METAPERCEPTIONS AND IDENTITY NEGOTIATION STRATEGIES OF PERCEIVED MIDDLE EASTERN IMMIGRANTS IN THE U.S.

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ABSTRACT

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Utilizing the Communication Theory of Identity (CTI), this qualitative study explores the metaperceptions and identity negotiation strategies of immigrants from the so-called Middle East (and North Africa) region. The study encompasses in-depth interviews with ten (10) individuals with various ethnic backgrounds from the Middle East, living in the United States either as international students and/or as immigrants. In addition, this study explores the author's lived experiences as a Turkish international student in the U.S. in forms of autoethnographic writings embedded throughout the project. The findings include common themes of metaperceptions such as "terrorist," "foreigner/not-American/the Other," "rich (and poor)," "Middle Eastern – Arab – Muslim," and "white but not white." Regarding identity negotiation strategies, common patterns were found which emerged as "informing/lecturing," "avoiding talking/interacting," "being used to it / not caring about it anymore," and "use of attire/clothing." Besides the metaperceptions and identity negotiation strategies, three "contingent" factors emerged from the analysis. These factors (i.e., "beliefs about Americans," "with/out family member," and "location/setting") overlapped with both metaperceptions and identity negotiation strategies of the participants; thus, not only affected them but were also affected by them. Lastly, the research introduces two mini case studies from the participants' own accounts and examines them in detail. Overall, the results of the study indicate that the participants experienced numerous identity gaps due to the inconsistency between their self-perceptions and their metaperceptions. The participants tried to close these identity gaps by utilizing various identity negotiation strategies. The autoethnography section of the paper concluded that the author's metaperceptions were highly consistent with the

interviewees' while revealing salient differences in identity negotiations employed by the author and the participants. Finally, this paper emphasizes the importance of using clear and consistent terminologies in relation to ethnic, racial, religious identities as well as geographic categorizations (e.g., the Middle East, Arab, Asian, etc.).

Dedicated to my family

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

In this dissertation, I explore the metaperceptions (i.e., our perceptions of others' perceptions) of immigrants from the so-called Middle East region, and how they negotiate their identities in public and social settings. The foundations of this study reside in my personal experiences as a Turkish international student who lived four years in Germany and who has been living in the United States for more than a decade. As an adolescent in Germany and later as an adult in the United States, most of my intercultural experiences have shown me that people from other cultures are very likely to have misperceptions about my country of origin and thus about me as an individual. Especially in the U.S., I came to realize that even the most trivial or (seemingly) unimportant experiences were affecting my perceptions of what other individuals thought of me. This led me to feel as if I had two identities; one ascribed by others, and one that is "me." The two identities are almost in total conflict with little overlapping elements. I examine the differences between these two identities throughout this project, particularly through autoethnographic writing. In short, I argue that the main difference and conflict between ascribed and avowed identities is the result of the stereotypes associated with the Middle East region together with high levels of ethnocentrism.

When contemplating my intercultural experiences in the U.S., I came to the realization that I could not actually know what others were thinking about me, but rather that I could only form my own perceptions about their perceptions about me. This subjectivist assumption relies on the perspective that each human is a unique individual with different levels and, types of education, knowledge, experience, bias, prejudice, empathy, sympathy, intelligence, etc., together with various intersections of identities related to culture, race, ethnicity, religion,

nationality, gender, sex, as well as many other traits and personality characteristics that co-construct each person's own world-view; the lens through which they look at the world.

In this project, however, the focus is not the perception of others, rather, it is how we anticipate how others will perceive us when we enter a public or unfamiliar social setting based on our previous experiences with strangers. Specifically, this research focuses on international students, immigrants, and U.S. Americans who either have cultural and/or ethnic roots in the region (e.g., born in U.S. to Arab, Persian, Turkish, etc. parents). My personal experiences as an international student from Turkey played a major role in constructing a general perception that strangers in the U.S. will have a very different and inaccurate view of me because of the way I look (i.e., facial features, hair color, etc.) as well as my ethnic and cultural background: the identity I believe people will perceive when they see me or interact with me, is not necessarily how they "actually" perceive me. This is extremely important and requires emphasis as it constitutes a backbone of this study; the same reason why the focus of this study is on the "metaperceptions" (Kenny & DePaulo, 1993; Laing, Phillipson, & Lee, 1966) and not "perceptions of others." For example, when a stranger looks at me, they may perceive me in a variety of ways, which can be positive, neutral, or negative (or somewhere between these) depending on the nature, setting, and the particular individual. Yet, regardless of how any individual perceives me in their own unique way, it is, in the end, my own understanding of their perception that will influence my interactions with them, also affecting how I manage and negotiate my identity in the future. Indeed, how the other person perceives me can be the exact opposite of my interpretation of their perception (i.e., my metaperception of them). Hypothetically, it could even be argued that people's "actual" perceptions of me are irrelevant to my metaperceptions; in the end, I have no way of truly knowing others' perceptions of me. Of

course, this is an extreme example as people's perceptions almost always affect our metaperceptions. Still, it is vital to understanding the difference between people's perceptions and our metaperceptions: Regardless of what others perceive me or think about me, I can only make sense of these to the extent of my own understanding of them, which are filtered through my own perceptions.

> Society is an interweaving and interworking of mental selves. I imagine your mind, and especially what your mind thinks about my mind, and what your mind thinks about what my mind thinks about your mind. (Cooley, 1927, pp. 200-201)

As humans, we can only perceive things as individuals since we are not (yet) able to enter other people's minds or consciousness. Put differently, regardless of how we express and perform our identities, we can never be sure how it will be perceived by others; thus, we can only have our own perceptions of others' perceptions. This phenomenon is called metaperceptions defined as "judgments of how people view one another" (Kenny & DePaulo, 1993, p. 146).

Psychologists and social psychologists have long been interested in people's perceptions of themselves in relation to others. This interest goes back to Cooley's (1902) looking glass self; a process that describes how a person looks into the eyes and minds of others and imagines their view of that person. One simple yet also complex significance of metaperceptions stem from the concept and process of the phenomenon called "social perception;" defined by the American Psychological Association as "processes by which a person uses the behavior of others to form opinions or make influences about those individuals, particularly as regards to their motives, attitudes, or values." (APA, 2015). The way we see things in the world, the way we want to live, the way we want the society to be, etc. is determined or at least significantly influenced by our

(social) perceptions1. How these perceptions are constructed, and how they function or influence our lives is far beyond the scope of this project, therefore, only one specific perception will be examined: our perception of how others see us, that is, our metaperceptions.

Two primary metaperceptions I have in the U.S. are "Muslim" and "Arab." In other words, I believe that in a public setting, people will perceive/think that I am a Muslim and/or an Arab. Yet, I am neither a Muslim (meaning that I do not believe in the religion of Islam), nor an Arab (meaning that I am not ethnically related to Arabic people, and also I do not identify as an Arab for any other reason). In a public or an unfamiliar social setting, a person might think of me as an Arab or Muslim, they might think that I look like one of their childhood friends, or any other possible things they can perceive me as. Still, what they actually think of me or who they perceive me as does not matter as much as how I perceive their perceptions to be as I can only rely on my own (meta)perceptions even if I receive honest feedback from them about their perceptions of me.

Related to the example above, I would like to portray the importance of metaperceptions by utilizing a remark by Donald Trump during his presidential campaign back in 2016. In a speech given to his supporters, he announced that if he gets elected as the President (of the United States) that he will (temporarily) ban all Muslims from entering the United States. Although I was not sure if he would or could do that, one of the things that I asked myself was how they were going to determine who is Muslim and who is not a Muslim. If he had suggested that he would ban all citizens of a particular country or countries from entering the U. S., the idea would be feasible. Also, religions are not simply ideas people believe in, but also constitute parts

[1] Please note that this paper uses the term perception to refer to social perception.

of their culture. In fact, one does not even need to be a believer in Islam (or any other religion) to have a partly Islamic cultural identity. Many Turks, for instance, do not practice Islam, it is more of a cultural tradition. Nevertheless, I argue that unpacking Trump's promise of a Muslim ban can illustrate the subtle yet highly significant role of (meta)perceptions in regard to socio-political issues including but not limited to discrimination, stereotyping, and ethno-religious profiling. Banning all Muslims is technically impossible since a person's religion or commitment to a certain faith cannot be known by others. Therefore, any discriminatory act of this kind is not only targets "followers of Islam" but anyone who is perceived as a Muslim. Hate crimes against a group who are perceived as Muslims serves, unfortunately, as the best example for this situation.

Ever since the 9/11 terrorist attacks, there have been dozens of major hate crimes against the Sikh community in the U.S. because of a misperception of their religious affiliation, some of which have resulted in the deaths of innocent civilians. In 2012, for instance, a gunman entered a gurdwara (a Sikh religious temple) in Wisconsin during a prayer service, killing 6 and injuring 4 Sikh individuals (CNN, 2012). Hate crimes in general are mostly results of ignorance about other cultures, religions, and communities, which certainly includes the violence against the Sikh people. Regardless of the community they are committed against, all hate crimes are terrible, horrifying, and loathsome incidents. However, in this particular group's case, I believe it is even more appalling since such crimes are the result of confusing them with Muslims. I claim that this confusion is primarily due to the turban, a religious attire, worn by Sikh men; though, we certainly cannot disregard other factors that cause this community to be generalized as part of the larger group of "others." It is generally acknowledged that the terror attacks committed by some radical fundamentalist Muslims have resulted in the stigmatization of the Muslim identity,

causing Muslims to have a stereotype as potential terrorists. This stereotyping and discrimination itself are already unfair to all Muslims who are peaceful and non-violent. At the same time, we know that one does not actually have be a Muslim to experience this type of discrimination as we have seen in the examples of hate crimes against the Sikh community.

Put differently, stigmatized groups such as Muslims as well as those who are perceived to be Muslim are likely to experience prejudice, discrimination, and even violence (e.g., hate crimes). As a result, it is very likely for these individuals to hold negative metaperceptions — as it is with any stigmatized group (see e.g., Pinel, 1999; Vorauer, Main, O'Connell, 1998). Having negative metaperceptions is naturally an undesired condition and will cause the individual to experience a type of cognitive dissonance, meaning that they will experience conflicting beliefs or ideas about themselves or about an act they committed. In order to remove this incongruence, individuals can engage in various identity negotiation strategies, mostly utilized to distance the individual from the negative stereotypes associated with the Muslim identity. For example, a Muslim individual could try to highlight their hospitality and tolerance, not only to show that they are different from the (inaccurate) Muslim stereotypes but also to help change those negative perceptions about Muslims in general. A non-Muslim, on the other hand, may try distancing themselves directly from the Muslim identity or any associations with it. For instance, a Sikh individual could explain that they are followers of a completely separate religion; or, a Christian Arab could try to make sure that their cross/crucifix pendant is easily noticed by others, mainly to imply that they are Christians and thus non-Muslims.

To sum, this project seeks to explore how people form relevant metaperceptions (e.g., Muslim, Arab, terrorist, etc.) and how these metaperceptions influence their identity negotiation strategies.

Research Purpose

The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore (1) how people in the U.S. with ethnic and/or cultural (and perceived) roots and/or backgrounds in the so-called Middle East form and (co)construct their metaperceptions, and (2) how these metaperceptions influence their identity negotiation strategies in their daily lives.

How others see us is important to our general well-being (Burke 1991, 2004). Yet, we cannot truly know others' perceptions of us, hence we form our own beliefs about how others perceive us (i.e., metaperceptions). Studying metaperceptions is, therefore, imperative for understanding how we interpret others' beliefs about us and how our lived experiences influence this sense-making process. Moreover, metaperceptions are important as they are interrelated with our self-image; a person with a negative self-image, for instance, is more likely to form negative metaperceptions, and in turn these negative metaperceptions can affect their self-image negatively, potentially leading to a downward spiral in the person's view of themselves. Indeed, a positive self-image is considered a universal need for individuals' well-being in general mainly due to its relationship with essential personality traits such as self-esteem and integrity (Matsumoto & Juang, 2008). In addition, to maintain a certain self-image we engage in identity negotiations with people we encounter and/or interact with in our everyday lives. This process is influenced by our metaperceptions — as well as many other intrapersonal dynamics that are beyond this study's scope.

As mentioned earlier, the purpose of this research is to investigate how people from the Middle East (the geographic region that is home to mostly Muslim majority countries in Northern Africa and also Western and Central Asia; see Chapter 3, Methods – "Eligibility for participation" for a list of countries) form metaperceptions related to this identity aspect,

especially considering the negative stereotypes (e.g., uncivilized, terrorist, etc.) associated with the region and the people. Put differently, this study seeks to explore how misperceptions, stereotypes, and prejudice impact the participants' metaperceptions, and consequently their identity negotiations. Overall, this research aims to add to the existing literature on metaperceptions, identity negotiations, and intergroup dynamics from a communication perspective. In this project, I highlight some of the intercultural challenges these minorities face on a daily basis by using their own words.

In the following chapter, I review the existing literature while constructing a theoretical framework for the project. Consequently, in chapter three, I explain the methods employed in this project, which can be summarized as interviews with participants and autoethnographic texts. In chapter four, I describe the data analysis process while presenting the general findings of this study. Lastly, in chapter five, I provide a discussion of the significance, implications, and also limitations of the study and its findings

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

In this chapter, I review the existing literature to (1) introduce the concepts and theories relevant to this project, (2) offer justification for the study by pointing out gaps in the existing literature, and finally (3) to present the theoretical framework upon which the present study was constructed. To start, I define and discuss the concept of metaperception while reviewing past studies that looked at its dynamics in various contexts.

Metaperceptions

The judgments individuals make on how they are perceived by others are called metaperceptions (Kenny & DePaulo, 1993; Laing, Phillipson, & Lee, 1966). It should be noted that the prefix meta- brings the subject of perception to a higher level of inquiry that arches over the subject itself, which in this case, can be interpreted as “perception of perception.”

Research and theorizing on metaperceptions has mostly looked at interpersonal contexts to investigate the formation of metaperceptions with significantly less focus on intergroup contexts (Frey & Tropp, 2006). Therefore, before reviewing the metaperceptions literature on intergroup contexts, I will first discuss metaperceptions in interpersonal situations.

Metaperceptions in Interpersonal Contexts

Lead by Goffman (1959), the self-presentational perspective suggests that humans attempt to convey particular impressions of themselves. The success of these attempts depends on carefully observing the reactions of others. If it appears that others do not have the impression the individual wants them to have, the individual may employ a number of strategies to modify this impression (Goffman, 1959).

Following Goffman’s (1959) self-presentational perspective, researcher Daniel Ames (2004) claims individuals utilize three strategies to predict what others are thinking: (1)

observing others' behavior, including nonverbal cues, (2) projecting their own views onto others, and finally (3) relying on stereotypes they associate with others (Ames, 2004). It is important to note that this model proposed by Ames offers an explanation for how individuals try to read other people's minds, thus, it is mainly concerned about individuals' cognitive processes. In other words, the model's claim is about perceptions but not directly metaperceptions. Albeit, Ames's model is still relevant due to the interconnected nature between people's self-perceptions and metaperceptions.

In terms of metaperceptions, the first strategy offered by Ames (2004) is observing other individuals' behavior. A number of researchers have also addressed this strategy in regard to metaperceptions (see e.g., DePaulo et al., 1987; Kenny & DePaulo, 1993; Schechtman & Kenny, 1994), and agreed on the importance of observing people's behavior as one of the frequently used strategies people employ in forming their metaperceptions.

Observing others to form metaperceptions, however, has its limitations (Frey & Tropp, 2006). Research studies focusing on the accuracy of people's metaperceptions have shown mixed results, some suggesting relatively accurate metaperceptions (see e.g., Feil, 2001; Funder, 1980) while others found a common tendency to misjudge others' perceptions (see e.g., DePaulo et al., 1987; Kenny & DePaulo, 1993).

The mixed results of these studies are not surprising as the accuracy of one's metaperceptions would not only depend on the context but also on the individuals involved. For example, based on my current metaperceptions, I am inclined to think that people who see me in a public setting will perceive me as an Arab individual — which has been accurate many times. At the same time, there has been also been occasions where people thought that I was from Greece, Serbia, and even India. I am none of the mentioned ethnicities (in both examples), yet

the first example shows a situation where my metaperceptions were accurate whereas the latter one demonstrates an inaccurate metaperception.

The second strategy offered by Ames (2004) is projection — people's tendency to project their views of themselves onto others. This involves thinking that others will perceive us the way we think about ourselves. Individuals, for instance, who have positive self-perceptions are more likely to believe that others view them in a positive light (Campbell & Fehr, 1990; Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 2000; Murray et al., 2001). A similar strategy — though not mentioned by Ames — is "perspective taking." People employ this strategy by taking the other person's perspective, that is, by putting themselves in their shoes to be able to see how they are likely to be perceived (DePaulo et al., 1987; Kenny & DePaulo, 1993). According to Frey and Tropp (2006), "perspective taking" is not very different than "projection" since it is highly susceptible to the person's own biases.

Finally, the third strategy offered by Ames (2004) involves "stereotyping" others, and therefore relies on oversimplified generalizations about them. Stereotypes play a key role in intercultural communication as they are behind most of the misconceptions about various peoples, groups, and communities as well as geographical regions and continents. Accordingly, I provide a review of this phenomenon in the following section due to its higher relevance to groups and intergroup communication.

Intergroup Communication

Intergroup communication takes place when one or more of the parties involved view themselves and/or the other party in terms of group memberships (Harwood, Giles, & Palomares, 2005). Thus, intergroup communication is likely to occur when we interact with strangers or people we are not personally acquainted with, who have different group memberships. For instance, when I am talking with a U.S. American friend about personal issues, this interaction would not entail an intergroup communication aspect, even though we have different group memberships. If we continued our conversation about the cultural differences between the U.S. and Turkey, for the sake of the example, the conversation would be more likely to involve intergroup communication aspects. The same would occur if my friend and I were fans of two rival sports teams or supported different political parties, and so on and so forth.

The differences as well as the overlapping features of interpersonal and intergroup communication can also be explained using Tajfel and Turner's (1979) social identity theory [SIT]. According to SIT, individuals enact “the self” in two interconnected identities: (1) personal, and (2) social (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). In SIT, “personal identity” offers a perspective on the person as one unique individual, whereas “social identity” looks at the individual based on their group memberships (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). It is important to note that the terms “group” or “group membership” can apply to many overlapping social identities and will depend on the context. For example, a person’s social identity can be based on their nationality, race, ethnicity, religion, political affiliation, fandom, fraternity, generation, gender, and sex — to name a few. Because of this project's scope and focus, the prominent social identities of the participants were ethnic, national, religious and cultural group memberships. Social identity theory posits that an individual’s social identity will be salient when communicating with members from other groups

(hence, intergroup communication), instead of their personal identity that encompasses individual characteristics (Harwood et al., 2005). It should be noted that this is contingent upon the context as well as the individuals involved (similar to the example I provided above about two friends who support rival teams or political parties and enact their relevant social identity when discussing sports or politics, making it more salient than the personal aspects of their identity).

Metaperceptions in Intergroup Contexts

To be a part of a group is an important aspect of being human. Even our most significant interpersonal relationships are filled with group identifications that connect us to individuals within our own groups while separating from those that are not in the group (Harwood, 2006). Examining metaperceptions from group-related perspectives is important as we encounter numerous situations every day where our social identities are more salient than our personal identities. Accordingly, it would be reasonable to suggest that people will employ different strategies in forming metaperceptions and in negotiating their identities in intergroup situations than they would in interpersonal contexts. To explore this premise, it's necessary to look at both individual and situational factors and their influence on the salience of a person's (personal and social) identities (Frey & Tropp, 2006).

Group Membership Salience: Situational Factors

Intergroup conflict. While building a framework for social identity theory, Tajfel and Turner (1986) posited that intergroup conflict may play an influential role in how strongly individuals are perceived in terms of group membership. They assert that when an intergroup conflict is escalating people involved tend to respond to others based on their group membership and not their unique individual characteristics (Frey & Tropp, 2006).

Especially since the 9/11 terror attacks there has been a persistent tension between the West and the Muslim world — including the minorities living in the U.S. and some western and central European countries. Hence it is reasonable to suggest that people from the so-called Middle East are more likely to be perceived in terms of their social identities (e.g., Muslim, Arab, etc.). Furthermore, this can be expected to be more salient after particular incidents or series of attacks, and so on (e.g., Boston marathon bombing, lSIS/Daesh massacres in the Iraq and Syria). Also based on this argument, we can reason that people will be more likely to have metaperceptions in relation to their relevant (or perceived) group membership (Frey & Tropp, 2006).

Mere presence of outgroup member. Although intergroup conflict or tension can affect social identity salience, it is not a necessary condition. According to SIT, the mere presence of an outgroup member will cause ingroup members to have increased group membership salience (Tajfel & Turner, 1986; Wilder, 1984). Accordingly, Frey and Tropp (2006) suggest that in such a condition (i.e., mere presence of an outgroup member), individuals are likely to believe that others will perceive them based on their group memberships. Therefore, it is reasonable to claim that even without any historical or on-going intergroup conflict, individuals are going to experience a heightened salience in their group memberships when a (perceived) outgroup member is present in a public or social setting.

Numerical representation. Another situational factor that is correlated to membership salience is the number of outgroup members. An increase in the number of outgroup members will also increase group membership salience. The majority's sense of group identity, for example, is going to be heightened when there is an increase in outgroup members (e.g., mass immigration, etc.). A heightened sense of group identity will also be experienced by minority

members. However, knowing that they constitute a numerically smaller group will lead them to realize that they are under close scrutiny as they will be perceived as representatives of their ingroups by the majority (see e.g., Bettencourt, Miller, & Hume, 1999; McGuire, McGuire, Child, & Fujioka, 1978). Therefore, Frey and Tropp (2006) reason that once people recognize their numerical minority or majority status, they will be more likely to form metaperceptions based on group memberships.

Stigmatization. Existing literature shows that stigmatization can also be a factor in heightened levels of group salience, particularly when stigmatization is coherent with the group's characteristics (Crocker, Major, & Steele, 1998; Goffman, 1963). As noted earlier, members of minority groups are likely to be perceived as representatives of their ingroups. This, however, can lead to the individual's behavior that may be interpreted as reaffirmations of the negative stereotypes and stigmas associated with the group (see e.g., Spencer, Steele, & Quinn, 1999; Steele, Spencer, & Aronson, 2002). Due to the stigmas ascribed to their group, members are likely to focus on how others view their group rather than trying to predict how they are seen individually (Pinel, 1999, 2002). Put differently, people who are members of stigmatized groups are likely to focus on their social identity, which also turns their attention to their metaperceptions as members of their ingroup. Frey and. Tropp (2006) attest that members of stigmatized groups are more likely to anticipate other people to see them based on their group membership identities.

In sum, research shows us that presence of these situational factors (i.e., intergroup conflict, mere presence of outgroup member, numerical representation, and stigmatization) can result in a heightened social identity salience which then also affect people’s metaperceptions in the same direction. In addition to these situational (i.e., external) factors, certain internal factors

that are contingent upon a person's individual attributes can also elevate their corresponding social identity salience together with their relevant metaperceptions. These include factors such as how strongly they identify with their ingroup, their awareness of group membership and how sensitive they are to rejection by others (Frey & Tropp, 2006).

Group Membership Salience: Individual Factors

Group identification. The first individual factor that affects group membership salience is the strength of a person's identification with their ingroup. For instance, a person who strongly identifies with their ingroup will tend to regard group membership as imperative to their lives (Brewer & Gardner, 1996; Luhtanen & Crocker, 1992; Tropp & Wright, 2001). People with such high levels of self-identification with their ingroup will experience feelings of similarity and closeness to the members of the ingroup, hence also high levels of motivation for the interest of the ingroup (Spears, Doosje, & Ellemers, 1997; Hogg, Hardie, & Reynolds, 1995; Tropp & Brown, 2004). According to Frey and Tropp (2006) people who strongly identify with their ingroup are likely to think that others will also see them as a member of that particular group.

Awareness of group membership and sensitivity to rejection. Pinel (1999) posits that people show varying levels of group membership awareness and that the level of awareness is not always in correlation with one's identification with a group. Indeed, a person might still expect to be viewed by others as a member of a group, even if they do not identify with the group (Mendoza-Denton, Downey, Purdie, Davis, & Pietrzak, 2002). For instance, a person may be cognizant of their group membership but may attempt to distance themselves — mostly to resist or avoid categorization with the group (Ellemers, Spears, & Dosje, 1997). Furthermore, research suggests that individuals also vary in the extent to which they believe they will be rejected by others because of their group membership, and that those who are highly concerned

about being seen as group members are likely to view ambiguous situations in group context and will tend to anticipate rejection from outgroup members (Mendoza-Denton et al., 2002; Pinel, 2002).

Metaperceptions: When Group Membership is Salient

As mentioned earlier, individuals in intergroup contexts are more likely to look at outgroup members with the negative stereotypes associated with the outgroup. This increases the individuals' ingroup awareness, leading them to consider that outgroup members may be looking at them in the same way — with their ingroup's negative stereotypes (Frey & Tropp, 2006). This means that people's perceptions about outgroups can lead to similar types of metaperceptions about their ingroup. Basically, looking at people through a lens that highlights their negative traits will in the end make one think that the same people might be looking at the individual through a similar lens that emphasizes negative traits.

Anticipating that one will be viewed negatively by outgroup members particularly due to the stereotypes and stigmas associated with one's ingroup can cause the person to feel uncomfortable and threatened. This phenomenon is called intergroup anxiety (Stephan & Stephan, 1985; also see Blair, Park, & Bachelor, 2003; Britt, Boniecki, Vescio, Biernat, & Brown, 1996; Stephan, 2014) which can be responsible for avoiding contact with other groups and can result in fewer interactions — potentially hindering positive intergroup relations or outcomes (Blair, Park, Bachelor, 2003; Dovidio, Gaertner, Kawakami, & Hodson, 2002).

