

# **Community Isolation and Group Solidarity: Examining the Muslim Student Experience after September 11th**

**Lori A. Peek  
Department of Sociology  
University of Colorado–Boulder**

---

As news spread of the events of September 11, 2001, people around the world reacted with shock, horror, and grief. However, in addition to reports of the immense destruction and suffering caused by the terrorist attacks, there was also a significant amount of media coverage regarding the pro-social behavior that subsequently occurred. For example, thousands of individuals lined up at blood donation stations across the United States; volunteers converged at the disaster sites (Kendra and Wachtendorf, 2001; Webb, 2002); individuals and organizations donated unprecedented amounts of money and physical goods to charities (Turkel, 2002); and a multitude of candlelight vigils, communal interfaith services, teach-ins on university campuses, and other such events were organized to help people cope in the aftermath of the disaster. Radio and television announcers discussed this unity and positive behavior, and they frequently uttered the phrases, “Today we are all Americans. Today we are all New Yorkers.” Upholding this national identity offered many Americans a way to begin to deal with the devastation caused by the attacks.

Some scholars asserted that the widespread public consensus and outpouring of pro-social behavior that followed the attacks closely resembled reactions which have been documented following most natural disasters (Alexander, 2002; Mileti, 2001; Tierney, 2002; Webb, 2002). That is, the aftermath of September 11th was compared to what social scientists have labeled as the creation of an “altruistic” (Fritz, 1961) or “therapeutic community” (Barton, 1970). Essentially, these terms characterize the coming together of a community in the immediate aftermath of a disaster, which

ultimately provides disaster survivors the physical and emotional support that is necessary to create a sense of solidarity and unity of purpose (Cuthbertson and Nigg, 1987).

While undoubtedly there was a tremendous increase of pro-social behavior after September 11th, there was also a general need to focus a sense of blame (Alexander, 2002). The call to find those who were responsible was understandable, given the intentional, violent, and criminal nature of the attacks. However, the attribution of blame, and subsequent scapegoating (see further Barton, 1970; Bucher, 1957; Drabek and Quarantelli, 1967; Quarantelli and Dynes, 1976) that followed the attacks resulted in some ethnic and religious minority groups in the United States becoming disconnected from the national therapeutic community that emerged. Indeed, while the events of September 11th brought many together and led to increased feelings of patriotism and national unity (Turkel, 2002), the attacks isolated certain marginalized members of U.S. society as well. Truly, we were not “all Americans” on that day.

This paper examines the Muslim experience after the events of September 11th. I begin by reviewing the literature regarding post-disaster communities, with a specific focus on community cohesion and isolation after natural and technological disasters and intentional acts of violence. Next, I discuss the setting in which this study was conducted, the research participants, and the methods that were used. I then explicate several reasons why Muslim university students in New York City often felt excluded from the larger therapeutic community that emerged after the September 11th attacks. The group solidarity that developed among Muslims in response to this exclusion is detailed. The report concludes with a discussion of the sociological implications of post-disaster community isolation as well as suggestions for future disaster research.

### **The Post-disaster Community**

Scholars recognize that disasters and large-scale catastrophes provide unique occasions to examine how individuals and groups behave in crisis situations (Quarantelli, 1998). Fritz (1961) posits that disasters offer a realistic laboratory for testing the integration, stamina, and recuperative power of large-scale social systems and communities. Subsequently, there is general consensus in the social science literature that along with destruction and devastation, opportunities also arise out of disastrous events (Quarantelli and Dynes, 1977).

Natural disasters represent a definitive risk, are often sudden in their onset, and are largely viewed by the public as indiscriminate and external to social systems. Hence, heightened levels of community solidarity and social cooperation are repeatedly reported in the aftermath of natural disasters

(Barton, 1970; Dacy and Kunreuther, 1969; Drabek, 1986a; Dynes, 1970; Fritz, 1961) as people come together to react to unforeseen and threatening situations. After the disaster strikes, there is a temporary focus on the urgent needs of the victims and their families, which precipitates a pulling together of the community, albeit typically short-lived (Demerath and Wallace, 1957; Drabek, 1986a; Oliver-Smith, 1979).

Although there is much evidence that natural disasters and catastrophes bring people together, there has been less empirical or theoretical examination of why communities break down in certain disaster situations (Barton, 1970; Erikson, 1976), or why some groups become isolated from emergent therapeutic communities. Research has shown that the type of disaster agent may directly correlate with whether community consensus or conflict follows an event (Couch and Kroll-Smith, 1985; Drabek, 1970; Drabek, 1986b; Quarantelli and Dynes, 1976). Specifically, crises that involve some sort of perceived human culpability are more likely to result in the demise of communal solidarity. For example, we know that civil disturbances (Hewitt, 1997; Warheit, 1976), riots (Quarantelli, 1993; Scanlon, 1988), and technological disasters (Couch and Kroll-Smith, 1985, 1991; Erikson, 1994; Kroll-Smith and Couch, 1990; Neal, 1984) are more likely to result in conflict, blame attribution, long-term negative impacts, and anti-social behavior.

Erikson (1994) posited that “a new species of trouble” emerged with the development of disasters that represent the work of humankind, versus those previously studied as acts of nature. In their examination of an underground mine fire, Kroll-Smith and Couch (1990) discovered that the type of extreme environment created by this chronic disaster resulted in the destruction of the social bond within the community. Edelstein (1988) reported that victims of residential toxic exposure came to feel stigmatized and isolated from friends, relatives, and co-workers living outside their contaminated community. Using case study data from two separate technological catastrophes, Cuthbertson and Nigg (1987) found that the factors conducive to the emergence of a therapeutic community were not present in these instances, and therefore conflict, rather than solidarity, followed the events. Baum et al. (1983) concluded that technological catastrophes are more likely to cause chronic stress and therefore have more widespread and long-term social impacts than natural disasters.

