzi, 2008), which is a good start to addressing misinformation regarding Islam and Muslims. It is important not to restrict coverage of such material to religious studies departments. Religions and religious institutions also play a role in the fields of history, religion, English, education, media literacy, and other disciplines (Barlas, 2007).

There is a small research base on best practices in teaching about Islam and countering stereotypes, regardless of discipline. Some advocate foregrounding stereotypes and prejudicial thinking, including media depictions (Barlas, 2007; Gonchar & Schulten, 2015; Hussain, 2005; Jackson, 2010). Some instructors counter stereotyping by foregrounding Islamic contributions to academia and society (including, but not limited to, mathematics, engineering, architecture, astronomy, geography, literature, medicine – and, in our case, technology). Others cite the benefits of teaching about issues of stereotyping in a broader sense in order to counter ignorance of Islam and other marginalized groups (Jackson, 2010).

Education is equally important outside of classroom boundaries. “People from different ethnic, racial, and cultural groups live in close physical proximity. But coexistence does not mean that people create genuine communities in which they know, relate to, and care deeply about one another” (Gay, 2004, p. 30). Students who participate in activities and organizations that emphasize intercultural awareness have a more accurate understanding of different cultures and ethnicities (Cole & Ahmadi, 2010).
Suggestions for Future Research

The sample in this study consisted of students who were taking undergraduate courses at a state university. To increase the breadth of the sample, similar surveys could be administered to undergraduate and graduate students from multiple institutions. It would be useful to identify points of similarity and contrast among institutions with student populations dominated by the majority culture (i.e., white, Judeo-Christian, middle class) and institutions with more diverse populations. This study’s sample was largely representative of the majority culture (i.e., largely white and Judeo-Christian). Providing broader context by studying attitudes about multiple minority religions (like Maher, Knox, & DeCuzzi’s 2008 study on attitudes toward Buddhism and Islam) would provide additional insight into if and how religious minorities are “othered.”

Additional studies that utilize quantitative, qualitative, or mixed methods might shed light on the variety of student perspectives. Surveys are beneficial for gaining information about perspectives and attitudes, in part because surveys allow for large numbers of participants (and, thus, more data to analyze). However, surveys rely on self-reported information, which is not always completely accurate (Mertens, 2010). Social desirability bias, a desire on the part of respondents to say the “correct” thing, particularly regarding controversial topics, poses a challenge with survey research (Abu-Rayya & White, 2009; Khan & Ecklund, 2012; Lee, Gibbons, Thompson, & Timani, 2009). Qualitative methodologies would lend more understanding to nuances and possible inconsistencies in survey responses as well as yield insight into how respondents “give meaning” to lived experience (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013).

Limitations

This study took place at a rural university in which the student population is predominantly white. The demographic characteristics of this study may not be reflective of the diversity of other campuses. Additionally, two-thirds of the respondents were male, which does not reflect the demographics of most four-year institutions, including the one where this study was conducted. Therefore, the findings from this study may have limited generalizability.

We also acknowledge limitations in methodology. With knowledge questions in particular, some participants could have obtained correct responses through guesswork rather than prior knowledge. Finally, given the brevity of the survey, we may have excluded forms of knowledge that are important to participants’ perceptions of Islam and Muslims.

Conclusion

The Qu’ran states that “God created nations and tribes that we might know one another.” America is a nation of nations and a microcosm of the world. How “we might know one another,” how pluralism works among ourselves and vis-à-vis the outside world will determine in large measure whether our country succeeds as a role model. (Afridi, 2001, p. 12) Colleges and universities are “microcosms of the world” and places where members can come to “know” one another. Expanding our knowledge of those who are “Other” is at the heart of what educators do. To participate in an increasingly globalized society and economy, students will need the capacity to recognize and address cultural,
religious, and political misunderstandings and conflicts. Higher education institutions should take a leadership role in creating opportunities for cross-cultural communication and learning, including but not limited to religious identity.

References


Authors

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