Intergroup anxiety can also impair people's ability to pay attention and process information (Wilder & Shapiro, 1989a, 1989b; Aberson & Haag, 2007). Accordingly, people become less likely to resist information that contradicts the stereotypes of an out group while

becoming more eager to associate their actions with the existing stereotypes of the outgroup (Wilder, 1984; Wilder, Simon, & Faith, 1996; Zomeren, Fischer, & Spears, 2007).

To sum, people's predictions about how they are perceived (i.e., metaperceptions) play an influential role in situations where group membership is salient, potentially resulting in fewer and uncomfortable intergroup interactions. Perhaps more importantly, people's metaperceptions as (perceived) members of a group that's viewed negatively can perpetuate the existing stereotypes in a vicious cycle potentially causing tension and conflict (Frey & Tropp, 2006).

Social Identity Theory and its Role in the Current Study

As I mentioned earlier, SIT offers a framework for the initial investigation of metaperceptions, general identity categorizations, and dynamics. This theory plays a prominent role in the current study; not only as a theory that sets the agenda for identity research but also because of its notions of personal and social identity. Since the current study is on metaperceptions of a minority group, SIT's two general frames (personal and social identity) provide an opportunity for a convenient and general initial exploration on the participants' potential intrapersonal, interpersonal, and intergroup identity conflicts and their corresponding identity negotiations. Furthermore, SIT aids the current study by offering a general understanding into social mobility regarding the permeability of the social group boundaries. This is important since it provides ways to explore the interplay between metaperceptions and perceptions of social mobility and how this interplay affects the participants' identity negotiation processes.

Some of the social identities of the participants in this research included their nationality, ethnicity, religion, race, and various combinations of these identities. To give a specific example, a participant who identifies as a Saudi national is more likely to be concerned about their

personal identity when they are in Saudi Arabia, thus among many other Saudi nationals. Yet, when they are in the United States, the Saudi individual might feel high levels of group membership salience, especially in certain group contexts such as a classroom where everyone else is a U.S. American. In such a case, SIT would claim that the Saudi individual's social identity would be the level of comparison.

Regarding the permeability of group boundaries and their interplay with the individual's metaperceptions, an example can be given by using the reports of two individual participants who identify with the same nationality, ethnicity, or religion, but have a significant level of difference in their metaperceptions as a result of their physical and/or personal characteristics. To provide a more specific example, a blond individual who identifies as a Turkish national might have remarkably different metaperceptions compared to another Turkish national who has darker hair, and/or darker skin tone. These different metaperceptions may not only affect how these individuals see the permeability of social boundaries, but also could influence how they negotiate their identities.

Lastly, I explore the two identities I mentioned in the introduction of this project; one representing the "real" me (i.e., how I see myself, how I identify personally and the other representing how I believed others see me (i.e., my metaperceptions) using SIT's frames of personal and social identity. As a minority member in the U.S., I always perceive group membership salience to be high unless it is a private/personal setting or a social gathering where I know everyone personally. I believe that it is not unusual to feel that group membership salience is high since I am a minority member as a Turkish international student in the U.S., and because I believe I am perceived as a member of a different minority group (i.e., Arab, Middle

Eastern, Muslim, etc.) to which I do not belong and/or do not identify with; I am constantly attempting to diminish group membership salience and to reinforce personal identity salience.

These attempts constitute the identity negotiations I engage in on a daily basis. SIT, even though providing a backbone to the project at hand, lacks the versatility to explore these processes. In addition, certain contingencies and contexts require a more detailed and holistic approach such as how, where, or with whom these processes change or are affected. Hence, I utilize the communication theory of identity [CTI].

Communication Theory of Identity

Communication Theory of Identity (CTI) is a theory in the field of communication that explores identity by offering four layers that constitute it: (a) personal, (b) enacted, (c) relational, (d) communal. This theory primarily takes an interpretive approach in explaining the communicative process of identity negotiation. The theory posits that communication is a process in which individuals' identities are constructed from their interactions and relationships with others. In addition, it suggests that identities are expressed through core symbols, meanings, and symbols, in the process of communication (Hecht, 1993).

CTI's Major Premises and Components

The communication theory of identity has eight (8) major premises that Hecht elaborated with an enumerated list:

(1) Identities have individual, social, and communal properties; (2) identities are both enduring and changing; (3) identities are affective, cognitive, behavioral, and spiritual; (4) identities have both content and relationship levels of interpretation; (5) identities involve both subjective and ascribed meanings; (6) identities are codes that are expressed in conversations and define membership in communities; (7) identities have semantic properties that are expressed in

core symbols, meanings, and labels; (8) identities prescribe modes of appropriate and effective communication (Hecht, 1993, p. 79).

As noted earlier, CTI offers four frames of identity that are grounded in the current literature of research: (a) personal, (b) enacted, (c) relational, and (d) communal. According to CTI, the key to reaching a better understanding of people's identities is looking at them through these frames which provide a reflection of the individual's identity at four various levels. Albeit, CTI does not require researchers to utilize these frames individually; if necessary, researchers can use two, three, or four at the same time in exploring identity as well as these frames' own layering, interpenetration, and dialectic tensions (Hecht, 1993, p. 79).

Four Levels of CTI

Personal Level

The first frame of CTI looks at identity through the personal frame and assumes that (a) identities are hierarchically ordered meanings attributed to the self as an object in a social situation, (b) identities are meanings ascribed to the self by others in the social world, and (c) that identities constitute a source for expectations and motivations (Hecht, 1993, p. 79). In simpler terms, the personal frame of identity encompasses our personality traits, feelings, thoughts, and spirituality — mostly unique characteristics that define us as individuals (Drummond & Orbe, 2009). For example, a person's individual interests and hobbies are mostly reflections of their identity at the personal level. Other examples could be a person's attitude towards life or their view of the world in general; whether they are more optimistic or pessimistic, whether they are more spontaneous and adventurous or generally cautious and predictable — so on and so forth.

Enacted Level

The second layer of CTI views identity from the enactment point of view. The enactment frame of identity focuses on messages expressed as well as the constructed meanings of these messages through identity enactment. The enacted identity frame of CTI has three additional assumptions: (a) identities are emergent; (b) identities are enacted in social behaviors, social roles, and symbols; (c) identities are hierarchically ordered social roles (Hecht, 1993, p. 79). Broadly, the enacted layer refers to the way individuals express their identities through verbal and nonverbal messages when interacting with others (Drummond & Orbe, 2009). That is, everything we express constitutes our identity enactment. For instance, when making a sarcastic comment we might change the tone of our voice to ensure that others understand that we are not completely serious. Other examples may include a person's proficiency in a language and/or their (foreign or regional) accent. People's hand gestures, facial mimics, their tattoos, marks, scars, and even their attire (clothing and accessories) or lack of attire can be covered by the enactment frame of identity.

Relational Level

Next frame CTI presents is called the relational frame of identity and shares the same premises with the enacted frame (see above) though with a focus on mutual and relational aspects (Hecht, 1993, p. 80). This frame consists of three levels in itself. The first level is concerned with one's existence based on others around them. As Hecht posits, "the self … is influenced by who one is with" (1993, p. 80). The second level is similar, yet much more specific as it involves "gaining a sense of self through relationships with others such as marital partners, occupations, and friendships" (Hecht, 1993, p. 80). Finally, the third level is about the

identity of a relationship itself, such as a dating or married couple establishing a single identity – an entity that represents both individuals.

Communal Level

The fourth and final component of CTI looks at identity from a collectivistic point of view, locating it in the group and community. The communal frame of identity has a single assumption: "Identities emerge out of groups and networks" (Hecht, 1993, p. 80). Even though it locates the identity in the group and not the individual, the communal level is quite similar to the personal level of identity. As Hecht noted, the same characteristics of the personal frame directly apply to the communal frame except that it takes the group as the locus and not the individual (Hecht, 1993).

CTI in Recent Literature

Although CTI is essentially based on the interpretivist paradigm, it is employed by both qualitative and quantitative scholars to explore issues related to identity and communication. Some of the quantitative research include studies that looked at identity gaps and communication satisfaction of elderly people and their caregiver-grandchildren (Kam & Hecht, 2009; Pusateri, Roache, & Kam, 2016), communication between cancer patients and their (caregiver) family members and how caregivers enacted their identities in issues related to the patients' illness and treatment decisions (Krieger et al., 2015), intercultural patient-physician encounters with a focus on ethnic identity enactment (Scholl, Wilson, & Hughes, 2011). Other studies looked at adopted individuals' relationships with their adoptive families and their birth families, finding relational-relational and personal-relational identity gaps (Colaner, Halliwell, & Guignol, 2014).

Qualitative studies also employed CTI in exploring various phenomena such as stepfather identity formation and enactment (Pettigrew, 2013); identity negotiation strategies of transgender

individuals (Nuru, 2014; Wagner, Kunkel, & Compton, 2016), as well as culture and gender specific phenomena such as African-American men and their communal identities in the context of barbershops (Shabaz, 2016), and the changing dynamics in Japanese communities with rising numbers of single women (Maeda & Hecht, 2012).

Researchers also examined similar topics with the current study at hand. For instance, Hecht and Faulkner (2000) applied utilized CTI to study how Jewish Americans negotiate their identities in regard to how they reveal or conceal their Jewish (communal) identity, mainly looking through the personal and relational frames. One of the main findings was the subjects' "closetable identity" that enabled them with an option to conceal or disclose their Jewish identity; a privilege while also a constant reminder about their outsider status. In other words, the study posited that Jewish-Americans experience a tension since they feel both as part of the ingroup and outgroup in the society.

The closetable identity phenomenon that Jewish-Americans experience is interestingly quite different than (other) people with Middle Eastern backgrounds, especially when we consider that Jewish people also have ethnic, cultural, and religious ties with the region. Arabs and Jews, for example, are both considered part of the Semitic cultures who trace their linguistic roots to the same common origin, which also point out to their original homeland (Katzner, 2002; Lipinski, 2001). The Jewish and Arabic identities today include people from various ethnicities, cultures, and beliefs; therefore, it is important to emphasize that I am referring to their historical origins that points out to a group that spoke a common cognate language (see Lewis, 1997; for a detailed review).

Rationale and Research Questions of the Study

Unlike Jewish-Americans, most people from the so-called Middle Eastern countries living in the U.S. do not have a closetable identity. In other words, they mostly do not have the option to reveal or conceal their identities since they are seen as an outgroup who did not permeate the social boundaries. For instance, research shows that Arabs experience a racial and ethnic invisibility and that they suffer from a "conflation of categories Arab-Middle Eastern-Muslim [which] distorts the meaning of Arab" (Naber, 2000, p. 54). This is consistent with the claim that Muslims and Arabs are seen as one and the same group by U.S. Americans (Suleiman, 1999) and that they are "racialized through religion" (Naber, 2000, p.55) and not through phenotype — which in turn is "associated with the media's image of a generic Islam" (Naber, 2000, p. 55). This conflation of categories also affects Turks and Iranians as they also "remain indistinguishable to general public" (Suleiman, 1999, p. 33). If Arabs, Muslims, and people from the (greater) Middle East are perceived as one and the same group, we can ask whether this general perception is reflected in their own metaperceptions and how they affect their everyday identity negotiations. First, by utilizing CTI, we can investigate the dynamics between their frames of identity during the formation of their metaperceptions and look for any potential identity gaps. Next, we can explore how they seek to negotiate their identities in both social and public settings as well as how they enact these strategies in an attempt to bridge the (identity) gaps therein: In other words, the research questions (RQs) that this study is seeking to explore are broadly as follows:

(1) What are some of the overarching metaperceptions of individuals who are Middle Eastern, Arab, Muslim (perceived or self-identified) in the U.S in relation to this group identity?

(a) What identity gaps are manifested as a result of the incongruences between the individual's own perceptions and their metaperceptions?

(2) How do metaperceptions (and thus also related identity gaps) influence people's identity negotiation strategies in social and public settings?

(a) What particular identity performances do such individuals exhibit in a attempt to bridge their identity gap(s)?

Before moving on to the specific methods this study is employing, I would like to provide the reader with an explanation of why I focused on "public settings" and with an overview of some of the relevant terms – especially to better understand this conflation of categories mentioned earlier (Arab-Muslim-Middle Eastern, etc.). First, I provide an explanation on why I chose to focus on public settings in particular and move on to the first term "Middle East."

Why Public Settings or Places?

I wanted to focus on the experiences in public spaces where most people we encounter are strangers. When we start a new school, a new job, or get involved in such social and/or professional settings, we get the chance to meet new people and know that we will encounter them quite frequently thereon. Even if one does not socialize or does not introduce themselves, they can still communicate by being part of the same school, organization, company. Or even if it is an informal event where one is attending a birthday party of a friend, those who don't know the individual can think that since the birthday person is their mutual friend, the individual in question must be someone who is not a threat, or who gets invited to their mutual friend's party.

In public places (e.g., a mall, a grocery store, a coffee shop, etc.), however, people do not get this opportunity. While it might be argued that everyone in a given public setting lacks this chance (except for celebrities, perhaps), being a (perceived) member of a stigmatized and/or

negatively stereotyped minority is more likely to have an impact on one. One of the prominent metaperceptions that arose from the interviews was "terrorist," meaning that the participants believed that others might think of them as terrorists. The metaperception does not need to be such a negative concept; anything that does not reflect one's true self (i.e., one's self-perception) can cause a dissonance, a conflict of identities. And since in a public setting people are perceived based solely on their appearance, minority members will be perceived in light of their (perceived) group's prominent stereotypes.

As public settings constitute temporary spaces, it might be suggested that they are less important compared to settings where one lives, works, studies, and so on. At the same time, such locations are known for racist or xenophobic attacks; whether they are verbal attacks or altercations or involving physical violence.

Terminology: Middle East, Arab, and Muslim

Middle East

Historians claim that the term “Middle East” possibly originated in 1850s during the British rule in India but became a common term in the English-speaking countries in the early 1900s (Beaumont, Blake & Wagstaff, 2016). Before this, two terms were used to refer to the East from the West’s standpoint, namely “Near East” and “Far East,” mainly in reference to Ottoman Empire and China, respectively (Koppes, 1976). Indeed, according to Grannan (2016) the term Middle East was originally used to refer to the area between the Near East and the Far East. Currently these terms are still in use, however, the terms Near East and Middle East are used interchangeably. This amalgamation of meanings is important because it portrays how the West changed its point of view to look at the East. Particularly with the fall of the Ottoman Empire, a distinction between Near East and Middle East was redundant as the majority Christian nations

in the Balkans (e.g., Greece, Bulgaria, Romania, Moldova, Serbia, etc.) were no longer under the Ottoman rule, making them part of the "new West." Furthermore, other nations that were not located in Europe and did not have a majority Christian population (e.g., Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, etc.) could now be viewed under the same category — the Middle East.

Similar to other social constructions, the term itself seems to be fluid in nature, changing shape and meaning depending on the current socio-political situation of the era. Today, for instance, there is no consensus on what constitutes the Middle East — even amongst different departments and offices of the U.S. government. To illustrate, the two branches of the government that are primarily responsible for foreign affairs of the U.S.; namely, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and the US Department of State (DoS) do not share the same classifications or criteria for categorizing countries into regions. The CIA, for example, categorizes Turkey as part of the Middle East (CIA World Factbook, 2017), whereas the U.S. Department of State categorizes Turkey as part of Europe (US Dept. of State, 2017).

The fluid nature of the region in terms of which countries it includes in different eras depending on major (socio-)political events can be demonstrated by the Bush administration's attempt in "reshaping of the vision of the Middle East in the American mind" (Stewart, 2005, p. 400) by adding other countries that were previously not considered as part of the Middle East, under the name of "new," "greater," or "broader" Middle East (Stewart, 2005). The new working definition of the "greater Middle East" under the Bush administration starting in 2004 included "the 22 nations of the Arab world, plus Turkey in Europe, Israel, and Pakistan and Afghanistan in South Asia" (Wright, 2004, para. 10). This attempt was criticized as taking Islam as the main criterion since it included countries spanning from North Africa to South East Asia, and also because it generalized such a vast geographical landscape that contained countries with

enormous diversity in terms of “economic circumstances, governance structures, and linguistic patterns, as well as ... very different histories and unique cultural patterns” (Stewart, 2005, p. 402). Including Afghanistan into the Middle East was clearly strategic when one considers the invasion of Afghanistan by the U.S. (together with NATO forces) starting on October 7, 2001 (“History of the Afghanistan War,” 2012; also see e.g., “Timeline of War, 2018” for a full review).

As illustrated, the Middle East as a term was ascribed by the West and thus has an ethnocentric viewpoint; with the West considering the East as its counterpart, its antithesis; the other, the Orient (Said, 1977), then dividing it based on proximity as in the cases of “Near East,” “Middle East,” and “Far East.” In contrast, the other terms I mentioned (e.g., Arab, Muslim, etc.) are originally terms that are native to its own people.

Arab

The word “Arab” is defined as “a member of a Semitic people, originally from the Arabian Peninsula and neighboring territories” by the Oxford Dictionary, and as “a member of an Arabic-speaking people” or as “a member of the Semitic people of the Arabian peninsula” by Merriam-Webster. Countries that have Arabic as their official language or with a majority of Arabic speaking people are members of the “Arab League” also known as “the League of Arab States;” an international organization of twenty-two member states (“The Arab League,” 2017).

Muslim

Also an Arabic word, “Muslim” has a literal meaning which can be translated as “one who submits [to the faith]” (“Muslim,” 2010) and is therefore a variation of the word “Islam” - meaning submission to god. Hence, even though etymologically an Arabic word, “Muslim” does not necessarily imply an ethnic, racial, or a regional identity or group. Any individual who

believes in the premises of the Islamic religion is called Muslim regardless of their ethnicity, nationality, gender, or any other type of identity categories.

In this chapter, I provided a review of the existing literature and then offered some background to the key terms and definitions. In the next chapter, I present the methods utilized in the study at hand, specifically the two primary methods of inquiry; in-depth interviews and autoethnography. Following, I offer an overview of the participants before discussing the sampling process, the eligibility requirements, and the recruitment procedure of the study. Finally, I explain the details of the interviews as well as the autoethnography process before moving on to the analysis chapter.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

The current study utilized respondent interviews as well as autoethnographic writings which are mainly based on my intercultural experiences in the U.S. In this section, I elaborate on these methods while also presenting a rationale for utilizing them.

As qualitative researchers, we first ask ourselves what we want to know about a certain phenomenon and once we can pinpoint a locus that requires an in-depth study, we move on to determining which specific method of inquiry would be the most appropriate for the study at hand. Initially, this study had started as an autoethnographic inquiry that investigated my intercultural experiences in the U.S. These experiences had led me to think that I was being perceived as someone that was not a true reflection of my own self-concept. In other words, it felt as if I had two incongruent and conflicting identities; "who I think I am" vs. "who others think I am." This made me wonder if other individuals had similar experiences of conflicting identities caused by people's misperceptions about their native countries, cultures, and so on. At this point, I already knew many individuals who had told me about similar experiences. Yet, I was more interested in finding out how these experiences had shaped their metaperceptions, and in turn, how they were negotiating their identities to reduce the conflict between their self-perceptions and their metaperceptions.

To investigate these phenomena, in-depth interviews seemed to be the most proper method. In-depth interviews give participants not only an opportunity to express themselves in their own words but also ask them questions that might lead to a better understanding of themselves (Leavy, 2017). Indeed, I believe that in many of the interviews I was able to fulfill these premises based on the feedbacks from the participants. Especially when discussing the results of this study, I try to use the participants’ own language as much as possible. By doing so,

I was able to provide a relatively authentic description of the participants' input as well as giving them a voice in their own words as people who need to be heard but are not typically. This is also a part of my ethical obligation as the researcher not to change or "erase cultural differences and homogenize the participants' voices" (Leavy, 2017, p. 142).

The "need to be heard" certainly exists for many minorities, however, especially after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, people from the Middle East region have been experiencing higher levels of discrimination, oppression, and also physical violence, creating the need for more outlets for people to voice their concerns and experiences. It's crucial to note that one does not need to be a Muslim, an Arab, an Iranian or — some other identity associated with the Middle East in order to experience discrimination and oppression. In other words, instead of just focusing on individuals from Muslim groups or communities, I also tried to get insights from those who are not Muslims but have roots that connects them to the Middle East, such as ethnicity or nationality. Indeed, one of the participants in the study was a Catholic Mexican American, born and raised in the U. S. — that is to say, someone with no ties to Islam or Middle East in general. Nevertheless, this did not change the fact that he was at times perceived as an Arab and/or Muslim based on his similarities such as having darker hair and skin tones.

As mentioned earlier, the study had its roots in my own lived experiences as an international student in the U.S. which constituted the autoethnographic parts of this inquiry. By using this particular method, I was able to further examine my intercultural experiences; especially in regard to my own metaperceptions and the ways I negotiated my identity. Researchers employ autoethnography to look into the ways an individual performs, acts, and tells their stories of lived experiences; hence, also providing insight into the meaning-making process of the researcher, who is also the subject of the study. Moreover, autoethnographic inquiry

expects the individual (i.e., researcher/subject) to constantly "dig deeper," to contemplate further and further upon their own lived experiences; providing a way to reach a better understanding of their lives, their own perceptions, of themselves.

Qualitative Research

Providing a definition that fully captures qualitative inquiry is almost impossible. Thus, I present a quote from Denzin and Lincoln (2003) with a bold yet dynamic definition of the field:

> Qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible ... These practices turn the world into a series of representations, including field notes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings, and memos to the self (p. 4).

Qualitative researchers mostly employ an interpretivist lens to explore and investigate the social world. When studying a certain phenomenon, qualitative researchers observe the study's subjects in their own natural settings while making sure to take into account the meanings constructed by the people about the phenomena that's being studied (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). The qualitative approach involves the transformation in how we look at things in a transdisciplinary way as well as a pragmatic change in research practices, habits, and politics. This transformation has one question in the center: what is represented in a text? (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

Janesick (2000) suggests that qualitative research design resembles choreography; a good choreographer is able to portray the complexity of the story, not only by employing dependable procedures but also by resisting to be confined to only one approach. Mainly, she uses this metaphor of choreography since both qualitative research and choreography are about presenting and portraying lived experiences. Furthermore, Janesick argues that in qualitative research,

particularly ethnography, the researcher is the instrument of the research, similar to choreography in which the body (the dancer) is the instrument of dance. According to Janesick, the choreographer and the qualitative researcher have another essential similarity: refusing "to separate art from ordinary experience (2000, p. 380). This is consistent with what John Dewey (1934/1958) had suggested:

The artist should restore continuity between the refined and intensified forms of experience that are works of art and everyday events, doings, and sufferings that are universally recognized to constitute experience. (p. 3)

The qualitative researcher, then, is not only an individual who conducts a given research, but also an artist, who studies and practices the mechanisms of art, such as poetry, performance, photography, film, music, dance, and even fiction (Adams, Holman, & Ellis, 2015; Janesick, 2000).

Lived Experiences, Multiple Realities, Subjective Representations

Contrary to the objectivist view of one reality, most qualitative researchers attempt to uncover how individuals give meaning to their life experiences. These experiences are embodied in stories, the telling and the told, which are performances (Denzin, 2014). There can never be an accurate representation of what the subject means or says. Rather, there can only be different representations of different experiences (Denzin, 1997) due to the "inevitable gaps between reality, experience, and expressions" (Bruner, 1986, p.7) of those experiences. This is important as the perceptions are based on the idea that whenever we perceive regarding what others think about us is merely our own ideas – sometimes close to what they actually think, and sometimes completely the different. This is another reason why it is important to remember that metaperceptions are, at their core, perceptions themselves.

Accordingly, qualitative researchers do not consider having an objective viewpoint possible; an observing eye who watches from the outside and records what they see in the study. It's not only the data collection though; qualitative researchers also do not claim to be unbiased during the analysis of their research. Obviously, this does not mean that qualitative researchers simply ignore their biases; rather, they note their biases (including potential ones) in their reports. This process requires a lot of introspection, reflexivity, and courage as the researcher not only has to contemplate upon their own biases and their subjectivity but also must acknowledge them. In qualitative research, being aware of one's own biases and openly acknowledging them is one of the key factors that strengthens the credibility and trustworthiness of the research. Indeed, the claim that researchers are (or can be) objective and that they can put their biases aside is unattainable and thus unrealistic, even though it is one of the pillars of objectivist research that mainly utilizes quantitative data. Unlike its objectivist/positivist counterpart, the subjectivist / interpretivist paradigm believes that there can never be one real or true interpretation of what has been said. As Law (2004) suggested, to assume that the world is a set of specific, determinate, and more or less identifiable processes is nothing but the hegemony of the standard research methods.

In the same way, as the researcher, I do not claim an objective interpretation nor a separate status from the research itself. I acknowledge that even without any autoethnographic parts I would have still influenced the data collection and the analysis. Personally, I do not believe that reaching objectivity is possible, particularly when it comes to exploring the complex nature of humans, their thoughts, feelings, or experiences in general. Therefore, claiming to be a tabula rasa, a spotless mirror, or a clear window to the research process would not be legitimate nor fair. In addition, I also acknowledge my biases that might have influenced this particular

study, which I discuss in the context of relevant issues or subjects in the upcoming chapters of this project.

Autoethnography

Ellis and Bochner define autoethnographies as “autobiographies that self-consciously explore the interplay of the introspective, personally engage with cultural descriptions mediated through language, history and ethnographic explanation” (2000, p.742). Put simply, autoethnography is a research method that utilizes personal experience and writing to describe and critique cultural practices, beliefs, and experiences (Adams, Jones, & Ellis, 2015; Denzin, 2014). According to Adams, Jones and Ellis (2015), autoethnographies involves deep and prudent self-reflection, also referred to as “reflexivity”, to identify and investigate “the intersections between self and society, the particular and the general, the personal and the political” and to balance “intellectual and methodological rigor, emotion and creativity” (2015, p. 2). Autoethnographies are also important as they acknowledge the power of the researcher to explore their own life, much more closely than others can. They connect the personal story to the cultural, while sharing the vibrancy of the experience with the reader; making them more engaged (Keefer, 2009).

Autoethnographies are also stories we tell to describe, to explain, and to make sense of our experiences. Denzin (2014) claims that stories are similar to pictures and uses the Italian term pentimento to explain. This term is used to refer to paintings that have visible traces of previous works on the canvas; when the newer paint is peeled off, an older sketch or picture can be seen giving the artwork a fresh look. "What is new is what was previously covered up," Denzin claims (2014, p. 1). Similarly, lived experiences and stories are also like a pentimento, with things that change or displace what was previously thought to be there. Furthermore,

Denzin argues that "there is no truth in the painting of a life, only multiple images and traces of what has been, what could have been, and what now is" (Denzin, 2014, p. 1).

Developing Autoethnography

For the autoethnographic part of this study, I used diaries, journals, introspective and retrospective contemplation which is either put on paper or audio recorded. The most frequent approach I utilized was as simple as taking notes; whether it's only a few words, sentences, paragraphs, or pages. These types of notes are sometimes field notes for my autoethnographic journal, and sometimes snippets from my memory - mainly about the problematic interactions I have had in social situations that potentially require more introspection and contemplation.

I believe that the autoethnographic parts of the study were imperative to the project as a whole. I claim this mainly based on three major reasons: (1) The foundation of this research lies in my own intercultural experiences; starting from my time in Germany, but mainly revealing themselves in the United States because of the post 9/11 era we live in. These experiences (most of which occurred in the U.S.) had a negative impact on my cognitive and emotional well-being. For this reason, autoethnography is crucial as it is not simply a research method that is conducted at one time to produce certain results. Rather, it is a reflective, exploratory, and a healing process that delves deep into the researcher's own thoughts and feelings, attempting to discover, deconstruct, and to reconstruct the lenses through which we look at the world. To put it differently, it is a metacognitive process in which I try to make sense of how and why I create meaning from my experiences the way I do, which brings me to the second main reason why I utilize autoethnography: (2) As I mentioned previously, metaperceptions are not necessarily the way people perceive us; rather, they are our own constructs even though largely influenced by our environment, culture, lived experiences as well as the historical era we live in. Thus, by

conducting autoethnography, I do not simply attempt to unpack my own process of constructing meaning, but also try to discover the external factors that played an influential role in shaping my own identity, and the way it looks at the world. In the end, it is our experiences that constantly shape our perceptions and our identities, which in turn influence our future experiences as well as the way we look at our past experiences. Finally (3), I suggest that the autoethnographic sections serve as a detailed, first-hand experiences that can be used to check for credibility of the overarching results of the interviews I conducted that constituted the other part of this study. While individual and cultural differences between me and the participants are likely to produce varying experiences and results, I believe that the project portrays quite similar overarching themes that are generally experienced and expressed by all participants. For instance, both during the interviews and the analysis of the transcripts, individual differences in the accounts of the participants were evident. At the same time, similar experiences and overlapping metaperceptions in these accounts were also highly salient. Both of these similarities and differences were expected as this project (and therefore, I) considered people as vastly different from one another individually, maintaining a unique presence of various characteristics, world-views, and experiences; while still acknowledging that we also share certain general conditions and traits that makes us part of the same group, distinguishing us from other mammals. These aspects that humans share are the main forces behind our ability to communicate with one another (particularly through language) and possess a certain level of intersubjectivity.

Research Design of the Study

Interviews

In the current study, the first objective was to understand the participants' metaperceptions of U.S. Americans. In other words, the specific metaperception I asked my

participants was how they thought U.S. Americans perceived them. The participants were not given any definitions of any concept but were expected to talk about them in the way they understood them.

The second objective was to learn about the participants' identity negotiation strategies in public and social settings in the U.S., and how these strategies were influenced by the metaperceptions they reported earlier in the interviews. How the participants performed their identity negotiations and how their metaperceptions affected these identity performances is the primary focus of this study.

For the interviews, I employed unstructured respondent interviews that were designed to explore and make sense of the participants metaperceptions and their identity negotiation strategies. Only in one email interview the design was semi-structured due to the asynchronous nature of sending and receiving emails. All interviews were conducted between October 2016 and October 2018. On average, the synchronous online interviews took about 2 hours (119 minutes to be exact), with the longest interview lasting about 158 minutes and the shortest about 84 minutes, not including the asynchronous interview that I conducted via email. All interviews were conducted between 2016 and 2018

These interviews followed a flexible and tentative interview guide (see Appendix B) with open-ended questions which served as a framework for structuring the interviews (Holloway & Wheeler, 2013). After asking the participants some general demographic questions (e.g., place of birth, age, where they grew up, how long they have been in the U.S.), I continued the interview with a similar question about how they self-identified in terms of nationality, religion, ethnicity, and race. While this question was also demographic, it focused on how the interviewee identified as an individual, and not on external facts such as their birthplace, age, or time lived in the U.S.

These were followed by questions that broadly explored their metaperceptions, such as "what do you think an American [whatever it meant for the participant] you do not know, thinks of you when they see in public?," or "what are some of the stereotypes about your native country/culture?; as well as inquiries on their related identity negotiation strategies by asking them about "the first thing [they] tell someone who does not know about [their] culture" and "the first thing they tell people who have inaccurate assumptions/beliefs," and whether they do anything to "reduce the chances of being misunderstood by Americans" or if "they do anything different in the U.S. to express" their identities which they do not feel the need to in their native countries (for the complete Interview Guide, see Appendix B).

The interviews continued until data saturation was reached. According to Lindlof and Taylor (2011), data saturation is signaled when the researcher sees continued observation of what is already known in the data. Checking for data saturation not only helps the researcher in managing the obtained material, but also ensures that the analytic categories and explanations of the data are robust and rich (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011).

Except for one interview that I conducted via email, all interviews were done online on Google Hangouts, an online chatting platform that can be used both for professional and personal purposes, secured with encryption for each party's privacy. These eight interviews were, thus, synchronous in nature, unlike the email interview that is asynchronous. I shall also note that the total of these nine interviews do not include those that were scheduled but cancelled or the one interview in which the interviewee left after about 15 minutes with no explanation.

Initially, the online interviews were planned to be conducted on any medium that allowed synchronous conversations (i.e., chats) between me and the participant. However, after conducting the first two interviews on Google Hangouts, I decided to employ the same tool for

the rest of interviews; however, the final decision was always left to the interviewee. One of the reasons of selecting Google Hangouts was its convenience for the participants since they all had a Gmail address or a Google account. Other mediums, such as Facebook, did not present the same convenience as Google Hangouts. Looking at the interviews retrospectively, I am happy not to have utilized Facebook's messaging or chat features because of the recent events that showed some of the unethical ways Facebook collected information from its users (see e.g., Cambridge Analytica Files, 2018).

Sampling

Unlike quantitative research, nonrandom sampling is the main resource for making sampling decisions in qualitative research. Sampling, therefore, requires prior knowledge about the phenomena that is to be studied. Qualitative inquiry is not interested in attempts at generalizing the findings of a given study. Instead, it strives to focus on specific situations, individuals, groups, and sites; therefore, primarily employs nonrandom sampling strategies (Rapley, 2014). Hence, for this project, I employed nonrandom sampling strategies, particularly purposive sampling. This sampling method selects participants based on nature and purpose of the study, especially when the study involves a specific group of people, a certain subset of a population. Because this study at hand required participants with (perceived) Middle Eastern roots, I had to try recruiting individuals who were thought to be representative of the specific group of people being studied (Lavrakas, 2008).

Recruiting Participants

In order to be able to officially recruit people for my interviews, I applied to the Human Subjects Review Board of my university (later changed its name to Institutional Review Board - IRB) for an academic permission to recruit individuals to partake in my study. After two

revisions, my request was granted under "expedited review category #7" by the university's HSRB/IRB on November 3rd, 2016 with project number 936551-3. Before this permission expired in October 2017, I requested an extension which was granted by the HSRB/IRB for another year (until October 2018) with the project number 936551-4.

As an international student, I personally knew many individuals who were eligible to participate in the study and I used this as my main method of recruiting participants. Ergo, all individuals who took part in the study were all people I knew personally; though, my level of acquaintanceship with each participant was at different levels in a relatively wide spectrum. Nonetheless, most of these individuals were male which also affected the demographics of the interviewees in this project and resulted in only having one female participant overall. Other restrictions were also present. Unfortunately, not everyone I approached was willing or available for partaking in the interviews. I believe the relatively sensitive topic of the project in addition to the tense socio–political climate at the time did not work in my favor. This was especially true when it came to my attempts at reaching other potential participants who I did not know personally. For instance, my attempts to recruit individuals via posters distributed across the campus (with official approval from the university), and announcements via the university's "Campus Update" – a daily email news/announcement service sent to faculty, students, and staff members were unsuccessful. In the couple of times it appeared to be working (and even looked quite promising until the end), it still failed to produce any end results. For instance, after one of my "Campus Update" email posts, I was invited to an ESL class to advertise my project and recruit potential participants. On the same day, I was delighted to see several emails from students who were all eligible to participate and replied almost immediately. Nonetheless, that was the end of the story; I did not receive one single response to my follow-up emails. In short,

all these attempts to recruit participants (other than reaching out to people I knew personally) were unsuccessful.

Eligibility for Participation

To be eligible to participate in this study, the individual had to, [a] be over the age of eighteen, and; [b] have ethnic and/or cultural ties, roots, or background (e.g., a first generation Syrian–American, etc.) in one of the countries listed below, and/or; identify themselves as a native of one of the countries listed: Bahrain, Palestine (Gaza Strip), Iran, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Turkey, United Arab Emirates, Yemen (CIA Factbook, 2019), also including Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, Egypt (Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs, n.d.) and Afghanistan and Pakistan – as defined by the G.W. Bush administration as the “Greater Middle East” (see e.g., Wright, 2004).

Please note that countries were selected based on multiple U.S. government agencies and their definitions of “Middle East” and the countries within. At the same time, it is significant to note that the U.S. government does not have a single definition of this region. The Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), for instance, categorizes Turkey as part of the Middle East. Another federal institution, the U.S. Department of State, had a different opinion on where Turkey was, categorizing it as part of Europe.

Data Analysis

For the analysis of the interview data, I utilized open coding; a process in which the data is divided into segments and is named accordingly with a code that describes the phenomenon with one or more words (Flick, 2009). Whenever possible, I went over the interview transcript right after the interviews concluded. This usually involved highlighting certain parts I deemed as important; adding notes to others, sometimes to clarify the context, especially when I came

across parts that sounded differently than they did during the interview. This was necessary to ensure both meanings I had interpreted from the text. There were also instances where I noted significant similarities (or contrasts) between the interviewee's responses and other participant's input. In some cases, this also included my own experiences that either were similar or completely different.

This reading and re-reading process was also a way for me to ensure that not only I did not miss anything important as well as to check for my initial understanding of the responses. I claim that this process was similar to peer-briefing though I was the "other" person with different perspectives and a fresh(er) set of eyes. Regardless of what this process may resemble, I believe that it certainly helped with the credibility /trustworthiness of this research.

The second phase of the analysis included going over the transcript again and taking notes of the phrases and words that stood out from the rest of the transcript. For example, direct and brief responses such as “terrorist” and “rich” were noted as codes that fell under the broader category of metaperceptions. Such responses were quite prominent in the earlier parts of the interviews, due to my interview guide's (see Appendix B) general order of questions that inquired about the metaperceptions of the participants before moving onto exploring their identity negotiations or other relevant issues that the interview process led us.

To explain the coding process in further detail, going over some of the actual interviews might be helpful. The most simple and salient example, for instance, can be given from our interview with Talib. When I asked him (indirectly) about his metaperceptions, he had simply listed them one by one: “terrorist, oppressive, angry, immigrant, barbaric, uneducated, and uncivilized.” I collected these one-word metaperceptions directly (i.e., verbatim) under an umbrella of "metaperceptions". All these codes were all interrelated, however, there were codes

that were closer to one another, compared to the degree of similarity and relevance of other codes. The following initial code groups are examples of my attempts to narrow down the total number of codes by pairing one code with another closely related and similar code: “uneducated and uncivilized”; “terrorist and barbaric”; “oppressive and angry.” I noted these initial codes on poster boards (explained below; also see Appendix D for a sample), both on the interviewee’s individual poster board that included codes, notes, memos, etc. as well as on a general poster board that collected all interviewees’ codes. As mentioned earlier, due to the nature of my interview questions and the general topic of this project, I was able to separate most of such codes into two main groups: “metaperceptions” and “identity negotiation strategies.” Not every one of these pairs became one separate metaperception category though, as they also had to go through another narrowing down process with the analysis of other interviews and the codes emerged thereof.

The coding process for these strategies, I demonstrate with the help of another interviewee’s initial codes based on this subject: I had asked Gibran how he talked about his native county (S. Arabia) and he had told me that unless he was not asked directly, he preferred not to "talk about this topic.” This was a type of inaction as it did not involve doing anything different than what one was doing in that moment. Following, Gibran noted that he does mention that he’s from Saudi Arabia but later corrected himself and said that he would not even share where he was from unless he was asked directly, but also noted that he would not go into detail. So far, we can see that there is something he utilizes, an inaction; the act of avoidance. Avoiding to talk / to interact would later become one of the frequently employed identity negotiations amongst the interviewees. I should also note that this code was also directly used by the participant when he mentioned that one reason behind this avoidance was him being cautious as

"some [people] are aggressive and hard to convince … so [he tried] to avoid it as much as [he] can."

Avoidance was also seen in interviews when the participants did not want to stand out for wearing their traditional attire, as in the cases of Gibran and Shams. "People might stare at gov" Shams had told me, mentioning his avoidance to stand out and put himself" in that situation." Gibran, on the other hand, seemed to miss wearing his traditional clothes but told me that he "can't do it" as "people get scared" but mainly" to avoid any issue" that might arise from standing at." while this was also an avoidance to do something, it was coded as "avoiding to wear traditional clothing", or as "avoiding to stand out." Therefore, after this initial coding process, such codes were not put under the same category as avoiding to talk or interact, but were rather put under "not wearing traditional attire" as an identity negotiation strategy. In general, avoidance was seen as part of their daily lives and is, hence, a broad theme; in fact, too broad to generalize as it refers to an inaction that can be seen in all aspects of social life. Thus, instead of focusing on the (in)action of avoidance, I decided to tell the participants' stories in their relevant aspects. As an example of my coding process, however, it offers a great example, in the sense that how avoidance was noted as a code but within its own context.

While these codes were grouped in this fashion, there were also codes themselves that became the broader category and even themes as in the case of "terrorist." This code was mentioned by all participants and was frequent and significant enough to become a category and eventually a theme itself.

Poster Boards for Mind Mapping

In order to gain a better understanding of the big picture of each participant's answers, I started using poster boards to use as a kind of mind mapping that would allow me to have an

actual "overview" with the ability to pointing out connections (and disparities) between parts of the interviews; or in discovering links between highlighted data, and to be able to visually organize the most important data and snippets from the interviews. Until figuring out the best possible structure for these maps, I had to redo most of them multiple times (for a sample see, Appendix E). Because the poster boards were inconvenient due to their relatively rigid structure, limited amounts in combination with their financial cost, I looked for a better option; and discovered the best option to be a newsprint paper (Canson XL. 18"x24") that can be found in Arts and Crafts aisles of many large stores like Walmart or in stores that specialize on related supplies. In addition to the individual interviews, I also created poster boards for certain themes that encompassed significant responses from the interviewees. An example of a poster board of such nature included responses from the individual interviews or my own notes about the concept of race (see Appendix E). Depending on the interview, I created up to 3 poster boards per participant. This method is similar to and perhaps a juxtaposition of “concept-mapping” (e.g., see Novak, 1990) and “cognitive mapping” (e.g., see Eden, 1988).

In conclusion, the coding process in general focused on using the actual words of the participants during initial and final phases of the interview. I intended to do this to represent the participants’ voices directly, and as much as possible. While most of the codes, categories, and themes emerged from the interviews, due to the nature of the topic of this project, metaperceptions and identity negotiation strategies served as a priori overarching groups for the themes to be nested in. There were also emergent themes that could not be nested in any of the a priori groups, and thus were nested under a group that itself emerged from the interviews, namely the “contingent factors.” Hence, in the next and final chapter, I present my findings in three sections: (a) metaperceptions, (b) identity negotiation strategies, and (c) contingent factors.

These are followed by two cases from two of my participants, in which I examine some of their experiences in more detail, providing a broader context for the reader while using a generally narrative voice in representing their lived experiences.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

In this chapter, I talk about the themes that emerged from the analysis and were then brought together under two overarching group of themes, namely “metaperceptions” and “identity negotiation strategies.” Following, I introduce another cluster of themes which I refer to as “contingent factors.” First, I introduce the themes nested under “metaperceptions,” in which I discuss the most salient and significant metaperceptions of the participants. Following, I move onto their identity negotiation strategies and explore the relevant themes in this regard. Third, I contemplate upon the themes that were not nested under metaperceptions or identity negotiations. I refer to these overarching group of themes as the “contingent factors,” since these themes mainly consist of factors that could affect the participant’s metaperceptions and/or identity negotiations. Finally, I introduce two individual cases from the participants’ own accounts and examine them in detail. After a brief summary of these findings, I move on to the fifth and final chapter of this project.

Before I start talking about my findings, I would like the reader to note that the “scenario” or “the scenario question” I refer to throughout this chapter is a involves a hypothetical scenario example that attempts to give context to the interviewee for making sense of the question. The scenario can be as simple as imagining walking into a coffee shop, a grocery store, a restaurant (a public setting) and seeing that some of the customers are looking at you for a brief moment. A question would then follow; a version of “What do you think those people think of you when they notice you enter the coffee shop, restaurant, etc.?” (see Appendix A for other examples and a detailed explanation).

Findings I: Metaperceptions

Metaperception: Rich (and Poor)

"Rich" was one of the most common metaperceptions; particularly those of Saudi Arabian participants. For instance, both Gibran and Shams believed that "rich" was one of the prominent stereotypes about their country. According to Shams, the "rich" stereotype was directly related to the oil reserves of Saudi Arabia. "Do you have oil under your home?" was a question he found quite odd and told me as one of his experiences related to this stereotype.

While Shams and Gibran both claimed that "rich" was a stereotype about Saudi Arabia, Zach, a Lebanese American, argued that it was a broader phenomenon that also affected other Arabs, and not just those from Saudi Arabia. Still, the "oil/rich" phenomenon was rooted in the inaccurate generalization of Saudi Arabia to the whole Arab world. "Everyone thinks we that Saudi money," he said, after confirming that he too had the metaperception of rich."

On a different note, Shams had mentioned that whenever he invites U.S. Americans to his house, "they think [that he is] super rich." Nonetheless, he believed that this is not because of the "rich" stereotype itself, but mostly because of their tradition and culture of "hosting the guests and treating them well even if you don't know them." He also told me that he uses these traditions to inform people about their culture, including their traditional cuisine as well as their custom of providing great hospitality.

As I mentioned earlier, Gibran had also claimed that "rich" was one of stereotypes associated with Saudi Arabia. Albeit Gibran was also the only participant who claimed that "poor" was one of his metaperceptions since "some [U.S. Americans] feel like we are poor and came here to make money." Later in the interview, he told me a story that provided more insight. "When I bought my new Lexus, my wife and I went to buy ice cream. One lady parked next to

me and started shouting at us with no reason," Gibran told me. Apparently, when the woman first got out of her car, according to Gibran, she looked like "someone excited to have ice cream." However, once he and his wife got out of the car, the "woman was looking at [Gibran and his wife] and started shouting." Apparently, "people around [them] were surprised" as they could not understand "why she was doing that." Intrigued by this odd event, I asked Gibran for further details, but he was only able to recall that she was a middle-aged U.S. American woman who simply was not happy that Gibran and his wife were driving a brand-new Lexus.

One might argue that we can never know the "actual" reason why this woman was highly upset with Gibran and his wife. Especially for this project, the woman's intention or reason for yelling at Gibran is irrelevant. In the end, what actually matters is Gibran's perception that it was about the car they were driving. This also raises the question why this event was perceived as in relation to Gibran's metaperception of "poor." As mentioned earlier, Gibran explains this metaperception arguing that "some [U.S. Americans] feel like we are poor and came here to make money." This claim is not necessarily negative per se — until we consider some of the beliefs about immigrants, such as the belief that immigrants push U.S. citizens out of their jobs and/or get the already limited number of available jobs (Enchautegui, 2015; Hoban, 2017; for a different take on the issue see Borjas, 2016). On top of this, if we add a similar claim that immigrants (whether documented or not) receive welfare from the government, adding to a bloated welfare state and thus increasing U.S. Americans' financial burden (Nowrasteh & Orr, 2018), we can have a better understanding why misinformed individuals will have a more negative attitude towards immigrants in general. While these beliefs (whether related to jobs or welfare) are mostly inaccurate (e.g., see Santana, 2014; for a more comprehensive review, see Nowrasteh & Orr, 2018), they play important roles in othering and stigmatizing immigrants,

which then might lead to scapegoating immigrants for many social, political, and economic problems.

Metaperception: Terrorist

Sadly, one of the most salient metaperceptions of the participants was "terrorist". Before I talk about my interviewees' responses in specific, I would like to define and discuss the term terrorist and provide some visuals to better depict the current stereotypes associated with the term.

Terminology: Terrorist

Who or what is a terrorist? The word "terror" is rooted in Latin and had initially the meaning "frighten." Though the word "terror" is over 2000 years old, the term "terrorism" (viz., terrorisme) was coined during the French Revolution. Today, the same term is used to refer to the actions of violent, extremist groups that target civilians in order to invoke fear in the society.

Nonetheless, there is no universal consensus on the term ought to be defined. The United Nations (UN), for instance, defines terrorism as "[c]riminal acts intended or calculated to provoke a state of terror in the public, a group of persons or particular persons for political purposes are in any circumstance unjustifiable, whatever the considerations of a political, philosophical, ideological, racial, ethnic, religious or any other nature that may be invoked to justify them" (United Nations, 1994). The, US Department of State, on the other hand, defines terrorism as "premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against noncombatant targets by subnational groups or clandestine agents" (Bureau of Counterterrorism, 2016).

Today, the word does not remind us of the French revolutionaries, but another group of people: Middle Eastern, mainly Arab and Muslim men. A simple Google Images search reveals that most of the pictures offer the same theme for the word "terrorist", namely men with ski

masks and/or thick long beards holding AK-47s. The background is mostly a steppe or a desert. One flag stands out in those pictures, the flag that's been displayed by ISIS/Daesh terrorists— a black background with a couple Arabic-looking words. Almost all of the images also only feature a male terrorist, but never a female terrorist.

A similar image search for the word "Muslim" shows similar looking people, though this time no weapons or wearing ski masks can be seen. In this image search, approximately half of the pictures depict women along with men, unlike the terrorist images that only showed men. Still, almost all men in these pictures have a thick beard and a non-Western clothing, and all women are depicted as wearing some type of head- or body-covering, such as hijab, or burka.

Now that we examined the term and its current stereotype associated with Middle Eastern people, we can have a better idea how and why my participants were all claiming to be perceived as one.

For example, when I told Gibran the scenario (see Appendix A) in full detail, he responded by saying one word: "terrorist." Please note that he did not even hesitate, did not say "probably" or "perhaps" or anything in that nature.

What if the same scenario happened in Saudi Arabia, I asked him; this time his response was very mundane, neutral, and perhaps even little bit universal. He said, in that case, he'd think that the person looking at him is trying to recognize him (e.g., "Where do I remember him from? He looks familiar… etc.). Here, on the other hand, he noted that no matter where he goes, it does not change this metaperception of "terrorist." Indeed, he told me that this affects how he feels even before going to public places.

Talib, also from Saudi Arabia, named seven one-word terms. He said, "I feel like (…) they think that I am a (1) terrorist, (2) oppressive, (3) angry, (4) immigrant, (5) barbaric, (6)

uneducated, (7) uncivilized." As one can clearly see, this list starts with the metaperception "terrorist," and includes many other descriptors that either overlap or are somehow associated with the same stereotype.

I would like to note here a few important differences between Gibran and Talib, as they both expressed their primary metaperception as a 'terrorist'. Although both men are from Saudi Arabia, they not only have many personality-related differences, but also physical differences regarding skin tone or hair type. Gibran, for instance, has a darker skin tone, with thick and curly hair; whereas Talib has a much fairer skin tone. Moreover, Gibran is more traditional, and conservative compared to Talib; for example, Gibran is not only from the more conservative area of Mecca, but also is married to a Muslim woman from Saudi Arabia. Talib, on the other hand, is married to a U.S. American woman of European descent. Notwithstanding, both men had the same primary metaperception: "terrorist."

Zach, a Lebanese American, also responded to my question "What are some of the stereotypes associated with Arabs or people from the Middle East?" with "the obvious one of course is terrorist."

Husam, the youngest participant in the study with Algerian and Norwegian ethnic roots, told me that he was bullied in school: "People would call me a 'terrorist' which I absolutely hated," he said. To make it worse, this did not happen in high school or at college, but in grade school. He was obviously frustrated as he told me that he was "borderline bullied," which made him feel "bad" and "angry" at his peers and "at the terrorists themselves for putting me in this situation." Here, I would like to ask the reader to go back to their grade (elementary/primary) school years, and imagine being called a "terrorist," and how this would make them feel; back then, and how it would have affected them now. In Husam's case, it looks like it made him

distance himself from identities such as Arab, Muslim, and Middle Eastern. For instance, he told me that he does not like Islam (i.e., as an ideology/religion), and that “being called a Muslim is not [his] favorite.”

In sum, "terrorist" was one of the most significant and common metaperceptions. Making this claim may seem far-fetched as people would run away from someone who they thought was a terrorist. However, it's important to keep in mind that these are metaperceptions, and also do not refer to an actual terrorist who is actively trying to commit acts of terrorism. Rather, it refers to someone who has the same mentality as an (Islamic) terrorist, a person who is potentially an enemy of the U.S., who wishes terrorists to succeed. An enemy, someone on the other side, someone who can’t be one of us; which brings me to the next metaperception group of “non-American”, “foreign,” and thus, “the Other.”

Metaperception: Non-American, Foreign, the Other

Most of the interviewees believe that in a public setting people perceived them as non-Americans, and/or as foreigners, immigrants — as “the other.” Mehmet, a Turkish immigrant, told me that when people see him in a public setting, they think that he is a “foreigner, probably a student or immigrant.” When I asked why he had this (meta)perception – in other words, why he thought people did not think he was a U.S. American, he provided an interesting explanation: “Because I don’t look like a typical American,” he said, “which I believe is Anglo-Saxon and African-American.” I thought it was quite curious that he did not use the term “white” or “Caucasian” but rather chose the term “Anglo-Saxon.” I found his response highly peculiar as Mehmet was one of the few participants who actually identified as white or Caucasian but was the only participant to make a distinction between whites and Anglo-Saxons. I should note that Mehmet’s self-identification as white began after moving to the U.S. as he told me during our

interview that he did not identify with a certain race until moving here. Regardless of how he identifies, Mehmet acknowledged that he was not a typical U.S. American, and this did not seem to bother him. In the end, he had immigrated to the U.S. a few years after graduating from a college in Turkey. His native language was Turkish, and he was quite patriotic in terms of his nationality.

Zach, on the other hand, was born and raised in the U.S., and spoke English as his native tongue. Yet, he also believed that people saw him as a foreigner. When I asked him the “scenario” question (see Appendix A), for instance, he said: “I think for sure they would think of me as a foreigner.” He was certain that he, like Mehmet, did not fit into the Anglo-Saxon/White/WASP and African American/Black stereotype; hence he was the “other”. His parents were immigrants from Lebanon and were Arab Muslims. The fact that he was born and raised as a U.S. citizen did not help; he simply was not perceived as a “true” American. From his comments it was clear that he was quite upset about not being included:

It’s not a good feeling, being a minority in general. I feel this perception is unfair … this is my country as much as it is anyone else. Yet because of the way I look I am perceived as ‘not really from here.’ Perhaps not even belonging… Although I understand that this is ignorance … I don’t believe that I don’t belong here. But I know people have this perception about me.

Both Mehmet and Zach believed that they were perceived as foreigners, as “not-American.” For Mehmet, this did not constitute an identity gap as he acknowledged being a foreigner. In other words, Mehmet’s personal and communal identity layers are consistent in terms of being a foreigner as well as an immigrant; in the end, he had recently immigrated to the U.S. In contrast, Zach experienced an identity gap about the same phenomenon; he truly believed that he was a U.S. American – not an immigrant or foreigner. Thus, we see a personal-communal

identity gap as his perception of himself (a "true" American, a native of the U.S.) does not overlap with his communal identity ascribed by others — at least in his view (metaperception).

The main reason behind this othering of people such as Mehmet or Zach is directly related to their ethnic and cultural backgrounds that are rooted in the so-called region of Middle East – which was another common metaperception amongst the interviewees.

Metaperception: Middle Eastern

Before going into the particular metaperceptions of “Middle Eastern” based on the interviews with the participants, I would like to provide some background information on this region and while also presenting the common misconceptions about the ethnic/religious/cultural groups and identities that are associated with Middle East.

Terminology: The Middle East

Historians claim that the term “Middle East” possibly originated in 1850s during the British rule in India but become a common term in the English-speaking countries in the early 1900s (Beaumont, Blake & Wagstaff, 2016). Prior to this, two terms were used to refer to the “East” from the West’s standpoint, namely “Near East” and “Far East,” mainly in reference to Ottoman Empire and China, respectively (Koppes, 1976). According to Grannan (2016), Middle East was originally used to refer to the area between the Near East (i.e., Ottoman Empire) and Far East (i.e., China). Today, nonetheless, the terms Middle East and Near East are used interchangeably. This change in the meaning of these terms is significant as it displays the new division between the East and the West based on religious differences. Put differently, after the fall of the Ottoman Empire, a distinction between Near East and Middle East was futile as the majority Christian countries in the Balkans (e.g., Greece, Bulgaria, Romania, Moldova, Serbia, etc.) which were under the Ottoman rule could be categorized as part of the new “West.” On the

other hand, others that were not located in Europe and did not have majority Christian populations (e.g., Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, etc.) could now be classified under one regional categorization, namely, the Middle East.

Like other social constructions, the term itself seems to be fluid in nature, changing shape and meaning depending on the current socio-political situation of the era. Today, for instance, there is no consensus on what constitutes the Middle East — even amongst different departments and offices of the U.S. government. To illustrate, the two branches of the government that are primarily responsible for foreign affairs of the U.S.; namely, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and the US Department of State (DoS) do not share the same classifications or criteria for categorizing countries into regions. CIA, for example, categorizes Turkey as part of the Middle East (CIA World Factbook, 2019), whereas the U.S. Department of State (2017) categorizes Turkey as part of Europe.

The fluid nature of the region in terms of which countries it includes in different eras depending on major (socio-)political events can be demonstrated by the Bush administration's attempt in "reshaping of the vision of the Middle East in the American mind" (Stewart, 2005, p. 400) by adding other countries that were previously not considered as part of the Middle East, under the name of "new," "greater," or "broader" Middle East (Stewart, 2005). The new working definition of the "greater Middle East" under the Bush administration starting in 2004 included "the 22 nations of the Arab world, plus Turkey in Europe, Israel, and Pakistan and Afghanistan in South Asia" (Wright, 2004, para. 10). This attempt was criticized as taking Islam as the main criterion since it included countries spanning from North Africa to South East Asia, and also because it generalized such a vast geographical landscape that contained countries with enormous diversity in terms of "economic circumstances, governance structures, and linguistic

patterns, as well as ... very different histories and unique cultural patterns" (Stewart, 2005, p. 402). Especially the attempt to include Afghanistan into the Middle East was clearly strategic especially when one considers the invasion of Afghanistan by the U.S. (together with NATO forces) starting on October 7, 2001 ("History of the Afghanistan War," 2012; also see e.g., "Timeline of War, 2018" for a full review).

All these shifts in the meaning of the term "Middle East" shows that it has moved to a position that is almost synonymous with the Muslim world (i.e., majority Muslim countries). Hence in the next section, I argue that the term "Middle East" or "Middle Eastern" is directly associated with people who are (perceived) Muslims; which, in turn is highly associated and confused with the Arab identity in the U.S. society.

[(Muslim = Arab) ≈ Middle Eastern] ≈ The Other

Existing literature shows that Muslims and Arabs are seen as one and the same group by U.S. Americans (Suleiman, 1999). This is consistent with the argument that Arab Americans are "racialized through religion" (Naber, 2000, p. 55) and not phenotype. This misperception that groups all Arabs and Muslims into the same category also includes Turks and Iranians who "remain indistinguishable to the general public" in the U.S. (Suleiman, 1999, p. 33). Accordingly, if people from the Middle East are seen as an homogenous group who is "associated with the media's image of a generic Islam" (Naber, 2000, p. 55), and if the U.S. society sees Muslims and Arabs as one and the same group (Suleiman, 1999), we can deduce that the terms Muslim, Arab, and Middle Eastern function almost as synonyms with one another. For instance, Naber (2000) claimed that the confusion between these terms is directly related to the "mass media conflation of the categories Arab – Middle Eastern – Muslim" (p. 54).

An incident that received a lot of media attention during the 2008 U.S. Presidential election campaign of the late Senator John McCain can be considered as an example. During a rally in Minnesota, an elderly woman voiced her concerns over the Democratic Party candidate Barack Obama: “I can’t trust Obama. I have read about him and […] he’s an Arab.” Senator McCain then gently grabbed her microphone while also responding to her concern: “No ma’am. Barack Obama a decent family man that I just happen to have disagreements with on fundamental issues … (“McCain corrects woman,” 2015; “McCain responds,” 2008). I believe this to be a great example of the misconception about and the confusion between the terms “Arab” and “Muslim”. In this particular example, the woman is worried because Barack Obama’s father was a Muslim; however, she expresses her concern with the label (or perhaps an epithet) of “Arab.” Barack Obama’s father was a Kenyan, and his mother was a U.S. American (of European ancestry); thus, he has no ethnic relations to Arabs at all (Fallows, 2012). in other words, he has no ethnic connection to Arabs (Fallows, 2012). Yet, as mentioned earlier, the issue here is about religion, or religious affiliation, and not ethnicity. At the same time, though not an Arab or Muslim, Barack Obama is the “other” in the U.S. society because of his racial identity as an African American — which is possibly the primary concern of those with similar views as the elderly woman in the example.

Even though I argue that these three terms (i.e., Middle Eastern, Muslim, and Arab) function as almost-synonyms in the U.S. society, it should be noted that the term Middle Eastern is different in the sense that it does include (Israeli) Jewish people in most cases. Furthermore, as I illustrated earlier, Middle East is a fluid social (and political) construction of the West, which also points out its ethnocentric origin. In other words, the West considers the East as its counterpart, the other, the Orient (Said, 1977); and then dividing it based on the proximity as it

was in the case of the “Near East,” “Middle East,” and “Far East” made from the same standpoint.

In contrast to the ethnocentric origin of the term Middle East, the terms “Arab” and “Muslim” are both originally Arabic words. An Arab, for instance, is defined as “a member of a Semitic people, originally from the Arabian peninsula and neighboring territories” by the Oxford Dictionary and as “a member of an Arabic-speaking people” or as “a member of the Semitic people of the Arabian peninsula” by Merriam-Webster. Countries which have Arabic as their official language and/or have mostly Arabic speaking people constitute the international organization called the “Arab League” or “the League of Arab States” (“The Arab League,” 2017). Finally, the term “Muslim” is neither an ethnic, racial, nor regional identity as it refers to a follower of the religion of Islam and has the literal meaning of “one who submits [to the faith]” ("Muslim,” 2010).

Naber (2000) stressed that Arabs are not only experience a racial and ethnic invisibility, but that also suffer from the “mass media’s conflation of categories Arab - Middle Eastern - Muslim distorts the meaning of Arab” (p. 54).

Being from the region called Middle East or at least having cultural/ethnic roots in the region comes with the burden of being stigmatized and otherized whether one is an international student like me, first-generation immigrant like Mehmet, or born and raised U.S. American like Zach. This does not mean that Muslims and/or individuals from the Middle East are the only group of people who are otherized or constitute “the other” in the society. However, unlike many other minority groups, people from the Middle Eastern region (who are predominantly Arabic, Iranian/Persian, and Turkish) constitute a different type of “other” by being generalized to categories such as Middle Eastern, Muslim, or Arab — all of which have such similar meanings

that especially the Arab and Muslim identities are often confused with one another. The mentioned three ethnic groups only share an overarching religious cultural identity as the majority of Arabs, Iranians, and Turks are Muslim. Even so, these groups do not share the same schools of belief within Islam as most Persians are Shi'a Muslims, whereas most Turks and Arabs are Sunni Muslims. In addition, these three major groups who are seen as one monolithic group mostly because of Islam (Suleiman, 1999) do not share the same language nor the same linguistic roots. The Farsi (Persian) in Iran, Turkish in Turkey, and various dialects Arabic is spoken in Arab countries. Even though Farsi, Arabic, and Turkish have influenced one another because of Islam and geographical proximity, the origins of these ethnic groups can be distinguished by looking at their linguistic structures. For example, Farsi is a member of the Indo-European language family, Turkish is a member of the Turkic language family (sometimes categorized as a subfamily of Altaic languages), and Arabic belongs to the Afro-Asiatic language family (Simons & Fennig, 2018). These linguistic roots of the languages (i.e., family trees) are imperative as they provide a way to view ethnic groups from a cultural point of view instead of genetic. Because of these language families, for instance, we know that Turks share the same ethnicity with people such as Azerbaijani, Kyrgyz, Turkmen, Gagauz, and many others (Johanson, 2014; Simons & Fennig, 2018). Arabic, in contrast, is a Semitic language that shares a common history and structure with Hebrew and Aramaic (Testen, 2015).

Based on these arguments as well as the findings of my study, I argue that the terms "Arab," "Muslim," and "Middle Eastern" are terms that are used interchangeably in the United States. These terms surely overlap; however, this interchangeability of the terms is problematic as it depicts an inaccurate portrayal of Muslims, Arabs and other relevant groups of people and

reinforces many negative stereotypes. Furthermore, I claim that the term "Muslim" and thus also the other associated terms of Arab and Middle Eastern are stereotypes themselves.

Race without Racial Identity

It was clear from the beginning that almost all my participants were confused about the concept of race and racial identity. Even the official U.S. Census categorizations of race (see U.S. Census Bureau, 2019) were not helpful; indeed, it was one of the major factors of their confusion. To me, this is not surprising as I argue that the root of the problem stems from the socially constructed nature of race, which makes it not only "made-up" but also enables it to change its shape and form, thus maintaining its status as an important player in the power dynamics of a society. This fluid nature of race is another reason for its vagueness; it is constantly changing and yet there is no objective authority to decide which race includes which peoples. This is also normal as race itself is a human construct, based on inaccurate assumptions on the different phenotypes of peoples. One could even argue that it is merely an illusion; but it is an illusion that we created, and which continues to affect real people via overt, covert, and systemic racism. Because it has a human construct, it is constantly changing in its meaning. Today, for instance, it is mainly the skin color that comes to mind when we think of the concept of race. Yet, race was not initially just based on the color of one's skin; rather, in included various descriptions such as people's temperaments and habits, hair color and texture, facial features (e.g., shapes of the nose, cheekbones, forehead, etc.) and the shape of their skull. For instance, one of the earliest attempts to categorize races was done by the German physician and anthropologist J. F. Blumenbach whose categories of race (viz., Caucasian, Mongolian, Ethiopian, Malayan, and American) were mainly based on the shape of the skull he collected from various regions of the world (Blumenbach, 1775/1795). Yet, because racial conflicts are

mainly rooted in the struggles of Black people, the color or tone of the skin started to play the more important and salient role. For instance, even if we agreed on the color differences between "whites" and "Blacks," we would have a hard time differentiating people as Asian or Caucasian just based on people's skin color.

I should also note that while the participants were confused about the concept and classifications of race, majority of them did not express a resentment or resistance towards being categorized as white. Instead, there was mostly a sense of discontentment about the vague racial categories, mostly fueled by the inconsistency between the formal and cultural/social ascriptions. In the end, I can posit that all interviewees were somewhat reluctant to fully embrace any racial category.

'We Don't Have That Term in My Country'

One of the prominent themes regarding race and racial identity was the general confusion about the concept of race. "We don't have that term in Saudi Arabia," said Gibran, "in U.S. they identify us as white." Likewise, Shams stated "they say we're white, so we're white," referring to official classifications of U.S. Census. In fact, when I first asked Shams about his national, ethnic, racial, and religious identities, he gave me straightforward responses except for the category of race: "Saudi Arabia [nationality], Arab [ethnicity], Muslim [religion]" he stated before moving on to the racial category/identification: "For the race, here in U.S. we're considered white! [According to] U.S. Census." This is interesting because instead of simply saying "white," he explained his response and provided a rationale. In other words, it seems that for the first three categories (viz., nationality, ethnicity, religion) he did not feel obliged to provide any justification, whereas for the category of race, he seemed like he had to explain why he was saying what he was saying. This should not be surprising as he had earlier suggested that

race was not a concept that was prominent in Saudi Arabia, yet, he did not have to explain himself. This reminds me of certain situations where I felt the need to explain myself why I was choosing "white" as my race. At times when I did not have the space on the form to explain response, I remember simply noting "according to U.S. Census" right next to the checkbox. Retrospectively, I believe this was to avoid misunderstandings with individuals who might read the forms and think that I self-identify as white, even though I am "Middle Eastern" or some other race, but definitely not white — according to them. I should note that this would be the same for any other racial category; if I had a particular reason to check the "Black/African-American" or "Asian" checkbox in a form, I would still feel the need to explain myself. In general, the fact that both Shams and I feel the need to explain ourselves when choosing the "white" racial category is another example that supports the claim that people from the Middle East do not feel like they are perceived as white by the society (see e.g., Cainkar, 2006; Zopf, 2018).

White but not white: Census vs. Society

Initially, I was not expecting that every interviewee would be aware of the U.S. Census category definitions. In that sense, I was surprised that each one of them knew that they were a part of the "white" racial category according to the U.S. Census definition that states:
"White – A person having origins in any of the original peoples of Europe, the Middle East, or North Africa (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019)." Nonetheless, almost all participants, even those who were born and raised in the U.S., were confused about the concept of race. They knew that they ought to check "white" when filling out an official form (based on the U.S. Census guidelines), however, this was mostly done to follow the rules of these guidelines. In one aspect, the guidelines provided a convenience for the participants by allowing them to find a "right/correct"

answer to check. Regardless, the participants still had a tough time relating to the concept of race, most of them claiming that race as a concept does not exist in their native country. More importantly, the participants reported an incoherence between the U.S. government's (i.e., Census Bureau, etc.) predefined racial categories and how the society in U.S. perceived them racially. This finding is consistent with studies that confirmed the claim that people from the so-called Middle East are not perceived and/or acknowledged as white by other individuals in the society (see e.g., Cainkar, 2006; Marvasti, 2005; Zopf, 2018). This shows a personal-relational and a personal-communal identity gap.

Compulsory Self-Identification

Right below their racial category definitions, the U.S. Census Bureau states that people's responses to the "race question is based upon self-identification" and that they do not "tell individuals which boxes to mark or what heritage to write in" (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019). Giving individuals the autonomy and freedom in identifying themselves as they wish is obviously the ideal in a democratic society. This, however, does not change the fact that they are expected to identify with a certain category — whether it is race, ethnicity, or gender. When asked, I mostly claim that I do not identify with a particular race, however, I can only do so if there is such an option. When conducting this study, for instance, I wanted to make sure that I gave the opportunity to the interviewees to self-identify themselves — not just to follow the democratic ideal but also to make sure I am able to listen to their own accounts. Asking open-ended questions, therefore, was crucial. This, however, can create an expectation for concrete answers.

For instance, after Shams told me that he is "white" according to the U.S. Census Bureau (2019) categories, I asked him how he identifies himself — regardless of any formal or informal

classifications. He responded with a list of identities: “Saudi Arabia, Arab, middle eastern, Muslim.” This is the point where I noticed (later while going over the transcript) that he might have felt obliged to give me a concrete answer without knowing that he could simply say that he does not identify with a certain race. I believe that I should have designed the study differently in a way that they did not feel as if they were expected to give an answer. Thus, this could be considered as limitation or weakness of the research project. On the other hand, this limitation seems to have produced an opportunity to further explore the confusion Shams shared with other interviewees about the concept of race.

To explain, I would like to go over the sequence of the answers he provided: First (1), he told me his nationality, ethnicity, and religion — simple, one-word answers. His race was not included until he provided me with an explanation that also implied that he himself was not identifying with a race, but that according to the Census Bureau, it was “white.” Then (2), when I asked him how he identified himself, he repeated the same sequence of one-word answers, but this time it included “middle eastern” (his exact response was “Saudi Arabia, Arab, middle eastern, Muslim”). To clarify, I asked him if he meant his race by “middle eastern,” to which he responded, “we don’t use that term so that’s why we’re not sure … but I would say Arab. At this point, I realized that he might be feeling obliged to provide a concrete answer to my question. He could simply tell me that he does not identify with a particular race, yet he was constantly changing his response. These I interpreted as “uncertainty” together with “feeling obliged” to provide a concrete answer. As a result, I wanted to remind him that he can simply tell me that he does not identify with a certain race. To avoid asking a leading question, I chose to repeat what he said earlier “we don’t use that term” to see if he would elaborate it any further. “We don't differentiate between people when it comes to race … Its you're a citizen or not” he responded.

"So, you don't really identify with a race, then?" I asked. This could be considered as a leading question, but at this point I thought that was my only option to get a clear and confirming answer. "I don't think so," Shams said, "if someone ask I would say Arab even though I understand what they want to hear here," he added, without any further question from me. After confirming that he does not actually identify with a certain race, he makes an interesting point: In a social or public setting, he would answer with "Arab" to the person asking about his race, even though he knows that is not a racial category. More importantly, he points out that it is very unlikely that one would directly ask about his race; they might ask him about his ethnicity or nationality with questions such as "where are you from?" My interpretation of his answer is grounded upon the unlikelihood of a person asking another person's race unless they are conducting a study, a survey, etc. where these types of demographic questions might be present. Rather, in daily life immigrants and/or international students are mostly asked about their country of origin (e.g., "Where are you from?"). At times, people may ask about one's religion, their cultural traditions, their native language, etc. Neither during the interviews, nor in my personal life, have I heard any immigrant tell a story where they were asked directly about their race. Even if that situation ever occurred, telling the person one's country of origin (e.g., Saudi Arabia) or one's ethnicity (e.g., Arab) should provide a satisfactory answer to the question.

'You have to look Chinese to be Asian'

Like Shams, Talib also told me that he would "rather be called an Arab, or even Asian," instead of what U.S. Census suggests. "I don't feel like I am Caucasian or white," he argued, "I used to write Asian until I was told not to." From a geographical view, he has a point: Saudi Arabia is on the Asian continent, so why isn't he considered Asian? "[But] it seems like you have to look Chinese in order to be Asian," said Talib, again expressing his discontentment with

the vagueness of racial categories. Put differently, he was not actually complaining about being excluded from the Asian racial category; he was expressing his aversion for ambiguity in regards to racial categories. I believe being categorized as Asian would only have the benefit of gaining a minority status, which Arabs and other groups of people from the region do not have. Nonetheless, I assert that being categorized as Asian would not change anything in terms of the incongruence between the formal classification of U.S. Census and the society's ascriptions. For instance, people from India and Pakistan are not perceived or labeled as Asian in the society, whereas the U.S. Census Bureau (2019) suggests that they ought to check the "Asian" racial category:

> "Asian – A person having origins in any of the original peoples of the Far East, Southeast Asia, or the Indian subcontinent including, for example, Cambodia, China, India, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, Pakistan, the Philippine Islands, Thailand, and Vietnam."

Zach, a U.S. born Lebanese American, was also discontent with the racial categories. "In terms of race, my race is different than my neighbor [Jack] for example, whose great-great-grandparents immigrated to this country from Germany" he argued. Thus, he told me that he used to fill out the option "other" in forms until he found out that the U.S. Census categorizes Arabs as White. "What if he were born in Greece or Italy?" I thought, and decided to ask him if he'd feel different about his racial identity in such a case: "Would you still feel not white if you were originally from [Greece or Italy]?" Since these two countries in my example are geographically very close to the so-called Middle East and share many common physical characteristics (e.g., darker hair, olive-skin tone, etc.) with the people from the region, he might have been born in either of those two "European" and "majority Christian" countries and still

look the same as he does today. In fact, when I first met Zach, I could not figure out his ethnic background; he had dark hair and olive-skin tone, no foreign accent, and a very common first name in the U.S. He could be from a plethora of ethnic backgrounds — Albanian, Mexican, Greek, Arab, Italian, Israeli, and many others. Thus, when I gave him this hypothetical example (e.g., "Would you feel the same about your racial identity if you had Italian or Greek ethnic roots?") he seemed to realize that it was not necessarily just his physical characteristic and told me that I had a "good point" and explained that his actual problem is the broad generalization of the concept and categories of race. He noted, "I think my issue is with the word 'race' as a classifier in general … I feel like it paints such a broad stroke."

Zach's case is illustrative since he is a U.S. born and raised individual. This is interesting in the sense that he was born and raised in the US, yet did not necessarily have a better comprehension of the racial categories than some of my other interviewees who were born outside of the US, where the category or the concept of race simply did not exist. On the other hand, I contend that his reluctance to identify with the white racial category is caused by the incoherence between the formal description of the category (i.e., white) and the ascribed racial identity by the society (i.e., not-white, Middle Eastern, Brown, etc.).

Shirin, my only interviewee of Persian ethnic descent, had different ideas on race compared with the other participants. "[W]e are not white but they defined Middle-Eastern people in this category," she suggested, adding that she checks the "white" option when she's asked on a particular form.

My Turkish participants, Kenan and Mehmet, were more comfortable with being categorized as white by the Census Bureau; yet, they still expressed their disagreements with the current categories, and also with the concept of race per se. Kenan, for instance, after answering

“Caucasian” to my interview question (i.e., how do you identify in terms of race?), told me that “race is artificial and not well defined,” and because of that he would rather “stick with ethnicity.” As a Turkish individual myself, I can clearly see his point; in Turkey, race as a concept does not have the same meaning it does in the U.S. Rather, it is the concept of ethnicity that has the most significant role, affecting almost all social, economic, and political dynamics in the country. On a different note, if we look at the demographics, history, and culture of Turkey from a U.S. American point of view of race, we could once again see the complexity and superficiality of the related concepts (i.e., the superficiality of their origin and not their social effects) at the same time. In the U.S., for example, as a Turkish individual I formally categorized as white. However, Turkish people belong to Turkic peoples whose ethnic origins go back to northern and central Asia. Moreover, Turkey as a country is situated mostly in the Asian continent. Based on these two facts, it would be reasonable to think that Turks should be categorized as Asian. At the same time, categorizing Turks as Asian would not be coherent as the concept of the Asian race is known to be mainly associated with east Asian cultures and peoples from countries such as China, Japan, and Korea. Because Asia is the largest continent in the world, it is home not only home to billions of people, but also a vast variety of people and cultures. The problem (other than the concept of race itself) is, then, rooted in the association that links this enormous continent to only a portion of its people. This reminds me of a response from Talib when we were talking about race in our interview. He had told me that he did not “feel like Caucasian or white,” and that he’d rather be called “an Arab or even Asian.” He added that for a period he “used to write Asian until he was told not to.” As we were moving on to another subject in our interview, Talib concluded his thoughts with this remark: “It seems like in America, you have to look Chinese in order to be Asian.”

In this section of this chapter, I introduced some of the most common and salient metaperceptions amongst my interviewees and discussed them in detail in combination with other important issues that arose as significant from the interviews. Next, I examine my participants' identity negotiation strategies; that is, how they performed, managed, and negotiated their identities in the U.S., mostly as a result of their metaperceptions.

Findings II: Identity Negotiation Strategies

Identity Negotiation Strategy: Use of Attire and Clothing

In both universities I attended in the U.S., I remember receiving emails that asked international students to wear our traditional clothes for an event that celebrated different cultures and traditions. In order to participate, I would have to wear "traditional" Turkish clothes. The problem, however, is that I do not have any traditional clothes, attire, accessories, etc. — not because I do not wear them in the U.S., but because I've never owned or worn anything that could qualify as part of the traditional Turkish attire. In fact, I do not even know what such attire would be. Related to that, in my first year in the U.S., I remember an international student from India asking me if we wore different clothes in Turkey. Though I was surprised at first, she had later told me that most of them wore some type of Hindu traditional attire back home. Other than certain religious attire that is worn by practicing Muslim women (mostly a headscarf to cover the hair), there is no certain piece of clothing or attire that would stand out when compared to those worn in the U.S. or Western Europe.

Whether traditional or not, a person's attire visually communicates various messages about them and their culture. Fashion, for instance, is a form of communication as any piece of clothing (or accessory) can operate as a symbol of age, personality, gender, social class, group membership, and even deeply held values such as religion or general worldview (Kuruc, 2008).

In addition, particular types of accessories such as rings or pendants can also work as a symbol for an individual to express their group membership or individual identity, while affecting their own self-perceptions (Wood, 2004).

From a CTI perspective, an individual's clothing is regarded as part of the identity enactment, thus, the enacted layer of identity (Hecht, 1993). The clothes we wear (or do not wear) can say a lot about us. Even if we do not intentionally try to send a message with our clothing (or accessories), it will always communicate something. The enacted identity through our attire might be influenced by the other frames of identity. A funny statement on a t-shirt can be an enactment of an individual's personal frame of identity; a wedding ring can enact individual's relational frame; a jersey of a sports team can enact the communal identity. Clothing and accessories can also communicate more than one frame, for instance, a crucifix pendant can be the enactment of an individual's personal frame (as their religious belief) and communal frame of identity (as part of the Catholic community) at the same time.

In the first chapter as well as other sections of this project, I mentioned discriminatory behavior and even multiple attacks towards Sikh individuals in the U.S. Although these people believe in the Sikh religion, some perceive them as Muslims due to their "turban." In other words, the turban functions as their enacted identity, although mostly perceived as a symbol of a different religious affiliation. To sum, what people wear is highly relevant and important to this project especially if we consider some of the clothes and accessories that are somehow associated with people from the Middle East; such as the "turban" of the Sikh men, or the headscarf of practicing Muslim women, and so on.

'People get scared'

Broadly, most interviewees expressed that they do not wear anything different in their home country. Yet, one country stood out because of its more common traditional attire, Saudi Arabia. Even if other countries have types of traditional clothing, they are not as prominent or ubiquitous as the "thawb/thobe" of the Arabian Peninsula (for an example, see Figure 1.) Political leaders of these countries are one way to demonstrate my reasoning: The royal family of Saudi Arabia, for instance, only wears traditional clothing - even during official diplomatic events. We are not able to observe this in any other country in which my interview participants had ethnic and/or cultural roots. Turkey, Lebanon, Iran, Algeria may have their own traditional clothing, yet, they are not comparable to Saudi Arabia. Even though I had multiple Saudi Arabian participants, only one of stood out: Gibran. In our interview, when I asked Gibran whether he wears his traditional clothing in the U.S., he said that even though he misses wearing his "thobe" a lot, he never wears them in public. In other words, he only wears them if there is a Saudi cultural event where other Saudis get together for various events (cultural, national,

Figure 1 - *Men in Thawb/Thobe* (Paulose, 2006). *[Creative Commons 2.0]*.

religious, etc.), but never in a public setting where he will stand out. He also added that he was not the only one in avoiding wearing the traditional clothing, suggesting that “most Arabs do not wear it in public.” While talking about attire, Gibran seemed very adamant about not wearing his thobe in the U.S. — almost as if he had sworn not to ever wear it in public.

I still had to ask him about his extreme reluctance. It was almost as if he had sworn not to ever wear it in public. He responded briefly and clearly: “People get scared,” he said. Obviously, it was not the attire itself, rather, it was what it evoked in the minds of the people. For instance, wearing a camouflage hat may be a hint for us for perceiving the person as someone who likes to hunt, who is more conservative, traditional, and who is probably from the countryside. In Turkey, a person with a “thobe” would mean that the person is a tourist, possibly from Saudi Arabia or the United Arab Emirates.

How does wearing one's traditional clothing scare people, I wondered. Gibran responded with a question asking me if I have heard about the incident that happened in Avon - a suburb of Cleveland. He told me that a tourist wearing the thobe from United Arab Emirates (UAE) was arrested as he was mistaken for a terrorist with ties to ISIS. At the time, I did not know about the incident, however a simple Google search was able to show me reports on the particular incident (see e.g., “For Muslim visitor,” 2016”; “U.S. apologizes,” 2016). After reading these reports, it became even clearer to me why wearing a thobe was a bad idea. Indeed, after the incident, the UAE had warned its citizens to avoid wearing the thobe (“UAE warns against,” 2016). Shams, another interviewee from Saudi Arabia, was also very adamant about not wearing the thobe in the U.S, even though he wears the traditional attire when he is back home. When I asked him whether he wears (or wore in the past) the thobe in the U.S., he first responded with a casual “nope.” However, before even I could ask him why, he added “never ever.” We then talked

about why he does not wear it in the US. “There is no reason to wear it here, and bring all eyes on you,” he explained. So, I asked him a hypothetical question, “what would happen if you decided to wear it one day in [a small college town in Ohio]?” He responded by telling me that people might stare at him, and that he does not “want to put [himself] in that situation.” This is, obviously, understandable and would not surprise anyone. In fact, any traditional attire would get looks, especially if they are highly different from the every-day clothing of the people in one particular region. It does not even have to be from another country, region, or culture. The Amish are a good example for this, as they would still get the same looks when they go to a certain public place. In short, if it stands out, people are likely to look at it. The issue with Shams’ response, however, is the inconsistency between his first reaction of “never ever” and then the explanation of it by arguing that he would not want to be stared at. The “never ever” response may seem trivial, or at least nothing unusual, however, knowing Shams personally, I was surprised to hear such a rigid and adamant response. Because of time limitations, I could not ask him to elaborate; however, I believe that it is not only the fear of standing out and being stared at, rather, it is the fear of getting hateful looks, together with verbal and perhaps even physical abuse and assault. In another section (this project, "Contingencies - with/out Family Member"), I discuss Shams's experience about his wife's hijab and how it is perceived in the U.S. Considering what he had expressed in that section, his lack of willingness to wear the thobe is not surprising at all.

The only female interviewee, Shirin – a naturalized U.S. citizen from Iran, had experienced a different aspect of being a Muslim in the U.S. She had recently started to cover her hair after her Islamic pilgrimage to Mecca before which she did not wear anything that was traditional or religious. She told me that, during those times many people in the U.S. had asked

her why she did not wear a hijab. According to her, it was a very common question she used to get. She mentioned that it made her feel bad as she thought they were right. I am not certain if this had any effect on her, however, she is now wearing a hat that covers her hair; a kind of a substitute for hijab (i.e., the headscarf). It is more likely that the pilgrimage was the main factor behind her change in clothing, even if it's simply a hat that covers her hair. This, however, is not what this project explores. On the other hand, the fact that she is wearing a hat, and not a headscarf or a hijab is interesting for one particular reason. Shams, for instance, had told me that her wife wore a hijab except for winter. When it gets cold, she wears a hat that still covers her hair but does not look like a hijab, thus getting less attention. From these two instances, I assume that people feel more comfortable wearing a hat instead of a hijab (i.e., a headscarf, etc.) in terms of social situations.

Identity Negotiation Strategy: Informing and Lecturing

The most common identity negotiation strategy among the interviewees was found to be an identity negotiation strategy I refer to as "informing - lecturing". With no exception, all respondents expressed engaging in this strategy. Although I use these two terms interchangeably, there is a minor distinction to be made. By "lecturing," I refer to longer explanations that are sometimes given without solicitation. "Informing," on the other hand, is more common and is used mostly after being asked a specific question(s), or to correct a certain misperception.

This particular strategy primarily involves the enacted layer of identity since it mostly deals with the interviewees' verbal and nonverbal communication in public and social settings. The enacted layer of identity serves as the negotiation strategy per se, which functions to reduce the personal-communal identity gaps interviewees experienced. Depending on the person who is interacting with the interviewee in a social setting, this may emerge as a personal-relational

identity gap. Indeed, one of the participants (Talib) used this strategy during my interview with him to lecture me about Saudi Arabia.

Overall, we can argue that the interviewees employed this strategy in an attempt to reduce the incoherence between who they actually were and who they were perceived to be due to misconceptions and people's inaccurate ascriptions about their communal identities. By enacting their identities through informing, explaining, and lecturing, the interviewees were trying to reduce the personal-communal identity gap they were experiencing on a daily basis.

Shams expressed the importance of informing people and suggested that the best way to deal with stereotypes and prejudice was "through meeting with people and engaging with them so they can know who you are." He believed that the media was responsible for most of the prejudice as they "follow money and certain people's/governments' agendas … [and] manipulate the public opinion." Even though we as individuals are not stronger than the media, he argued, the only solution is still "by engaging with people," he repeated. Shams also suggested that sometimes he has "this feeling that some Americans try to explore who [he is] by starting a conversation."

When describing his attempts to educate people on the Muslim, Arabic, and Saudi cultures, Talib used the word "lecture." He told me, "I give lectures … about my culture etc." and that he is "always participating in any event that has anything about Islam or the Arab world." In an attempt to obtain more details, I asked him about the first thing that he mentions or explains when he gives those lectures. "I explain what Middle East, Arab world, and Islamic world is. People don't know the difference," he responded, "I usually focus on the media [and] how the Western media portrays or vilifies Arabs." Before 9/11, which established the main stereotype about Arabs as terrorists, "the media always showed Arabs as villains, uneducated,

stupid, violent, womanizers, and oppressive," he expressed. Even during our interview, Talib informed me about certain characteristics of Saudi Arabia. This happened when we were talking about the issues with his in-laws. He told me that his wife "loved Saudi Arabia when she visited it" and added "if you come with me to Jeddah, you will be surprised." He did this because he knew about my stance towards the oppressive nature of many Islamic countries, but also relying on the trust between us. "It could be dangerous for me though … because of apostasy," I tell him, knowing that Saudi Arabia executes people who denounce Islam. I have never believed in Islam, yet, since I was born to a (culturally) Muslim family, it could be seen as apostasy which would result in my decapitation by executers with a sharp sword. "Yes … I see what you are saying," said Talib, confirming my fears of execution, "you are stubborn … you will not keep it to yourself," Talib he added. He told me that he has Turkish friends in Jeddah, and that "Jeddah is the most liberal city." At this point, he started explaining how certain parts much more conservative and how other parts are liberal. "Let me explain one thing that you know … Al Hijaz, where Jeddah, Mekkah, and Medina are [was] part of the Ottoman Empire [which] is why we are different than the rest of Saudi Arabia," Talib argued. Many cities including the capital Riyadh are "deserts occupied by Bedouins," he continued, "Al Hijaz is civilized … we have a different culture, a rich culture, more civilized, compared to the deserted Riyadh." He concluded lecturing me on Saudi Arabia by telling me that the region of Al Hijaz is more civilized also because "most people in Al Hijaz are mixed, like how I am half Saudi, half Egyptian." Talib's lecture about the differences between various regions and cities of Saudi Arabia was also very helpful as I had no knowledge about this prior to our interview. Indeed, getting to know people like Talib, Shams, and Gibran had already changed a lot of my views about Saudi Arabia. On the other hand, I should note that my views and criticism of Saudi Arabia was always about its

oppressive political regime. Yet, my experiences and interactions with its people certainly helped me soften my views of the monarchy.

Besides “lecturing” in real life, Talib told me that he “always posts on social media” in an attempt to “try to educate Americans who are in my circle.” After asking him for more elaboration, he expressed that he posts “any articles that have some facts about Islam … or correcting something wrong that the Western media is saying.” He then provided me with an example, “recently people were upset that the U.S. administration didn’t vote for Israel’s request for occupying more Palestinian lands,” so he felt that he “had to post videos and articles about the issue.

The youngest interviewee, Husam, a U.S. born Arab-American preferred lecturing people on geography as a part of his identity negotiation strategy as the son of an Algerian father. During our interview, I gave him an example of how I am not categorized or perceived as Asian although I was born in the continent of Asia. “Exactly,” Husam responded, “I just like to tell people what I think when discussing that … I would never consider North Africa to be Middle-Eastern.”

Lecturing or informing was also employed by Gibran. Recently, however, he stressed that he has been avoiding this strategy. He still informed people when they asked a direct question, or when he felt that it was necessary to correct something they had said. Before going further into this, I would like to give some insight on how I got to know Gibran and talk about his personality. In fact, Gibran’s enactment of “informing-lecturing” is how I met him. I was at a local coffee shop when Gibran politely joined my discussion with a friend about Islam or some relevant topic that also involved Gibran’s native country, Saudi Arabia. Since this happened several years ago, I do not recall the exact nature of the conversation except that I was criticizing

oppressive regimes together with their understanding and implementation of Islamic laws. As mentioned, Gibran was very polite and amicable when he attempted to become involved in our discussion. Even though I was harshly criticizing Saudi Arabia's oppressive regime, he did not show one bit of negative sentiment or an aggressive attitude. In the end, we did not agree on anything; however, this did not change the fact that we became acquaintances who conversed whenever we ran across one another. It was obvious that he loved talking to people, and he did so in a very friendly and sincere way — it was almost impossible to dislike him. His outgoing and talkative personality in this sense is important to emphasize as he had mentioned during our interview that he had started to avoid talking to strangers about his culture, religion, or Saudi Arabia. He had started to see it as futile. "If there is a direct question [about Saudi Arabia] I will answer it, otherwise I do not go in detail," he told me. If someone mentioned a misconception about his culture or country, he "will correct that for sure," but this "depends on the person [he is] talking with." This was surprising as Gibran seemed to have changed from how I knew him from several years ago. "Sometimes I have to be cautious," he added, "some are aggressive and [it is] hard to convince them, so I try to avoid it as much as I can," he explained. Apparently, he started to see his attempts as futile, for instance, he claimed that there is "no advantage from explaining different view." He was aware of this change as he told me that this avoidance of talking to others was simply "against [his] personality" since he was actually a social person who "liked to talk with anyone." He gave a similar example to how I met Gibran when explaining how he is now actively avoiding talking to others: "[A person] is sitting beside me, for example in Starbucks, if I felt that the person is not friendly, I just keep quiet until I leave." This shift was not a change in his personality per se, rather it showed that he did not feel safe to enact his personal identity. In the past, like the other interviewees, he was actively trying to reduce his

personal-communal identity gap with the help of his enacted identity layer. Recently, however, he had started to consider it as futile which in turn caused a new identity gap to emerge. We can see this recently emerged personal-enacted identity gap from his own words when he said that he was "acting against his personality,"

Mehmet, a Turkish immigrant, told me that he explained "the lifestyle about Turkey and [his] social life," mentioning things such as "how we dress, how we live, nightlife, etc.," and that "people have European life standards" in Turkey. Furthermore, he asserted that (as a non-practicing Muslim) when he is asked about his religion, he is worried that people will judge him falsely: "Honestly, when I say I am Muslim, I don't want them to have some prejudices." At the same time, it sounded like he was not actively trying to inform people about Islam or about the fact that he is not a practicing Muslim: "if they ask I just tell them the answer … and that's all." He added "no, not really, maybe rarely if we went into a deep conversation about it."

Both in personal and professional life, Zach felt that he had to try harder than people - meaning perceived White U.S. Americans. For instance, at business events or festivals "in rural country" areas, Zach felt that he was being judged more as these type of events "predominantly [involve] white folks." I asked how he feels at these types of events, "like I have to try a little harder than everyone else … like I have to educate and inform." He also felt that he had to be the one who starts the conversation. On a different note, as a small business owner and as someone who has been involved in sales industry, Zach acknowledged that he did not have much difficulty accomplishing these things. "I feel I am a decent communicator [which] helps a lot," Zach claimed after mentioning something quite important: "I think it helps that I don't have a foreign accent, you know." In Zach's case, he feels that his enacted identity is helpful in enhancing his personal and communal identity. When talking to other people that he recently

met, knowing that he does not display a foreign accent makes him feel comfortable as it would contradict the other individual's perception that he is a foreigner, an immigrant, and so on. Ergo, Zach's enacted identity layer (in terms of having no foreign accent) is reducing the identity gap between his personal identity (a U.S. American) and his communal identity perceived by others (not-U.S. American).

Shirin also felt the need to correct people whenever she heard something inaccurate about her native country, Iran, or when people misperceived her identity as Mexican or Arab. She tells people that she's from Iran but "most people don't know about Iran, but they heard Persia. I have to explain I'm Persian," she continued, "some people come with next question, so I have to explain we don't ride camel and we are not living in the desert [either]." Shirin also told me about an incident that occurred when she went to a Baptist church in Washington.

"One of the American people [a woman in her 50s] said why are you here, you are Muslim and we are not welcome you. I said God is god and Church and Mosque are the same place. We are here to worship god no matter which religion."

Kenan felt the need to explain himself as well. During our interview, he told me that in many instances people thought his native language was Arabic and/or categorized him as Middle Eastern. "I had to explain where [Turkey] is, what language I speak, and so on." Hence, he constantly felt "eager to bring [up Turkey's] position geographically." In addition to Turkey's geographical location, he said that he emphasized "the fact that we are a democratic country" and that "the tolerance to the other religions is high."

To summarize, the negotiation strategy of "informing-lecturing" was the most common strategy amongst the participants. In CTI terms, this strategy involves the enacted frame of

identity as people inform, educate, or lecture others mainly using direct communication messages, thus, through performing this act of informing others.

Identity Negotiation Strategy: Being Used to It and Not Caring About It

Towards the end of our interview, Shirin repeated multiple times that people often ask her ethnic and/or cultural background (e.g., “Where are you from?” etc.). However, she claimed that she “[doesn’t] care anymore,” and that she only corrects people if she hears something inaccurate about her culture or her native country — Iran. Although she never directly suggested that she avoids talking about her background, this claim implies that she may have reduced her efforts in terms of talking to people in order to inform them about her culture, religion, or Iran. Put another way, Shirin’s argument of being used to it, and not caring about it anymore might reveal that these types of intercultural encounters affect her differently compared to the time when she first arrived in the United States.

In addition, I claim that the decline in her defensiveness (i.e., “I’m used to it,” or “I don’t care about it anymore) may be rooted in three phenomena. First, the more we encounter a certain experience, the more we will be used to it. Being used to something, however, does not necessarily mean that one is not bothered by it. Shirin claimed that she didn’t care anymore, however, her statement is a comparison to how she used to feel when she first came to the U.S.

Second, I argue that her naturalization (i.e., receiving U.S. citizenship) might have played a role in strengthening her U.S. American identity, which is consistent with her remark about feeling “honored to be Iranian-American.” That gaining citizenship status affects the individual’s view of themselves (and thus their layers of identity as well as their identity negotiations) is supported by research. For example, Urban and Orbe (2010) found that becoming a U.S. citizen

had a profound impact for many immigrants that transcended much of the challenges they faced due to their cultural background.

Third, it seems that she has a high regard for U.S. Americans — at least in certain aspects, which may have affected her defense mechanism to questions or conversations that include her cultural background. For instance, she told me that she suspects Iranian people (and/or people in the Middle Eastern region) to be more racist than Americans. This seemed to be more of an introspective account and might play a role in embracing the U.S. American identity.

Especially the last two points, regarding citizenship and her high regard of U.S. Americans, implies a transformation in her personal and communal identity from a CTI perspective. She now identifies as an Iranian American (personal layer) mostly because of her new citizenship given by the U.S. government (communal layer). As discussed earlier, CTI views layers of identity as intertwined and closely interdependent and that two or more of these layers can overlap or contradict one another, while operating at the same time. In Shirin's case, I claim that her citizenship status affected both her personal layer and communal layer of identity, narrowing the gap between the two that had existed earlier. Put differently, I suggest that her personal-communal identity gap still exists but the inurement she claims as well as the citizenship status she obtained seem to have narrowed down the identity gap.

'Don't care anymore'

Many of my interviewees argued that they do not care anymore what people think of them, and that people's thoughts didn't affect them anymore. Shirin, for instance, told me that she is used to being asked questions such as "where are you from?" and that even if people have misperceptions about Iranians, or Middle Eastern people in general.

In general, the “don’t care anymore” attitude of the participants points out to the closing gap between their personal and communal identity frames. In other words, regardless of what is causing it, the participants feel less comfort from the discrepancy between their personal and communal frames of identity. On the other hand, I can’t claim the same about my own case. Personally, I even have difficulty watching TV shows (even if they are professional documentaries, etc.) that for some reason feature a section from Turkey. In fact, I don’t watch these types of shows anymore; if I must watch for a special reason, it is always dreadful. I believe that I strive to avoid these types of things in order to avoid thinking how it is going to affect the viewers in the U.S. In other words, I realized that after watching documentaries or news segments on Turkey, I end up thinking about how I would explain it to an audience. These types of as whenever they depict Turkey on TV, they mostly focus on the differences between the U.S. and Turkey. In other words, they focus on those things that would confirm people’s stereotypes; except for camels and deserts, of course, as they do not exist. This again portrays my most salient identity gap, the one between my personal and the communal layers of identity.

Identity Negotiation Strategy: Avoiding Talk / Interacting

When I asked Gibran about how he reacts to people who express inaccurate information about Saudi Arabia (or Islam, Arabic culture, etc.), he told me, “I will correct that for sure, but still depends on the person I am talking with.” He then explained how he “sometimes” [feels the need] to be cautious” as “some are aggressive and hard to convince.” Apparently, he had started to shift his identity negotiation strategy from “lecturing/informing” to “avoiding to talk,” depending on the context, most importantly depending on the person with whom he was talking. I am certain that everyone adjusts or changes their identity negotiation strategies based on various contexts, however, Gibran was implying that he has been implementing this shift over

time. For instance, he told me that even when he feels the need to correct others, he did so by making one brief comment: “what you hear in the news is [mostly] not accurate.” This, however, was not what I had experienced when Gibran expressed his views and made certain minor corrections when I first met him. As I mentioned earlier, my acquaintance with him goes back to the year 2012. At the beginning of our interview, he had informed me that he had been in the U.S. since 2009. Thus, it is not surprising that he had experienced changes to his attitudes, to his identity performance and negotiation strategies, and perhaps even to his (meta)perceptions. Gibran is one of the most sociable and talkative people I ever met, including my interviewees. Nonetheless, he felt that he had to change his behavior, in other words, because of his experiences and, thus, metaperceptions, he found himself not talking to people, consciously avoiding engaging with new people, which according to him is not who he is. “Unfortunately, sometimes acting against my personality … personally, I like to talk with anyone,” he said, and gave me an example similar to my own experience with him, “sitting beside me for example in Starbucks … if I felt that person is not friendly, I just keep quiet until I leave.”

Finding III: Contingent Factors

There were three themes I was not able to nest either under metaperceptions nor identity negotiation strategies: (a) location and setting; (b) beliefs about U.S. Americans; and (c) presence (or absence) of a family member. These themes all had a common feature of functioning as contingent factors, affecting both the metaperceptions and identity negotiations of the participants. Their influence, however, depend on various internal factors (e.g., personality, etc.), and on external factors (e.g., being accompanied by of a family member; the context of a social or public setting; the general demographics of the town, city, region, or state where one resides, etc. I believe that the process of how these contingent themes work will be clearer as I

explain them case by case together with the participants' own accounts. Before I move onto "how" these factors function, I would like to provide a better understanding "what" they are as well as their significance in general.

The theme called "beliefs about U.S. Americans," for instance, is highly influential as it constitutes important part of the participants' view of the world, especially if we consider the fact that they all live here, some of them born and raised. In general, what individuals believe about the people of the country they live in is important regardless of the individual's own ethnic, national, or cultural background. Nonetheless, when these individuals are members of a minority, it becomes even more significant. Yet, I must note that this significance is greater for those minorities that are not included in the mainstream U.S. American archetype, such as Asian-Americans or Arab-Americans, in contrast to African Americans who are part of the mainstream even though they are a minority at the same time. I believe that this is worth mentioning as it was also suggested by some of the participants. Mehmet, for instance, had suggested that a "typical American" looks "Anglo-Saxon and African-American." Also, individuals who do not seem to fit this (stereo)type are more likely to be asked the notorious "where are you (actually) from?" question. In other words, people who have (or are perceived to have) ethnic roots in eastern Asia (e.g., China, Japan, Korea), Middle East, and South America are more likely to be perceived as not American. Of course, this does not mean that minorities such as African-Americans do not face intergroup conflicts; in fact, even though they are more likely to be included in the categorization of "typical American," it is safe to say that they still experience more discrimination (both unconscious/subtle and direct) in many aspects of everyday life. Nonetheless, I believe that it is important to make this categorization in order to make a better analysis with a more focused view.

Contingent Factor I: Location and/or Setting

Due to the diverse student population at universities, it is not surprising that minorities feel more comfortable at a university. Zach, for instance, suggested that he does not feel as much judged as he does elsewhere: “It depends on the setting, like universities are much more diverse … you won’t get that [judgmental looks] as much.”

In addition to universities as relatively diverse places, big cities were also mentioned by the participants. Shams, for instance, claimed that “usually, big cities are more friendly with international [people] because they [are] use[d] to have different people from around the world,” and gave examples such as Washington D.C., Boston, and Los Angeles.
Kenan also agreed that “crowded places which is getting more immigrants” across the United States. He didn’t elaborate mode on this claim as he told me that he hasn’t experienced it personally, but rather that he heard it from other individuals.

Contingent Factor II: Beliefs about Americans

One of the themes that emerged from the interviews was participants' general beliefs and opinions about U.S. Americans. It is important to note that these beliefs and opinions are all generalizations. The most common belief expressed by almost all participants was U.S. Americans’ “geographical illiteracy.” Put differently, the participants believed that the U.S. Americans did not know much about (world) geography, which, in turn, mostly impacted their metaperceptions of U.S. Americans as well as their interactions with them. This observation of the interviewees seems to be consistent with the existing research on geographic illiteracy of U.S. Americans (see e.g., Eve, Price, & Counts, 1994; Lewis, 2000; Trivedi, 2002; "Young Americans lack global knowledge,” 2006).

In my own experience, making large chunks of generalizations about other cultures is very common in the U.S. After almost a decade of living in this country, I am not surprised to hear (ignorant) generalizations about the Middle East (which is ironically a generalization itself), that is, viewing a whole range of different countries and cultures as one monolithic group or region. Indeed, what surprises me is when someone actually has some knowledge about the region.

In the recent years, I have noticed that many U.S. Americans make similar generalizations about places or cultures other than the Middle East. As an example, when talking about a future travel plan or when mentioning a past trip, I have witnessed many individuals refer to the continent instead of a particular country. Rather than telling people that they have been to France and Italy, for the sake of the example, they tell people that they have been to “Europe.” Claims like these are technically correct from a geographical point of view as whichever country they visited is on the European continent. However, Europe as a continent is home to more than 47 individual, independent countries (“Member States," 2018) most of which have different customs, histories, and languages.

Related to this generalization, I have noticed the same question asked by audience members at events where I was (as a guest speaker) giving a presentation about Turkey. In at least two instances, an audience member asked whether one needs a passport or a visa to cross from one side to the other — that is, from the European side to the Asian side or vice versa. At another event where I was not the speaker, an audience member asked how military troops were positioned on each side of the Bosporus (i.e., the strait dividing Europe and Asia in Istanbul), assuming that either side were parts of different countries.

The intellectual basis of this type of questions is still a mystery to me. Passports and visas are usually required for traveling between countries, but mostly never when traveling within the same country's borders. In the case of Turkey, the example I provided not only involves the same country but also the same city, Istanbul.

Geographical illiteracy, at least in our case, isn't simply not being familiar with the locations of individual countries across the globe. As I tried to illustrate above, it is a much broader issue involving familiarity with basic terms and their differences such as "country" and "continent." I should also note that geographical illiteracy of U.S. Americans may at first seem irrelevant to this project. On the contrary, though, it is highly relevant; not only because it was mentioned by almost all the interviewees, but also because it played such an important role in shaping their metaperceptions. Finally, it is important to acknowledge that the (perceived) geographical illiteracy of U.S. Americans is a generalization itself, and it is important that I handle this issue without further reinforcing the stereotype.

Taking Husam's situation as our first example should portray the complexity and importance of this issue. Like his mother, Husam was born and raised in the U.S. Husam's father, on the other hand, was an Arab immigrant from the country called Algeria – located in Africa with a 99% Muslim population (CIA Factbook, 2018). In our interview, Husam was quite certain about the role geographical illiteracy played in the issues that minorities experienced in the U.S. "The problem lies in my opinion with geography," he told me, "people, Americans primarily, are very centered to themselves and don't care about other countries or at least about where those countries are. I love geography and understanding where countries and cultures from them lie. So I gain a better understanding as to where someone might come from." Husam's

father is originally from Algeria, and it annoyed him that people did not know Algeria was a North African country. “A lot of people think all Africans are Black, I tell them that’s not true.” In addition to what Husam said about geographical illiteracy, it is imperative not to miss his point about ethnocentrism, particularly his claim that people in general are ethnocentric, U.S. Americans even more so. The term ethnocentrism can be defined as the tendency to see, to evaluate, and to judge other cultural groups (e.g., people from a different country, culture, religion, etc.) using one’s own ingroup’s norms, conventions, and practices. (Levine & Hogg, 2010). The term’s definition also includes the predilection for one’s own ingroup over other groups, mainly followed by ingroup bias (i.e., ingroup favoritism) and/or by outgroup prejudice (Levine & Hogg, 2010). At the individual level, this tendency is called egocentrism, which is then transferred to one’s own ingroup at the group level. In CTI terms, ethnocentrism can be viewed (primarily) at the communal layer.

On the other hand, beliefs about U.S. Americans might involve ethnocentric attitudes themselves. This comes from the nature of ingroup-outgroup classifications. For instance, due to the proximity of countries in continents such as Europe as well as its vast history, people in Europe learn more about other countries and cultures in school and possess the chance to travel to other countries without having to spend large amounts of money. More importantly, visiting another country or getting tourists from other European countries does not even involve any border stops in the case of European Union countries. For instance, a person from Netherlands can drive their own car through neighboring countries such as Belgium or Germany and may also continue their travel to other EU countries without even seeing a border — other than a sign that says, “Welcome to X-country.” This is similar to traveling across the U.S. without needing a visa, yet, unlike the U.S., traveling to another country will (with a few exceptions) involve

people speaking another language (e.g., Germany to France to Italy), and even a different script or alphabet (e.g., from any other E.U. country to Greece).

Some of the responses were about ignorance and lack of education. Kenan, for instance, suggested that most stereotypes existed due to a “lack of education,” and also that “people don’t read, they don’t do research,” and thus “they are not very open to strangers.” Generalizations, particularly about the Middle East were related to a lack of education in geography. “There is an [inaccurate] Middle-Eastern definition … everyone thinks that [the area between] Eastern Europe, North Africa, and Central Asia is Middle East [where] everyone shares the same language and culture. Kenan also stated that “it is an easy way to put people into categories and assign some stereotypes,” which naturally is worsened by (geographical) illiteracy.

When talking about negative experiences he had in the U.S., Shams suggested that “most of those” who made him feel “like [he and his wife] are unwelcomed” were “uneducated and ignorant.” I agree, most people who dislike or hate minorities are ignorant and uneducated. On the other hand, it is important to note that there are also many individuals who are highly educated, and yet are xenophobic, racist, or simply hateful towards minorities. Also, uneducated does not necessarily refer to people who do not have academic degrees, since there are also many people who are quite knowledgeable and informed in many subjects even though they do not have a degree. For instance, Shams told me, right after the comments about ignorant and uneducated people, about an interaction he and his wife had with a veteran at a university in Indiana. They were headed to the library, Shams said, “while walking, a guy greeted us and started a conversation saying where are you from?” After he told him that they are from Saudi Arabia, the man “started saying you people don’t like Americans,” and that he knows this because he had served in Iraq. In my opinion, Shams responded to him in one of the best ways

possible, he said: "If I didn't like Americans, I wouldn't be here." The veteran's claim that Arabs (or Muslims, etc.) do not like Americans is also interesting because it is based on the veteran's "beliefs about Arabs/Muslims." This veteran's beliefs are important in the sense that it provides a form of evidence that supports my participants claim that U.S. Americans make broad generalizations. I argue that making generalizations is part of human experience, which is a generalization itself. Indeed, it might be perceived as ironic to critique people for making generalizations, while the same people are being generalized in this project (e.g., U.S. Americans). Ironic as it may be, it is more importantly a paradox; a phenomenon that we need to not only acknowledge but also embrace more often than we do.

In CTI terms, the response Shams gave to the veteran involves multiple layers of identity due to the particular context. Primarily, the veteran accuses the group, thus the communal layer of identity is involved. Shams in return responds to the veteran, which is manifested through the enacted layer of identity, explaining an important aspect of himself, thus, the personal layer of identity.

Another participant, Shirin, agreed with others and claimed that U.S. Americans were generally not very knowledgeable about the world:

> Most of American people are lazy to know people around the world. Let me give you an example: Most of them even don't know where is Iran? Even though Iran and US have war for more than 30 years … They think Iran is an Arabic country. … They don't know how to pronounce Iran. They call it I Run.

At the same time Shirin also had a high regard for U.S. Americans, though in a different aspect: American people are caring. Sometimes I think they are more Muslim than us. They are helping people no matter their religion. Unfortunately, we are looking to find people same as us to help.

Same country, same language, same religions. Sometimes I think we are more racist than them. I'm honored to be Iranian American.

Before I move onto the next contingent factor, I would like to note that I mostly agree with these beliefs, particularly the geographical illiteracy of many individuals, but also with Shirin's positive comments about the people. Despite all the racism that minorities face every day, if similar things happened in Turkey, there would be more disagreement, more prejudice, and more violence. For example, when people from certain Muslim majority countries were not allowed to enter the country in 2017, many U.S. Americans protested this situation, including some conservatives. If a similar incident happened in Turkey, I would not expect the protests to be anywhere close how they were in the U.S.

Contingent Factor III: With/out a Family Member

The participants' metaperceptions (as well as some of their identity negotiation strategies) depended on individuals who were part of their relational communities, such as family members, relatives, and friends. This particular category emerged from the accounts of the participants exhibiting different feelings and metaperceptions depending on whether they were on their own (alone) at a public setting or together with a member of their family. In addition to the spouses, two participants mentioned their children, and two mentioned their mothers as individuals who affected their metaperceptions. Being accompanied by a family member in a public setting highlights the relational layer of identity in CTI terms. It should, however, be noted that the person does not necessarily need to be a family member — it may be anyone who has a personal relationship with the person.

The participants, most of whom were married individuals, had metaperceptions that varied depending on their spouses' presence. In other words, if a male participant had a spouse

who wears a hijab, the male participant's metaperceptions were more likely to become more negative when he is with his wife in a public setting. On the other hand, if the spouse does not wear any prominent Islamic attire (e.g., hijab) the male participants either reported that their metaperceptions did not change significantly (at least not in a negative direction) or reported that their metaperceptions were much more positive. This decreased negativity in metaperceptions was especially experienced by those whose female partner (and at one instance, their parent) was ethnically of European descent. Yet, regardless of the partner's ethnic background, the most significant and prominent factor that played a role in affecting the metaperceptions of their husband was whether they were wearing a hijab or not.

Shams, for instance, responded to my scenario question (see Appendix A) with a clarification request: "I'm alone, right?" This is very important to emphasize because not only it is a contingency but also because it points out to the fact that he was aware of this contingent factor. Indeed, later in the conversation he said: "I can tell you I feel the difference when I go out alone and with my wife." This again shows how significant the difference is that he felt the need to ask me if he should imagine the scenario question with or without her. "There are some situations [like at a restaurant with his wife] we get these looks from some people who think we came from another planet [and makes them feel] like we're unwelcomed here." When I inquired further about this issue, he told me that it was primarily because of his wife's hijab.

From the CTI perspective, I claim that when Shams is on his own at a public place, his personal layer of identity is incongruent with his communal identity layer, creating a personal-communal identity gap. On the other hand, when his wife is with him in a similar public setting this personal-communal identity gap becomes even more prominent. As Jung and Hecht (2004) suggested, identity layers may "enhance each other" (p. 267); but in this case, the "enhanced"

aspect is the personal-communal identity gap due to the larger inconsistency between the two layers. In other words, Shams's personal identity layer and his relational identity layer (spouse) are not necessarily inconsistent; yet, when he is with his wife in a public setting, his metaperceptions are more negative than when he is on his own. Thus, I claim that in this case the relational identity layer intensifies the personal-communal identity gap that is already in existence — turning it into (personal-)relational-communal identity gap, which is as a result larger than Shams' initial personal-communal identity gap. Moreover, since this is primarily caused by Shams' wife's hijab, it would be reasonable to argue that the main cause of the expanding identity gaps is her enacted layer of identity.

As mentioned earlier, Shams felt more comfortable when he is on his own compared to when he is with his wife. I contend that this is due to the "confirmation" the hijab gives to others. Shams himself does not wear anything that would signify that he is a Muslim, hence even when people perceive him as an Arab/Muslim, they may not be absolutely certain considering the fact that he has also been perceived as a Hispanic, Indian, and so on. However, when he is with his wife, the relational identity (husband-wife) becomes the prominent layer of identity which is highly influenced by the wife's enacted layer of identity (hijab). The hijab, then, "confirms" people's assumptions about Shams' and his wife's religious beliefs. This argument is consistent with literature suggesting that wearing hijab (or any other religious attire) increases the individual's likelihood to experience discrimination as they become easily identifiable regarding their religious affiliation (see e.g., Allen & Nielsen, 2002; King & Ahmad, 2010). On a different note, I claim that this is related to the hate-crimes and discriminatory behavior towards Sikhs. Sikh males wear a turban which is perceived as an Islamic attire, not only confirming but also signifying how highly devoted Muslims they are — even though they are not Muslims but Sikhs.

The only female participant, an Iranian American, Shirin told me during our conversation that many Americans had asked her why she was not wearing a hijab. “The people know Muslim people wear hijab, so it is very common question to ask me where is my hijab.” This, she says, made her feel bad as she thought that they were right. Recently, after visiting Mecca and becoming a pilgrim (one of the rules in Islam), she started to wear a hat that covers her hair. Even though most people respected her decision to cover her hair, she told me that she experienced a traumatic event at a Baptist church in Seattle. “I went to church and one of the American people said why you came here; you are Muslim and we do not welcome you.” She tried to explain to her that they “are here to worship God no matter which religion,” and that “God is god, and Church and Mosque are the same place.” This experience was very hurtful, Shirin told me, using the same word as my other participants who were treated unfairly, and/or were discriminated against (that is, “hurt”).

Another interviewee, Zach, also felt different when he was alone and when he was with his wife and children. Nevertheless, Zach’s situation was the complete opposite of Shams and his wife’s experience. In other words, compared to Shams who was more comfortable on his own in public settings, and less comfortable with his wife (because of her hijab), Zach was more comfortable when his wife and kids were with him: “It is much less intimidating I believe having them with me relieves some of that” uncomfortable feelings that he mentioned at particular events where there was not much diversity in the group. When he mentioned this, I thought he was referring to their companionship that helps him cope with (perceived) negativity. In order to make sure that I understand him correctly, I ask him to elaborate. “I think people in general feel warmer and more open to women and children rather than a single arab lookin dude,” explained Zach, “that’s why I often take them with me to places like that actually.”

In general, these two interviewees are affected by their spouses' presence in public settings in completely opposite ways. Before exploring the situation involving their wives, I think we should review the individual differences (and similarities) between Zach and Shams. First, Shams was born and raised in Saudi Arabia, unlike Zach who was born and raised in the U.S., as a result, Shams has an accent and is not fully fluent in English, whereas Zach's native language is English, spoken with no (foreign) accent. They are in the same generation, in other words, Zach is 34 and Saud is 32, and they are both married individuals. And other than Zach having roots in Lebanon, and Saud being from Saudi Arabia, they both identify as Arabs. And finally, they are both practicing Muslims. (Although not coming from the participants themselves, I also would add the fair skin tone of Zach, compared to Saud, whose skin tone is a bit darker.) If we consider the individual differences, Zach should be the one who is more comfortable when alone, and not Shams. I am making this claim hypothetically, in the end, we can never objectively compare two individuals, their personalities, tired experiences, backgrounds, etc. At the same time, this comparison proves this exact point; if this were a mathematical equation, one would predict that Zach will report more comfort when alone (compared to Shams) and but would fail to predict the outcome.

Going back to Zach and Shams, the main difference between their experiences and perceptions seems like about their wives, and more importantly about a particular piece of clothing/accessory: the hijab. "The hijab really throws some people off," Zach said, describing the hijab "like an elephant in the room." Although his wife does not wear the hijab, he is highly familiar with the stigmas of the hijab since his mother wears one: "[People] become fixated on this piece of cloth man, I have seen it when I am with my mother," he said, after telling me about how "she gets stared at" in public places and emphasized that it's "not just a glance" and that it's

blatant staring. This is similar to Shams and his wife's experience of getting looks that make them feel unwelcome.

Husam also expressed feeling more comfortable when his mother was present with him in public settings. He told me that until recently he was made fun of "for being Arab" which started in primary school and did not stop until college. When I asked him how he used to feel when he was in public settings during those times, he told me that he used to feel such a high level of discomfort "so much so that [he] probably wouldn't go to the place to begin with." Put differently, he used to avoid public settings altogether mainly due to his metaperceptions (i.e., being perceived as an Arab). Her mother's presence, on the other hand, would change this discomfort:

> Unless I was with someone like my mother … she's not an Arab at all and has a very pretty face along with blond hair so people would know I'm her son and would second guess themselves as to whether I'm an Arab or not.

His father's presence, on the other hand, did not have the same effect even though he "looks less like an Arab than [Husam]." In the end, his father was an Algerian Arab whereas his mother has ethnic roots in Germany and Norway. Husam's case is different than the other interviewees as he felt completely different when he was accompanied by his mother, simply because she had blonde hair and did not resemble an Arab person. Because of the age difference between them, he assumed that people would know that he is her son, which would create a type of cognitive dissonance in people's perceptions, bringing an element of doubt, or in Husam's own words "people would second themselves" about their judgment about him and consider the possibility that he is not an Arab. In Husam's case, we once again see a personal-communal identity gap which Husam attempts to close with his mother's enacted identity through the relational identity

layer arising from their mother-son relationship. On his own, Husam experienced a personal-communal identity gap, but when he was accompanied by his mother, the relational layer of identity became much more prominent, filling the gap between his personal and communal layers of identity.

Before concluding this chapter, I introduce two cases from two of my participants; Zach and Talib. These two cases stood out not only in terms of being significant events and on-going experiences but also in examining metaperceptions, identity negotiation strategies, and any other dynamic that plays a role in such intercultural interactions and relationships. I call these two mini-case studies, however, they are more like exploration of stories and vignettes Zach and Talib had told me. After these stories, I conclude this chapter and move onto the next and final chapter of this project.

Two Mini Case Studies: The Neighbor, and the In-Laws

Zach and His Neighbor Jack

As a born and raised U.S. American, you are finally ready for the next step in fulfilling the American dream: You are buying a house for you and your family to settle down. After some house-hunting, you find a house that you love. You know that the neighborhood is nice and safe, but you want to "get a feel" of your neighbors. In the end, it's a big decision; these people might be there for a long time, and you obviously do not want to have one of those crazy neighbors who might cause trouble, not giving you a peace of mind. Zach was doing just that. He was buying a house in a relatively rural area of Ohio to live with his wife and two children:

> When I was first thinking about purchasing the home, I knocked on his door randomly to get a feel for the neighbors. I greeted him and told him I was thinking

> about buying the house next door to him and wanted to get to know the neighborhood. His first question was the infamous 'where are you from?'

Questions like this are quite common for people who are not perceived as "typical U.S. Americans" (see the section on "the other/non-American metaperception for further discussion). The question of "where are you from?" is categorized as a microaggression (microinvalidation to be specific) causing a negation of their U.S. American identity by implying "that they are perpetual foreigners" (Sue et al., 2007). This microaggression particularly affects those who were born and raised in the U.S., like Zach, who had recounted earlier in the interview how much it hurt him not being seen as "not really from here" even though he believes that U.S. is his "country as much it is anyone else." This reminds me of a study by Drummond and Orbe (2009) in which one of their interviewees was quoted saying: "I hate it when people ask me 'where are you from?' … like I'm certainly not from here" (p. 84). It was bothering her more though both she and her parent were born and raised in the U.S. (Drummond & Orbe, 2009).

In most situations (especially during initial interactions) it is not appropriate to ask a (perceived) minority member questions such as "where are you from. Although I was not born or raised in the U.S., I personally do not like being asked that very question. I should, however, note that I have noticed many people mention my accent to justify their curiosity. Although I'd prefer not to be asked about it in general, I find it less irritating when such questions are based on my accent and not the way I look. This is mainly because people from around the world (including from other English-speaking countries) are likely to speak with a non-American accent which can be detected by native English-speaking U.S. Americans. For example, a French national might look like a typical (white or black) U.S. American; however, their foreign accent is very likely to be noticed by most native-English speakers. This is one of the important reasons

why one shouldn’t make assumptions about a person based on their physical attributes. A person's accent, on the other hand, can be a stronger indicator – as I tried to demonstrate in the French national example above. Finally, as mentioned earlier, Zach is a U.S. American with no foreign accent. This, however, did not change the fact that people like Jack ask him the notorious “where are you from?”

I responded that I’m from here. I was born here and have been here my whole life, but knowing that wasn’t satisfying enough for him, I had to include that my parents immigrated here from Lebanon.

If Zach were a “typical American” he’d probably tell him his hometown or state; though, Jack would not probably ask him that question in the first minute of their interaction. Nonetheless, as Zach said, telling Jack that he is a U.S. born and raised America would not satisfy his question. But how does Zach know that? As I discussed earlier, he does not have an accent and Zach does not wear any traditional or religion attire which means that people like Zach do not even need to speak or even wear anything to be perceived as non-Americans, as the “other.”

Even if we assumed that Jack's "where are you from?" question was simply a harmless curiosity, asking one about their religious beliefs is highly inappropriate as it’s not only irrelevant but also none of anyone’s business. Moreover, having ethnic roots in Lebanon does not mean that one is a Muslim. It would make it very likely that the person is ethnically an Arab, however, not necessarily Muslim. This is especially true for Lebanon as it is one of the most religiously diverse Arab nations. Indeed, Lebanon has one of the highest numbers in terms of non-Muslim populations. For instance, according to CIA’s World Factbook, more than 40% of Lebanese Arabs are Christians (2017). Though I should note that regardless of Lebanon’s or any

other country's religious diversity, no national or ethnic identity makes an individual a member of a certain religion. Nonetheless, whatever the facts are, Zach's faith certainly was not any of Jack's business. As he complained in our interview: "I just met this man! Less than 2 minutes into the conversation!" pointing out to the inappropriate nature and place of the question. After offering my sympathies, I kindly asked him to continue. This is when he gave me a description of his neighbor: "70 year old white guy with an NRA2 hat on." Please note that I had only asked him to continue and did not ask for a specific question or description. Nonetheless, this description focuses on the information Zach perceived as relevant to the situation; his approximate age, his (perceived) race, and a hat.

So why did Zach tell me these while not mentioning other descriptions? In other words, why are his neighbors' race, age, and hat are important while for instance his height, weight, or other clothing he wore were not mentioned? I argue that his race and his age are not necessarily relevant separately but when together, they complete a stereotype I will refer to as "old white people." This stereotype claims elderly people to be more likely to be racially prejudiced – or at least socio-politically conservative. Though still a broad generalization, this stereotype's premise is supported by research that mainly offers two interconnected reasons. Mainly, it is argued that since older individuals grew up in a highly different social era, it is hard for them to adopt to the norms of the society, which is in turn reinforced by a neurological process in their brains that causes their mental structures to be more rigid (see e.g., Dodgson, 2018; von Hippel et al., 2000; for a summary see, von Hippel 2018).

This makes me contemplate stereotypes and first impressions related to identity performance and negotiation, mainly because of the similar acts of making assumptions about

[2] National Rifle Association – a conservative right-wing political association

the people we encounter in social settings. Although they differ depending on the context and the individual, just as Jack (the neighbor) makes assumptions (perhaps even judgments), many people could or would make assumptions about Jack's political beliefs and values based on his hat and the message it conveys, support for NRA; the National Rifle Association – known for its conservative political influence in general, especially in issues related to individual gun ownership (i.e., 2nd Amendment of the U.S. Constitution).

Zach's mentioning of Jack's age and race are also important, especially when considering the stereotypes about NRA members, since they increase the feeling of certainty about the individual. In contrast, if Jack was a non-white person with an NRA hat on, it is still very likely that he would be perceived as politically conservative, yet, people would feel less certain about their assumptions or could believe that he is not as conservative as most NRA members. Personally, I believe that a significant number of those who display political symbols on an accessory, clothing, or other things (e.g., hats, t-shirts, car decals, laptop stickers, etc.), do so, simply to be perceived that way. After receiving the inappropriate, irrelevant, and offensive (and other similar adjectives) question of "that makes you a Muslim, right?" in the first few minutes of their initial interaction, Zach responded by saying that he is a Muslim, but that he is "not like the ones you see on the news all the time." This is clearly an identity negotiation strategy, in fact, it's perhaps the most common one, which I categorize as "Informing / Lecturing" in this paper. In this instance, because of the offensive nature of the interaction (on Jack's side), Zach feels the need to defend himself, as he told me using the exact same words: "feeling I had to defend myself." Here, there are two details that's worth more contemplation, that is, two words in particular, "defend" and "myself." When does one defend themselves? Obviously, when they feel attacked. Yet, if we only focus on the words Jack used, there is nothing that is offensive per

se. In other words, “that makes you a Muslim, right?” is not value-laden, until we look at the general and specific context. For instance, if Jack had said “so you are a terrorist, huh?” it would require no further investigation as the question/statement is bluntly offensive. Why, then, does Zach feel obligated to defend himself, since being a Muslim is not inherently negative or positive phenomenon? This is because of the context; in U.S., being a Muslim is a negative phenomenon, a stigmatized identity — mainly due to the stereotypes associated with Muslims. This is highly destructive as being a Muslim is not only an individual’s right, but perhaps more importantly, it is mostly one of the most important dynamics (if not the most important) in shaping an individual’s values, beliefs, and the meaning they strive to create in their lives. Furthermore, being a Muslim (or any other religious belief) is not simply a metaphysical belief, but rather it is part of the overarching cultural system of codes. Going back to Zach’s situation, it can be argued that the question of “that makes you a Muslim, right?” is not only offensive because of the assumptions and prejudice, but also because of its accusatory nature. I am suggesting this because Zach expressed that he felt the need to defend himself, as if he has done something wrong or as if he is a bad person in general. “Yes, [I am a Muslim], but I am not like the ones you see on news all the time” he had responded, referring to the terrorists that were mainly affiliated with the ISIS (also called ISIL, or DAESH), who were known for their extremely brutal executions of Muslims and non-Muslims at the time. According to Zach, this conversation took place in 2014, and particularly right after something they had done that caused a lot of news coverage: “I think something had just happened around that time you know,” Zach recalled, “you know, ISIS or some other crap.”

In the U.S., a negative view of Muslims goes back to many decades ago, but of course had reached its maximum after 9/11 terrorist attacks. In other words, Zach is not suggesting that

ISIS was at the root of the awkward interaction, but that it had rekindled the fear and hatred towards Muslims, which played an important role in Jack's aggressive and offensive attitude.

One might argue that we can never know Jack's intentions when asking all those questions, and that Zach might have been over-sensitive, or that he might have simply misperceived Jack's attitude. Yet, regardless of an individual's intentions when communicating, it is always the consequence that matters. Intentions are important too, but they do not change the negative emotions or experience the other person goes through as a result of (mis)communication. For instance, going back to the notorious "where are you from?" question, the person who asks does not (in most cases) have the intention to evoke negative feelings from the other individual. To explain the importance of consequences over intentions to my students, I use the example of a driver hitting a pedestrian; the driver (in most cases) does not have the intention to hit a pedestrian, yet this does not change that an individual is hurt as a consequence.

The story Zach told me is like one of those fictional ones; one the one side there is the young, energetic person with some form of oddity, and on the other side, there is the grumpy old person who is misanthropic, reclusive, and opposed to any kind of change. Over time, the two individuals interact more and more, which results in a friendship that has breaks all the negativity of the old grumpy one, while also showing the viewer that there is a particular reason why he or she was that way, before meeting the new person: the famous transformation story.

Zach does not let himself be intimidated by the "grumpy old neighbor" and buys the house anyway: "That conversation was a little awkward as you can imagine," he said, "but I really liked the house. [laughs]." After moving into their new home, they do not hear from Jack "for a couple of months or so." As he is telling me that, I ask about other neighbors to which he responds by telling me that the "other neighbor was a white widowed woman in her 50s, [who]

was very kind from the start." He does not have any stories to tell about their interactions with her, so he continues to tell me about the second part of the story with Jack. "So, I decided to go over there with my kids," Zach explains, "to invite him over for lunch that weekend." He brought "some Lebanese sweets," possibly as a part of the Lebanese customs and as a sign of good will. "[Jack] ended up coming with his wife and from that day on we were actually great friends!"

Clearly, this is a great story to be inspired by, and shows why and how communication plays such a vital role in human experience and relationships. I urge the reader to note that Zach believes they are not only neighbors who have a good relationship, but that they are "great friends." To support his statement, he tells me that Jack "helped him out a lot."

I wonder if the new neighbors actually changed Jack's attitudes and views about Muslims and Arabs, and perhaps even minorities in general. From what I heard from Zach it would be reasonable to expect some change in Jack's attitudes and views, but I want to hear Zach's opinion: "I think the experience of actually meeting a Muslim changed him," he notes "I am sure he has never been in a Muslim's house or sat to eat with a Muslim family."

While the not-so-pleasant initial interaction turned into a good friendship between two neighbors, there are certain individual factors that are worth mentioning that might have influenced the progress of this friendship. First, there is Zach's outgoing personality combined with his exquisite interpersonal communication skills; he had acknowledged during our interview: "I believe I am a decent communicator" he had told me and added that "it helps a lot." Though I only met Zach a few times for only brief periods, I am confident that he's response is a modest downplaying of his actual communication skills. There was another aspect that Zach believed to be relevant: "I think it helps that I don't have a foreign accent," he had suggested

right before acknowledging his communication skills. Second, I think it's also important to note that neither Zach nor his wife look like stereotypical Muslims. Put differently, other than a couple physical features such as dark hair and (perhaps) a darker skin tone, they both look, dress, and act like many other U.S. Americans. Indeed, Zach told me that if he or his wife wore anything that would stand out (e.g., religious attire, etc.), people's perceptions (though mainly referring to Jack) would be harder to change. Later in the interview, he told me that having his wife and kids with him at public settings made him feel more comfortable. "It is much less intimidating [because] … people in general feel warmer and more open to women and children rather than a single Arab looking dude."

Without giving any identifying information, I mention Shams's (mainly negative) experiences and metaperceptions and how he feels more comfortable in public settings when he is alone. When I mention that his wife wears a hijab, Zach does not sound surprised. "I can see that," he says, "I have seen [that] when I am with my mother who wears a hijab." Then he contends that "the hijab really throws some people off" and that "it's like an elephant in the room." Previous research confirms this claim; religious attire such as the hijab make people more vulnerable to implicit and explicit bias (Everett et al., 2015) as well as to discrimination in general (Allen & Nielsen, 2002). The course of our interview with Zach seemed to make him contemplate more and thus remember some of his other related experiences, more specifically about those that he had with his mother in public settings. "[People] become fixated on this piece of cloth," he complains – referring to the hijab. I wonder if he has experienced anything that he'd be willing to share. "Well, I feel that she gets stared at" he says, before emphasizing the intensity of the looks she gets: "like not just a glance [but] stare."

It should be noted that he was emphasizing the nature of the looks his mother gets without being asked, which I interpret as a sign of certainty and as an attempt to ensure that I note how intense these looks are. On a different note, I claim that Zach's experiences and how they differ when he is with his wife (who does not wear a hijab) compared to when he is with his mother (who wears a hijab) are important aspects to contemplate upon. The differences in his accounts are consistent with past research (see e.g., Everett et al, 2015; King & Ahmad, 2010), that is, women wearing a hijab (or other similar religious attire) are easily identified as Muslims, potentially setting off people's existing prejudices and stereotypes (Allen & Nielsen; 2002; Unkelbach, Schneider, Gode, Senft, 2010). From a CTI perspective, this difference points out to the significance of the enacted layer of identity, and how "a piece of cloth" (in Zach's own words) can play such an important role in people's everyday identity performances and negotiations.

Zach's story with his neighbor and how they became friends undoubtedly inspires hope and optimism. Indeed, the idea that intergroup contact and interaction could reduce prejudice against minority members is not new. Gordon Allport, in his classic work, The Nature of Prejudice (1954) asserted that contact between groups can reduce intergroup prejudice, though, for it to be effective there were certain conditions that needed to be met. He stated that it would be reasonable to argue "that contact, as a situational variable, cannot always overcome" (Allport, 1954. p. 280) the numerous individual factors in reducing prejudice. For decades, researchers reported mixed results for Allport's contact hypothesis. However, Pettigrew and Tropp's (2006) meta-analysis (including over five-hundred studies and over seven-hundred independent samples) found general support for the contact hypothesis; suggesting that while intergroup

contact can often reduce prejudice, it does not provide a guaranteed positive outcome – as we shall see in Talib's case.

Talib and His Parents-In-Law

Next, I explore Talib's particular situation as an immigrant married to a U.S. American woman with Anglo-Saxon ethnic background. Talib's situation is significant to investigate as he is married to a U.S. American whose parents fully accept and embrace Talib as a person yet are fully prejudiced towards immigrants and minorities in general. Before I go into any further details on Talib and his in-laws, I would like to take a look at the differences and similarities (mostly demographic) between Zach and Talib. This comparison is to serve as a general framework for Talib's and Zach's stories in order to demonstrate the complexity of these (and many other similar) situations.

To start, both Zach and Talib are males in their mid-30s who are married and have children. Zach was born and raised in the U.S. whereas Talib was born in S. Arabia and came here as an international student. Both individuals are of Arab descent, yet Zach's parents are originally from Lebanon unlike Talib's parents who are S. Arabian nationals with Saudi and Egyptian Arab backgrounds. Both Zach and Talib speak English fluently, though Zach does not have a foreign accent and is more competent in fluency as a born and raised U.S. American. Both are married with children; Zach's wife is a Muslim Arab who was born and raised in Lebanon whereas Talib's wife is a U.S. American with a WASP background.

As for metaperceptions, Talib's were much more negative compared to Zach. As discussed in this project's section entitled "Findings: Metaperceptions," Talib had responded to my question about his metaperceptions with several straight-forward one-word answers in the

following order: (1) terrorist, (2) oppressive, (3) angry, (4) immigrant, (5) barbaric, (6) uneducated, and (7) uncivilized.

The reason I am presenting these responses again is related to something Talib told me right after these metaperceptions. He had said, “unfortunately, my in-laws still think of my people this way,” and that his “in-laws know [him] for nine years [and yet] they still think this way [about] Saudis and they say that [Talib is] an exception.”

I told Talib that I was sorry, which was truly how I felt at that moment. What Talib had been telling me was not one of those stories people from other cultures told about their awkward intercultural communication experiences. Hearing about Talib’s situation was quite disheartening and disappointing for me. It was another reminder of how close-minded people can be, and perhaps more importantly it showed that being friends with or having someone close from another race, culture, religion, etc. did not necessarily mean that the person was an open-minded or unprejudiced individual. Similar to how people who are accused with racism are known to say that they can’t be racists because they have Black friends or even family members.

Becoming more curious about Talib’s in-laws, I asked him if he could tell me more about them. “They’re from California, but they are religious, Republican, and have high school education,” Talib summarized and added, “they voted for Trump while they know he is talking sh*t about Islam and banning my people.”

He was clearly frustrated with his in-laws’ acceptance of him and his family while remaining highly prejudiced towards Muslims in general. The issue was not about him or his personal traits but his “community.” In terms of CTI, I interpret this as a relational-communal identity gap since Talib’s relation with his in-laws conflicted with his communal identity. On a different note, I believe that this identity gap had existed ever since the in-laws finally accepted

Talib into their family. Recently, however it seemed as if the tension causing this identity gap was getting worse. The underlying reason became clearer when Talib brought his son into the picture: “They know that [Trump’s] rhetoric might negatively impact their grandson but they still voted for him.”

The relational-communal identity gap was widening after the birth of Talib’s son Since the grandson’s birth, Talib was not just some stranger who had married their daughter; he was the father to their “own flesh and blood” – their grandson. Hence, I argue that the birth of Talib's son added more value to the family while increasing the tension that's causing the relational-communal identity gap.

We know that the in-laws had accepted Talib, though only as an individual almost as if he was not a Muslim or an Arab. In other words, they had accepted him through his personal frame of identity which helped them also establish a relational frame of identity for both parties. According to Talib, his in-laws were not accepting him at first: "I mean they were fighting me, if my wife wasn't fighting for me, they were not gonna accept me." Initially, then, the in-laws only accepted Talib due to their daughter's persistence. To preserve their relationship with their daughter, they had to give a chance to Talib. The reason they did not want him in the first place was because of religious, ethnic, and national aspects of Talib's identity. In CTI, these correspond to the communal frame of identity, meaning that the in-laws were not accepting Talib due to his communal level of identity. Perhaps after getting to know Talib, they realized that he was a great individual and would in-fact make a great husband / partner for their daughter -were he not a Saudi Arabian and Muslim. Seeing him as an exception was perhaps the only way to accept him which then would mean stripping him off his communal frames of identity.

Even though they were highly reluctant at first, they must have realized that they had to give Talib a chance in order to keep a healthy relationship with their daughter. Using CTI as a lens to look at this situation, I suggest that the in-laws were initially against Talib because they were only familiar with his communal frames of identity, particularly the religious, national, and cultural aspects. Their relational frame of identity (i.e. their parent-daughter relationship) must have played a role in getting to know Talib personally which would then give him a chance to emphasize his personal frame of identity which in turn cleared a path to form a healthy relationship with Talib (thus, the relational frame at play).

As I was about to ask another question, Talib told me that “it seems like a counseling session” for him, probably realizing that he is not only informing me about the situation, but also venting his frustration. Happy to hear that I was able to create the rapport and that Talib felt comfortable to “vent,” I tell him that he can always reach out to me if he ever felt the need to talk (outside of the interview-off record).

Next, I asked him if his in-laws ever met any of his family members. “Yes. They love my family... but they still think that we are an exception." While I make notes of questions that could be valuable to the interview, Talib continues to talk about his family and the in-laws. “My family is more civilized, open-minded and educated than them,” Talib claims, “my mom is Egyptian and she is very open-minded.”

Though it may seem irrelevant, there is a reason why Talib mentioned his mother’s “open-mindedness” together with her Egyptian background. Compared to Saudi Arabia, which is one of the most conservative regimes in the world, Egypt is quite different in terms of its history, culture, and demographics. In general Egypt is has a more diverse population and is much more liberal than S. Arabia. According to the International Religious Freedom Report [IRFR] on Saudi

Arabia, the kingdom does not accept non-Muslims as citizens (IRFR, 2008b) and thus has no official non-Muslim population. Egypt, on the other hand, has a significant number of Christians who constitute about 10% of its whole population (World Factbook, 2015). Moreover, Saudi Arabia does not allow public worship of religions other than Islam and even implements the death penalty for committing apostasy (IRFR, 2008b). In contrast, Egypt has no such laws, providing its citizens with a much more tolerant and liberal country to live in (IRFR, 2008a).

Next, Talib talks about his father who is very "open-minded as well" and who holds a doctoral degree from a university in California. I believe that Talib's mention of his father's academic degree serves as an attempt to support his claim about his open-mindedness. Yet, perhaps more importantly, it serves as a juxtaposition to show the difference between his in-laws' (high school) and his father's (Ph.D.) education levels.

Talib then describes his parents as people who are "no conservative Saudis" and as "moderate muslims" and suggests that they "are considered liberal in Saudi Arabia." His claims do not surprise me at all; if they were not, they would have never allowed him to marry a non-Muslim woman. Later, Talib uses an example about my native country: "You are from Turkey … I am sure you saw people who are moderate Muslims and others who are conservative."

During the analysis of this interview, I reflected upon why Talib felt the need to repeatedly emphasize the difference between moderate and conservative Muslims, and whether I had failed to create an impression of someone who is already aware of such differences. Indeed, I was not just aware of them but would employ similar examples to Talib's to make sure to get my point across to a person or an audience. To clarify, in several social as well as academic settings, I have used similar examples about the varying degrees of devoutness among the believers of a certain religion. The very example Talib employed applies to any country or religion in the

world, whether it is Christianity in the U.S., or Judaism in Israel, Hinduism in India, and so on. Divisions and differences among the members of the same family is also quite common — regardless of the religion that is being practiced (or acknowledged). Therefore, providing examples that can lead individuals to reflect upon their own (in)groups as well as the generalizations they have about outgroups can be utilized as an effective method. Also, just like Talib did, providing the example in a (mostly rhetorical) question format can make it more effective. For example, a question as simple as whether all Christians (or any other religious group) are the same or whether they follow Jesus's (or any other religious figure's) teachings in the same strictness or devoutness. In other words, no matter which religion, country, or culture it is, there is always a spectrum of people with varying levels of devoutness (or any other relevant adjective) as Talib posited later: "It is a spectrum. People are different. People shouldn't generalize. Religion is personal."

At this point in the interview, I try to ask Talib how his in-laws communicated their views to him. He believed that his in-laws regarded him and his family as exceptions and I wanted to learn how they communicated this to him. I wanted to find about this as it is not only related to communication but also to metaperceptions. Talib's claim that his in-laws see him as an exception is his metaperception of them. exception is his metaperception of them.

It is, however, a complicated question to ask, as it is multi-fold. "How do they express their beliefs when they are talking with you?" I ask him, to which he responds with "what do you mean?" So, I paraphrase it: "How do you know that they think you are an exception?" Talib does not answer my question and goes back to talking about his disappointment with his in-laws.

I have been helping learn about Saudi Arabia and Islam for the past 9 years, I thought we [were] progressing. However, two months ago … they expressed that they are uncomfortable with their daughter and their grandson going back with me back to Saudi Arabia.

I am assuming that it is “normal” for parents to not want their child to be far away from them. Especially when they are going to be in a region that is always associated with terror, violence, and danger. Talib, however, was deeply disappointed and upset as their reaction felt very personal: “I was upset. I told them that they are making me feel like I am not part of the family and I am here to take their daughter away,” he grumbled. Apparently, the in-laws had truly made him feel like he was family; however, now having faced this reaction from them, he was feeling not only disappointed but perhaps also a bit betrayed: “I was upset. I told them that they are making me feel like I am not part of the family and I am here to take their daughter away… They don’t care about me and where I go. They feel like I am a threat to their family.”

At the time of the interview, I was not aware of his plans to move to Saudi Arabia for a few years, and because we were talking about how politically conservative and biased his in-laws were, I automatically interpreted this as part of these issues. However, during the analysis, it became clear to me that this may have also been a general reaction to their idea of moving overseas. In other words, even if Talib was not from Saudi Arabia, but from Germany for the sake of the example, I am certain that they would still be upset. Yet, the fact that they were moving to Saudi Arabia must have made them even more upset, mainly due to their views of the Middle East. On the other hand, the concern of this project includes Talib’s perceptions, and since he mentioned how he has been trying to teach them about Saudi Arabia and Islam, but that they were not progressing at all, we can conclude that Talib believes the main reason for their

reaction is rooted in their close-mindedness and their resistance to change their views and get rid of their biases.

Why do they think Saudi Arabia is not safe?" I ask Talib. Even though it is the most conservative and oppressive country in the region, it is one of the safest countries in terms of terrorist attacks or violence in general. Talib responds by telling me that "they don't know anything but what Fox News says." Perhaps he is simplifying this because of his frustration with them, however, considering fox News's "unfair and imbalanced" portrayal of minorities, and also how Middle East is portrayed in the media in general (i.e., war-torn, unsafe, violent, chaotic etc.), it shouldn't be surprising that their reaction is highly influenced by their views of the region.

"They have never been outside of the U.S." Talib adds, to which I respond sarcastically "anywhere else is dangerous; U.S. is the only free and safe country in the world." In my experience, many U.S. Americans think that other parts of the world (sometimes including industrialized Western democracies) to be vastly different from the U.S., living in lower standards and having limited individual freedom. I mostly noticed this after teaching college level classes that I taught, in ad classes I taught only in my conversations with U.S. Americans in social settings, but particularly in the classes I taught. For example, whenever I provided my students with certain data from the United Nations Development Programme's annual report (UNDP, 2016). Learning that the U.S. is ranked 20th in the (inequality-adjusted version) Human Development Index [IHDI], and 43rd in Gender Inequality Index [GII] most of them either looked surprised, shocked, or confused. By sharing such statistics, I hope to cultivate a less ethnocentric view of the world as well as a more critical perspective in general. I believe I do this because it is my duty as a college instructor, while also acknowledging that it possibly involves a

reaction to my experiences in the U.S.; particularly to all the misperceptions, generalizations, and other representations of general geographic (thus also socio-demographic) illiteracy I experience on a daily basis.

In the first few years I spent in the U.S., I used to complain (and I still do) how Turkey is perceived as a typical Middle Eastern country — vast deserts full of sand where people ride camels and live in the conditions of 13th century. Thinking that this misperception of Turkey was mainly rooted in the stereotypes associated with the Middle East, I used to believe that if I were, for example, from the neighboring country Greece — mostly perceived as a European or Mediterranean country — people wouldn't be as biased. Nevertheless, after hearing many international students or immigrants from various countries complain about the misperceptions and odd questions they receive in the U.S. have worsened. If these people were only from countries in the Middle East, Africa, or Eastern Asia (including India) it would not surprise me at all. Yet, some of them were from industrialized Western countries, some of which had even higher living standards than the U.S. The best example I recall was the experience of a Canadian exchange student who told me about some of the ignorant questions she was asked, such as whether they live in igloos in Canada.

It was striking for me to see how frustrated she was, in the end, she was from one of the best countries in the world to live in, one of the best in terms of living standards. Canada may not be a political or military superpower, yet, it is still higher on many rankings in terms of human development (see e.g., the UNPD statistics above). Nonetheless, apparently there are individuals who do not even know anything about Canada and have such odd beliefs about it. This example about Canada is important as it had a significant impact on my metaperceptions. If people think about Canada in such a way, it is highly likely that they think of Turkey as worse than I thought.

On the other hand, even if there are such ignorant beliefs about Canada, at least there are no negative stereotypes associated with the country. In fact, one of the most known stereotypes is "politeness" of Canadians (see e.g., "Can Canada teach us," 2015; "That polite Canadian," 2017).

If we go back to Talib's case, a similar phenomenon can be found. In the beginning of our interview with Talib, I had asked him his metaperceptions to which he responded with a list (viz. terrorist, oppressive, angry, ignorant, uncivilized, etc.). Right after telling me his list of metaperceptions, he added "unfortunately, my in laws still think of my people this way. [They] know me for nine years but they still think this way … and say that I am an exception." Following this comment, he expressed something very interesting: "If my in laws think this way, then I believe strangers are about the same or even worse."

These "if-then" statements are important since they show that we do not simply arrive at our metaperceptions (or perceptions in general) by making sense of our direct interactions with other individuals. Instead, our metaperceptions are constructed based on various elements, on various levels. Perhaps more importantly, they show how we constantly co-construct our metaperceptions based on various inputs we receive from a range of communicators. Nonetheless, it is important to note that this process, just like most meaning-making processes, works in a cumulative way. This is, once again, why communication is more than merely sender-receiver relationship. When we communicate, we interpret the messages (mostly) based on the context (i.e., the other party, the setting, etc.), however, this does not change the fact that we do this by looking through our own lens — our individual perception; constructed and shaped by our own background, and continues to be constantly reshaped by our experiences, while also shaping the messages sent and received.

To conclude, it is intriguing that Talib's in-laws do not seem to have changed their bigoted, prejudiced views of Arabs and Muslims despite having one as their son-in-law. Albeit, Talib may become their former (i.e., ex) son-in-law one day since their relation to one another is just "in-law," thus, highly vulnerable to any change in the marital status and relationship between Talib and his wife. On the other hand, regardless of what the future might bring to their relationship, the in-laws will always be related to Talib through their grandson, an ethnically half-Arab boy who might as well become a Muslim.

In this chapter, I reviewed the essential findings of this study; first I talked about the first cluster of my findings under which participants' salient metaperceptions and other related findings such as effects of race and racial identity were discussed. Following, I studied their identity negotiation strategies before introducing the last cluster of findings which I called "contingent factors" that overlapped with both metaperceptions and identity negotiations but were also independently significant enough to be considered apart from them. Finally, in order to give voice to my participants' stories, I examined two specific relationships that are still on-going and witness somewhat conflicting but also consistent intergroup/intercultural interactions and relationships. Next, I move on to the fifth and last chapter of this project, in which I discuss my study in general, especially regarding its significance, contributions and complications, both methodical and theoretical. Like the other chapters, this final chapter will also include a reflexive autoethnographic content I integrated into the chapter as a way of discussing my own metaperceptions and particularly my negotiation strategies, and how these compared to my participants' results.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

In the final chapter, I explain my rationale behind why my interviews almost only focused on the participants' experiences in public settings. Then, I discuss the metaperceptions aspect of the project, starting with how they differed from my own metaperceptions and then move on to discussing the significant findings related to metaperceptions. Following, I examine my own identity negotiation strategies that were in overlap with the interviewees' but places where there were significant differences. Finally, I talk about some of the limitations of this project and suggest future studies that can enhance our understanding of minorities' metaperceptions and identity negotiations.

Discussion

When I first started this project, I suspected that my interviewees would share similar metaperceptions. Regarding identity negotiation strategies, however, I was unsure what to expect. While I was generally accurate about our metaperceptions, the identity negotiation aspect was surprising and confusing at the same time. In other words, my metaperceptions were coherent with most of the participants' while displaying a significant difference between their identity negotiation strategies and mine. This should not mean that my identity negotiations employed completely different strategies; rather, that they included the participants' strategies and went further beyond them. For instance, while I also have been engaged in strategies such as "lecturing/informing" and "not talking about it" as the participants, my identity negotiations also included strategies such as displaying piercings, tattoos on my body and stickers and decals on my belongings. This does not mean that I claim to have been more affected by my metaperceptions or that my identity negotiations employed much more significant and

substantial strategies. Nonetheless, it is very curious that such strategies (piercings, tattoos, stickers, etc.) were never mentioned nor implied by any of my participants.

Since the subjects (including myself) were (meta)perceived to be from another culture, nation, religion, race, ethnicity, etc., the identity gaps were expected to mostly involve the personal and the communal layers of identities. This was also due to the focus of this study on our metaperceptions about people we do not know or are not in our social circles, and that we came across during simple encounters such as walking on a busy street, or entering a coffee shop, or running errands such as grocery shopping. The focus on public space is indeed one of the strengths of this study as most research in similar topics generally involves our families, friends, and colleagues. In addition, public places can involve the same people who we do not know personally or whom we have never interacted with but share the same social or occupational environment.

Importance of the Findings

The focus of this study was to explore the metaperceptions of so-called Middle Eastern people and how these metaperceptions were in harmony with their own self-perceptions. If no such harmony occurred, it would mean that there is an identity gap (Jung & Hecht, 2004) due to the discrepancy between the two identities. Using CTI, I was able to look at the layers of identity (i.e., personal, relational, enacted, and communal) and their dynamics of interacting with one another. Broadly, the identity gaps due to the discrepancy between two or more layers of identity was expected, as earlier mentioned. In specific, this project inquired about (RQ1-a) metaperceptions of individuals from the so-called Middle East and (RQ1-b) any relevant identity gaps that occurred as a result of their conflicting self- and metaperceptions. Following, this project examined (RQ2-a) the influence of the metaperceptions on their identity negotiations

while also (RQ2-b) looking for specific efforts to bridge their identity gaps in their negotiation strategies.

The interview analysis showed several salient metaperceptions most of which were interrelated and included the most prominent ones, such as (a) terrorist, (b) not-American-immigrant-other, (c) Middle Eastern-Arab-Muslim. Other metaperceptions included the dichotomies of (d) rich and poor, and (e) non-white but white. These metaperceptions are all in line with many of the prominent stereotypes about the so-called Middle Eastern region and its people. They were also interconnected, for instance, when one thought they were perceived as Middle Eastern, they directly associated that with other metaperceptions/stereotypes such as "terrorist" or "immigrant." As most of these individuals were not considered as "typical Americans," they were thought as "non-Americans", "immigrants / foreigners," and thus as part of the "other." While these metaperceptions are not necessarily inaccurate for some (e.g., actual immigrants who did not identify as Americans), they were highly inaccurate (and insensitive or offensive) for those who were born and raised in the U.S.

The Arab-Muslim-Middle Eastern Monolithic Trinity

One of the important findings of this project was the group of metaperceptions that functioned almost as synonyms of the same word. For instance, "Arab" meant "Muslim," and those perceived as Middle Eastern were Muslims, hence Arabs. Multiple times throughout this project, I have voiced my objection to the (over)generalization of the Western-centric term "Middle East." Yet, this finding of the research demonstrated that this term was not the only inaccurate generalization. Indeed, a person's nationality, ethnicity, culture, religion, etc. did not matter as much since if one was an Arab that meant they were Muslim – as if the two words were synonyms – and they certainly were from the Middle East. All these three interconnected

generalizations of identities constitute a major problem for the following reasons: First, they are simply inaccurate. The term "Arab" refers to a person's ethnic background thus does not imply a given religion. It is certainly true that most Arabs are Muslims, yet, this does not mean all of them are followers of Islam. A significant number of Arabs around the globe are Christians, while others are members of smaller religious groups, or are simply individuals who do not believe in any religion. On the other hand, the term Muslim simply refers to individuals who are followers of the religion called "Islam." Hence, any individual, regardless of their nationality, ethnicity, race, gender, etc. can be a Muslim. Perhaps more striking is the fact that the majority of Muslims are not Arabs; but in U.S. a Muslim was the same as Arab (see e.g., Chapter 2 for an anecdote about Obama’s ethnic identity).

At the same time, this Arab-Muslim-Middle Eastern monolithic trinity can also be looked at from the Middle Eastern aspect of it. For example, countries with majority Muslim populations (and/or Islamic regimes) like Afghanistan and Pakistan are likely to be perceived and portrayed as Middle Eastern countries regardless of their geographic locations. In fact, geographic location does not seem to matter much when it comes to describing Middle East; which does not make sense as the name itself is derived from its geographic location, though certainly Western-centric as the name suggests.

Middle East as a Construct

I talked about the history of the term Middle East in the first chapter, mentioning how the area between Near East and Far East was initially referred to as Middle East, later replacing the term Near East altogether. So, even though Middle East is a geographic (and geopolitical) term, it had become the general name, or an umbrella-term to cover Muslim countries. In other words, Pakistan and Afghanistan (or any majority Muslim country for that reason) are perceived as

Middle Eastern not because of their locations but because of their religion, Islam. In addition, I believe that these two countries (or any Muslim country for that matter) might also be perceived as Arab nations due to the high overlap between the two terms (i.e., Muslim/Arab). I claim that being perceived as Arab (or any other nationality or ethnicity) is more problematic than being perceived as Muslim or Middle Eastern. First, not all Afghani or Pakistani people are Muslim but since Islam is the majority religion in these countries, it is perhaps somewhat understandable or acceptable to generalize them as Muslim. Second, whether they are Middle Eastern or not, one might justify categorizing them as one by pointing out to the terms fluid nature, and that it has always shifted in meaning, changing which countries or areas it includes, based on various certain universally major events, political dynamics, different perspectives, and so on. Considering these countries as Arab (or any country that is not one of the 22 Arab nations), however, is problematic since it involves regarding them as part of some other identity to which they do not belong. In other words, it is culturally even more insensitive to generalize them into another ethnic group as if they do not have their own national, ethnic, cultural identity.

Arab as an Umbrella Term

Throughout this project I have mentioned multiple times how most people in the U.S. did not know the difference between Arabs and Turks. The only Iranian interviewee, Shirin, had also complained about this issue, "they think Iran is an Arab country" she had told me. As a Turkish individual, I believe that Iranians experience this more often than Turks, and not only in the U.S. but also in other parts of the world, even in a neighboring country like Turkey. Iranians, who are ethnically (descendants of) Persians, are a completely separate group and are not related to Arabs or Turks. But perhaps because Iran uses the Arabic script/alphabet, and/or because it's a theocratic Islamic regime, and/or because it has a name that is highly similar to one of its Arab

neighbors (viz., Iraq), Iranians are more likely to be thought as Arabs. But again, this instance is not exclusive to Iran or Turkey, but includes many other cultures and countries as well (e.g., Afghani, Kurdish, etc.).

I believe such conclusions are based on two major factors: First, there are at least 22 Arab nations in the region, therefore the majority shares an Arab ethnic background. Second, and more importantly, it is grounded on the inaccurate belief that "Arab" means "Muslim." This, again, points out to the main "othering" factor, namely religion. So, in general, it's not the Arab identity per se that is at the root of this issue (i.e., generalizing and othering), rather it's religion that plays the primary role.

Primary Factor for Othering: Religion

The claim that religion, Islam, plays the primary role in the monolithic view of Middle Eastern-Arab-Muslim is not only one of the major arguments presented in this project but is also supported by the existing literature suggesting that Arab and Middle Eastern people are racialized via religion (Naber, 2000). Notwithstanding, I should note that being perceived as a monolithic culture is not exclusive to Middle Eastern or Muslim countries. There are many other examples that are common, such as using a continent's name as if it were a country, whether it is Europe, Asia, or Africa. Someone telling me that they went to Europe last summer does not explain anything as the European continent is home to dozens of countries with mostly with different native tongues.

While I cannot claim all such generalizations are based mainly on religion, it certainly is a major factor; going for a vacation in Europe is very different than going for one in the Middle East. European countries are almost all majority Christian nations (both in cultural and religious sense), whereas Middle East is almost all majority Muslim nations. The largest continent on

earth, Asia is home to considerably large countries including (but not exclusive to); India, Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Indonesia, Malaysia, large(r) parts of Russia and Turkey, yet, it is mostly reduced to a few countries on the (north)east side of the continent such as China, Japan, Korea, sometimes also Thailand or Vietnam. Put differently, when someone talks about "Asian cultures" or that they went to Asia for vacation, it almost never includes the beforementioned countries. The argument I am trying to emphasize is, again, inconsistency. The recent war in Syria, for instance, was never called a war in Asia, or a crisis in Asia even though Syria is and has always been located in this continent. So, the question is, if social studies or humanities scholars are not going to consider these countries as Asian, why are we still making distinctions between these continents based on the science of geography?

Geography or Geopolitics?

One could argue that the main difference is between two related terms: geopolitics and geography. Even so, this argument only proves that such categorizations, even if they are based on objective sciences (e.g., geography, geology, etc.) are always contingent upon socio-political issues, agendas, views, and events. At the same time, it is important to note that such generalizations and categorizations are not universal. In the United Kingdom, for example, an "Asian" individual can refer to any person who is (originally) from India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, and China. I should also note that the same UK Census categorizes Turkey (and Turks) as European (Office for National Statistics [UK], 2015) – even though Turkic ethnic groups are still mostly located in Western and Central Asia.

Regarding such racial identities, interviews portrayed a general confusion about the concept of race amongst participants not only because they did not have that concept in their native countries but also because of the inconsistencies about racial categorizations in the U.S.

and the ambivalent nature of the construct. The interviewees were also experiencing an identity gap; though they did not necessarily identify with a certain race, they noted that while the U.S. Census identified Arabs, Persians, and Turks as "white," the general society did not consider them as white. This was not necessarily a major issue for the participants, nonetheless, they were still discontent with the issue as once again it functioned as a dynamic that put them in another category that did not exist as a separate group of phenotypes, etc. This was once again reinforced by their "belief about U.S. Americans" and the suggested geographic illiteracy. Being born (or having ethnic/cultural roots) in Asia did not mean that one was Asian; being born (or having ethnic/cultural) roots in Africa did not mean that one was African; or as one of the participants suggested, "you have to look Chinese to be considered Asian."

As I tried to explain previously, such terms used for categorizations and generalizations of places, regions, or continents are problematic also because they are directly related to issues around race and racial identity. Throughout this paper, I noted how the concept of race in the U.S. creates and reinforces confusions for non-U.S. Americans, in particular. Whites are referred as Caucasians (though an inaccurate and an insensitive term); most Black people are thought to be African – even though not all Blacks are originally from Africa nor all Africans are Black; and only some of the Eastern Asian countries' peoples are regarded as Asians, and some peoples' (e.g., Arabs, Indians, Iranians, Turks) racial identities are in a constant limbo. All these terms are not only inaccurate (and perhaps insensitive) but also work as a major dynamic in keeping the social (and thus racial) status-quo – considering whites as the norm, and while stereotyping others. Because certain peoples who have been categorized as white (according to the U.S. Census) are not recognized or perceived as whites in the society (i.e., Arabs, Iranians, Turks, etc.), they are in-process of being pushed to "become" a new racial category. Until then, they

share the invisibility of whiteness without the centrality of it (see Nakayama & Krizek, 1995). In this sense, this project supports the existing literature (e.g., Naber, 2000; Suleiman, 1999), but also claims that non-Arabs who are perceived also experience a racial and ethnic invisibility due to a “conflation of categories Arab-Middle Eastern-Muslim” (Naber, 2000, p.54). Subsequently, this project also supports the claim that Arabs and other Muslims groups are “racialized through religion” (Naber, 2000) and adds that this racialization includes anyone who is perceived as an Arab-Muslim-Middle Eastern individual.

A non-ethnic and a non-racial category in Census

Another claim of this project is that the conflated category of “Middle Eastern” is becoming an identity similar to the Hispanic/Latino identity. According to U.S. Census Bureau (2019), “Hispanic or Latino” is an ethnicity category and not a racial one, since one can be Hispanic or Latino regardless of their race. In everyday use of the terms, however, they are perceived and used as racial identities. For instance, when asked about a Mexican friend’s race, the response is usually “Hispanic” even though this does not necessarily imply anything about the person’s racial identity. The term Middle Eastern, I believe, is going a similar route. At the same time, unlike the Hispanic or Latino identities, Middle Eastern does not even refer to an ethnicity (or a race).

Indeed, there was a discussion about including Middle East and North Africa (MENA) as a category in the 2020 Census in the U.S.; but the proposition was rejected by the Census Bureau (for the full report; see Census Memorandum, 2018). Whether such a categorization should be in the Census is not the concern of this paper, however, the discussion and the Bureau’s memorandum about the issue supports my argument about the similarity between Hispanic/Latino identity and Middle Eastern identity.

Unlike Hispanic or Latino identities, however, a Middle Eastern identity does not involve speakers of a shared/mutual language (e.g., Spanish) and does not refer to peoples from the same continent (e.g., Latin America). As mentioned earlier, other than the Arab-speaking peoples (in 22 countries), many of the ethnic groups do not share the same language, whether it's Turks, Persians, Kurds, Afghani. More importantly, these peoples do not share linguistic roots that belong to the same language families. Arabic is a Semitic language, Persian is an Indo-European language, while Turkish is related to Turkic speaking peoples, ranging from eastern Europe to north eastern Siberia.

Ruling out geographic categorizations, mutual languages and scripts (i.e., alphabets) as well as common ethnic origins based on linguistic roots, we are left with one common aspect that is shared by most of these peoples, that is, religion. The question, this time, is not about geography or geopolitics, but rather why we continue to call these peoples using a term that is not related to religion, since it is the underlying factor after all. Other terms, such as "the Islamic World" or "Muslim countries" are used both in everyday language as well as academic literature.

I argue that the term Middle East is preferred as an umbrella term over other terms based on two reasons: (a) First, Middle East also includes the country of Israel, which is the only nation that does not have a majority Muslim population, and is, indeed, ruled by an amalgamation of democracy and Judaic theocracy. Thus, with a major country in international relations such as Israel, calling the area with an Islamic name would not be appropriate. (b) Second, I suggest that the term Middle East is a neutral term unlike the terms "Islamic" or "Muslim," which directly point out to these countries' religious beliefs and in turn could make certain political arguments (seem) more insensitive or offensive; or could potentially give away political and religious biases and prejudices.

As I mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, my own metaperceptions were parallel to those of my interviewees'. While I also shared most of the identity negotiation strategies employed by the participants, my autoethnographic findings also showed a vast difference; some strategies such as wearing certain accessories or having minor body modifications (e.g., piercings, tattoos, etc.) were never mentioned by my participants. This points out to the fact that I have wider identity gaps in relation to these issues, which makes sense since I do not identify as Middle Eastern nor Muslim or Arab; whereas for most of my participants, we had at least had one common identity.

Discussion on Identity Negotiations

Even though my metaperceptions were very similar to those of my interviewees, I claim that I was significantly more invested in emphasizing my individual identity. In other words, I was putting more effort in enacting my identity in order to close the identity gaps that were by my metaperceptions. This argument, however, does not mean that I was more affected or that I was experiencing more hardship than my interviewees. Rather, I am simply claiming that the number of ways I was trying to negotiate my identity were higher than theirs. Indeed, I have never met anyone who got tattoos with the intention of using them as an identity negotiation strategy. Same for piercings; nobody ever mentioned any such modification to their bodies. Let me explain:

In my first year in the U.S., I got my left ear pierced, purely as a strategy to negotiate my misperceived identity. A year later, I made a much more significant move and got a 5"×3" tattoo on my upper right arm / shoulder. About a year later, I got another tattoo, this time on my left forearm. As noted earlier, these (mostly) permanent but minor body modifications were done just to communicate a message to those who saw me in public or to those who were meeting me for

the first time. In CTI terms, via the tattoos and the earring, my enacted identity layer was trying to close or bridge the gap between my personal and communal layers of identity.

These tattoos, or the earring were not communicating what I am; rather, they were relaying a contradictory message to those who had noticed me in a public setting. Put differently, these enactments of identity via tattoos and earring were not communicating "who I am" but rather "who I am not." Inherently, I do not think I would get tattoos or piercings other than this and alike reasons. Back in Turkey, for instance, when many of my friends were getting tattoos or piercings during their college years, I was never really interested in having such modifications or accessories. In that sense, these two tools of identity negotiation were themselves transmitting inaccurate perceptions about me. However, I already had negative metaperceptions, thus having these changes done could not make them worse, but only better. Without the tattoo or the earring, someone who (I believed they) thought of me as a Muslim, Arab, Middle Eastern, terrorist, enemy, non-Western, etc. would now think "What/who is this guy? An Arab? A Muslim? Certainly, Middle Eastern… But with tattoos and earrings? No way. This guy isn't what/who I think he is." Something in this nature was what I was hoping to accomplish in people's minds. Hence, the tattoos and the earring were not necessarily "correcting" my misperceived identity, rather they were there to create a contradiction and confusion without giving away a clear idea who/what I am. Being thought as "unidentifiable", "X", "a question mark" was much more appealing than being perceived as someone or something that I am not.

Utilizing CTI, one could explain this process as using the enacted frame of identity (via tattoos and earring) to bridge a gap between the personal and communal frames of identity (i.e., personal-communal identity gap). Furthermore, since I do not think tattoos or piercings are representative of my personality per se, they were causing a small identity gap to emerge (i.e.,

personal-enacted). Nevertheless, this new, small identity gap was type of a collateral damage, or an insignificant sacrifice, especially when compared to the gap that was being bridged (personal-communal).

Limitations and Future Research

This study had several limitations. Some of the more obvious limitations was the number of the participants. While quantity is not necessarily an important dynamic in qualitative research, it can play an important role in various aspects, affecting the research's general quality. For this project, I believe that the number of the participants, together with the input they provided, was more than enough in regard to the general quality. However, it was not the total number of participants that constituted a limitation, rather, it was the low number female participants. Considering what some of my participants were able to share about their female family members and their experiences, the topic of this project constitutes even more layers of intersectional identity as potential female participants would show not only differen-ces in their ethnic, national, racial, etc. identities; but would also involve various differences in participants' everyday clothing and attire as females who are (perceived to be) from the Middle East might report differences in their experiences including different levels of discrimination, depending on whether they are wearing any Islamic head covering or any attire that is (perceived as) Islamic. The study's own data indicates that women who wear such attire (e. g, headscarf, hijab, burqa, etc.) are much more likely to experience difficulties whether it is in the form of (implicit or explicit) discrimination or anticipation thereof, thus having highly negative metaperceptions with possibly fewer ways to negotiate their identities, since their religious attire can't be simply "avoided" and has to be worn at all times in public, according to their religious belief. This aspect would have been especially important in the enacted identity layer of CTI; overlapping

with all other layers of identity. While this study still has some data on how these individuals are affected, future studies could focus directly on differences and similarities between the two genders, but especially between women who do wear Islamic attire and those who do not.

Another limitation of this project was also related to the sampling – recruitment to be specific. After promoting my study at an ESL class, I had received several emails from students. Unfortunately, while seeming so eager to take part in my study, none of these students replied to my emails. I can only make assumptions on why this attempt failed; I am, however, confident about my actions and recruitment attempts. At the same time, it is also understandable that people are hesitant about talking about this topic, especially to a stranger. Nonetheless, I also had an experience with an acquaintance who would have made a great interviewee for my project, who was also recommended by two other participants based on the person's role in their community. While I still do not believe to have done anything wrong in my recruitment attempts, I believe it was mainly due to a potential distrust and/or dislike towards me from the mentioned individual. These failed recruitment attempts may seem either too personal or too trivial, however, I am mentioning these incidents for a reason. Though I cannot provide any concrete evidence, it is my belief that at least some of these individuals did not feel safe talking about such experiences.

Another limitation of the study was related to the similarity of interviewees' physical characteristics. Put differently, all participants (including myself) looked similar to the general stereotype of Middle Eastern people; all had dark hair and darker features in general. I am claiming this to be a limitation based on my own experiences and on an unpublished study I had conducted on the metaperceptions of Turks. My experiences in the U.S. combined with the results of my Turkish metaperceptions study suggest that "outliers" (i.e. those who do not look

Middle Eastern) had quite different metaperceptions when present in public settings. These include individuals with blonde or lighter hair colors and other facial features, causing them to be (meta)perceived as typical white U.S. Americans. In the study, one of such participants whose natural hair color was blond, had told me about people's reactions when they learned that he is a Muslim, and had described the surprise on people's face as “eye-lifting moments.” If I saw these Turkish individuals in a public setting in the U.S., I would also think of them as U.S. Americans; yet, if I saw them in Turkey, I would think they're Turkish. In other words, such individuals would not stand out as minority groups in either country.

For future research, I suggest looking at Middle Eastern metaperceptions from both qualitative and quantitative points of view. Quantitative studies involving a wider range of ethnic and religious groups of (perceived) Middle Eastern individuals could help in obtaining a generalized understanding of such groups' metaperceptions. At the same time, qualitative studies exploring groups of individuals with specific shared identities (e.g., nationality, ethnicity, religion) and how these groups negotiate their identities based on their metaperceptions can be helpful in reaching a better understanding of such phenomena as well as these groups' experiences.

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APPENDIX A: THE SCENARIO

At the beginning of the interviews, after certain demographic questions, I asked the participants what they thought U.S. Americans thought of them. Because this question sounded somewhat complicated (mainly due to the meta aspect of it) and/or was not specific enough, I noticed that it would be helpful to provide the interviewees with a hypothetical example that included a scenario that enabled them to visualize the question and allowing them to understand and answer the question properly. Throughout the project, I refer to these hypothetical examples as "the scenario." Primarily, these scenarios provided examples such as the following:

Let's think of a scenario. You go to a coffee shop, you walk in, and you see an American looking for a brief moment. What do you think they think about you in that couple seconds?

Occasionally, I reminded them that this "American" is not someone staring at them, but rather someone who just noticed someone walk in. Also, to make sure that the participants did not just imagine a coffee shop, I sometimes mentioned a "grocery store" or another similar public setting. For instance, I asked Gibran the same question in the following way:

What do you think an American (that you do not know) thinks of you, when they see you in a public setting? For example, you entered a grocery store, or let's say you went to a coffee shop, and you see a person looking at you…

With each new interview, I tried to ask the question in a more specific way. For instance, I asked Shirin a question such as the following:

You walk into a coffee shop, it's not empty but it's not too crowded either. Some of the customers noticed that someone walked in, and so, they look at you for a brief moment. What do they think?

APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW GUIDE

Demographic Information

- How old are you?
- Where were you born?
- Where did you grow up?
- How long have you been living in the United States? (if not born and raised in U.S.)

Interview Guide

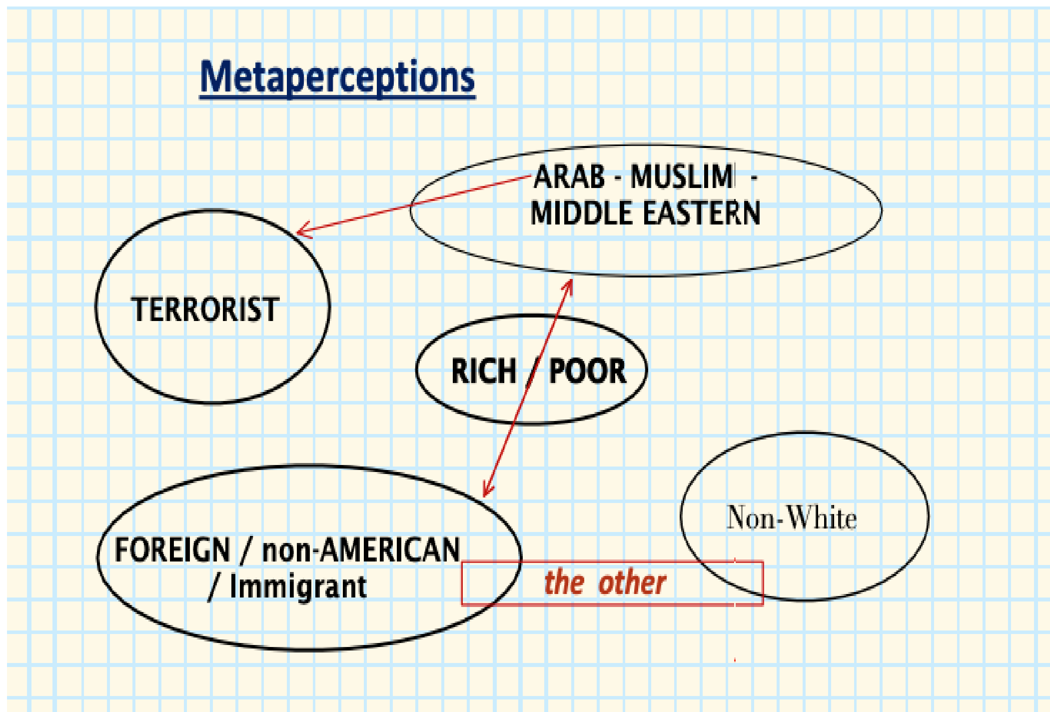
- How do you identify in terms of nationality? Religion? Ethnicity? Race?
- What do you think an American that you don't know, in other words, a random individual thinks of you, when they see you in a public setting?
- Was there a time when a person (or persons) was staring/ looking at you for no reason, which you interpreted as a negative expression?
- How did you interpret / make sense of it?
- Have you ever been thought to be from another nationality / ethnicity / religion / culture without being asked?
- (If yes) How did that make you feel?
- How did you cope with it? (If the feeling was negative)
- Have you ever felt that you were treated unfairly because of your cultural identity?
- If yes, how did the person (who was unfair to you) know/assume that you were from a different culture/country/etc.? from to you noticed your cultural identity?
- Is there anything that you do differently in the United States to express your identity(s) in a different way than you do in your home country?

- What do you think some of the stereotypes about your ethnicity/home country/culture are?
- What are some of the first things that you tell someone who does not know about your identity(s), in order to explain/describe your identity?
- What is the first thing you tell someone who does not know about your culture?
- What is the first thing you tell someone who has inaccurate assumptions/beliefs about your culture?
- Do you try to reduce the chances to be misunderstood by Americans (and others – except for the people from your home country / culture?
- If yes: what are some of the things you do?
- If no: Does that mean you don't act any differently in US, compared to when you are in your home country?
- Do you spend more time with people from your home country (or from similar cultures) in US, than your American friends?
- If yes or no, why do you think that is?
- What are some of the anecdotes/stories you've experienced in relation to misconceptions or about your culture? (no need to ask if the interviewee already told stories related to the question or the project in general.)

APPENDIX C: TABLE OF PARTICIPANTS

(Pseudo) Name	**Age / Sex**	**Ethnicity**	**Religion**	**Born In**	**Native Tongue**	**Parents' Native Country**
SHAMS	31 / M	Arab	Muslim	Saudi Arabia	Arabic	S. Arabia
ZACH	34 / M	Arab American	Muslim	United States	English	Lebanon
HUSAM	20 / M	Arab	Atheist Agnostic	United States	English	Algeria & U.S.
GIBRAN	37 / M	Arab	Muslim	Saudi Arabia	Arabic	S. Arabia
TALIB	34 / M	Arab	Muslim	Saudi Arabia	Arabic	S. Arabia
KENAN	32 / M	Turkish	Muslim (non-practicing)	Turkey	Turkish	Turkey
MEHMET	31 / M	Turkish	Muslim (non-practicing)	Turkey	Turkish	Turkey
SHIRIN	37 / F	Persian	Muslim	Iran	Farsi	Iran
RAPHAEL	28 / M	Mexican American	Catholic	United States	English	(n/a)

APPENDIX D: METAPERCEPTIONS - POSTER BOARD REPRESENTATION



APPENDIX E: MIND MAPPING SAMPLE (ON RACE)