The human tendency to blame the devastation caused by natural disasters on nature, fate, or some divine force often leads to higher levels of post-disaster, pro-social behavior.<sup>1</sup> Conversely, because human beings generate technological disasters, these events are more likely to result in conflict and other negative communal responses. Yet, even during technological disasters, there is a tendency to attribute the devastation to human error and to label the event an “accident,” allowing consensus-oriented behavior to occur.

### **Intentional Acts, Blame, and Community Isolation**

A final type of disaster to be considered differs from those that are of natural or technological origin in that under no circumstance is the event attributed to natural forces or human error. These acts—most often labeled as terrorism—are human-conceived, violent, and purposely designed to cause widespread fear, psychological and social trauma, and physical destruction.

Hence, one of the most obvious characteristics that distinguishes September 11th from other large-scale catastrophes that have impacted the United States is that a group of individuals was directly responsible for the destruction and loss of life. The disaster agent—an intentional, human-conceived attack—certainly influenced the response, both positively and negatively, that followed the events (Gunn, 2001; Hewitt, 1997).

The demonstrative nature of terrorist acts elicits feelings of revulsion and anger in those who witness them (Juergensmeyer, 2000), and the ensuing anger may become manifest in various forms. In the days, weeks, and months after September 11th, members of various ethnic and religious groups were targeted for blame. Thousands<sup>2</sup> of Arabs, Muslims, Sikhs, and individuals who appeared to be of Middle Eastern descent were victims of discrimination, harassment, racial and religious profiling, and verbal and physical assault (American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee, 2002; Council on American-Islamic Relations, 2002; Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2002; United States Department of Justice, 2002). Over the past two decades, Arabs and Muslims living in the United States have been victims of backlash violence, largely triggered by conflict in the Middle East and acts of terrorism associated with Arabs and Muslims (Human Rights Watch, 2002). However, the victimization of these and other minority groups in the aftermath of September 11th was unique in the magnitude and severity. The devastation of September 11th, combined with the ensuing attribution of blame to groups perceived as exhibiting ethnic or religious characteristics similar to those of the hijackers, led to a significant perception of communal isolation for the Muslims studied herein.

### **Setting and Methods**

Less than three weeks after September 11th, I traveled to New York City to interview Muslim students enrolled in area colleges and universities. I contacted the participants for this study through the Muslim Student Associations (MSAs) on their respective campuses.<sup>3</sup> After the first trip to New York City, I conducted follow-up interviews with the same group to gain a more nuanced understanding of the long-term impacts of September 11th. I returned for a second site visit in December of 2001 and a third visit in April of 2002. Over five weeks of direct study and observation were completed during those three visits.

I employed three descriptive fieldwork methods for this research project: focus group interviews, individual interviews, and participant observation. I used focus group interviews as the primary means of data collection during the initial phases of this study. In total, I conducted 19 focus groups, which ranged in size from three to 15 participants. The focus groups lasted from one to four hours. Conducting interviews in a focus group setting allowed several students to be heard, effectively utilizing limited time and resources to gather a breadth of perishable data (Krueger, 1988; Morgan, 1997).

During subsequent trips, I used one-on-one, semi-structured interviews as the primary form of data collection. This shift in method elicited richer and more in-depth data (Lofland and Lofland, 1995; Reinharz, 1992). In total, I conducted 55 individual interviews, lasting between one and three hours. Combining the focus groups ( $n = 19$ ) and individual interviews ( $n = 55$ ), yielded a total of 76 qualitative interviews, which were audio-taped, transcribed, and coded for analysis.

I utilized participant observation throughout the project to collect additional data (Adler and Adler, 1987; Lofland and Lofland, 1995), and recorded extensive sets of field notes. I engaged in a variety of activities with the Muslim students, which helped me to connect with them and better understand their perspectives. For example, I observed Friday prayers at mosques, ate Ramadan<sup>4</sup> dinners at various religious centers, attended religious and political speeches and informational events, and attended a Muslim wedding. I also visited dorms and apartments that were evacuated after the collapse of the World Trade Center towers, walked around the campuses and traveled on the subways and buses with the participants, and often shared a cup of coffee, lunch, or dinner with the students. Participating in these various activities, as well as simply spending casual time with the Muslim students, served to further verify the experiences discussed in their interviews (Bogdan and Taylor, 1998; Lofland and Lofland, 1995). For example, one of the greatest fears expressed by the participants immediately after September 11th, particularly by the women, was traveling on the subway alone (Peek, 2002). As I walked through subway stations and sat on trains with these young women, it quickly became clear that “the looks” they reported were unquestionably occurring.

In between site visits to New York City, I continued to talk on the phone, send cards and letters, and correspond via e-mail with most of the participants. Staying in contact between trips helped to secure follow-up interviews when I returned to the field, provided new themes for exploration, and resulted in a more personal researcher role.

### Muslim Student Sample Information

In total, 99 students from seven different colleges and universities in the New York City area were interviewed between September 30, 2001, and April 11, 2002. Most of the students were interviewed on two or three separate occasions over the seven months following September 11th.

Sixty-eight of the students interviewed were female and 31 were male.<sup>5</sup> Eighty-five were undergraduates and 14 were graduate students. The participants ranged in age from 18 to 31. Ninety of the students were single and nine were married. Sixty-eight of the interviewees were U.S. citizens, and the other 31 had student visas or were permanent residents. All of the participants were fluent in English, and over 75% spoke at least one other language (such as Arabic, Bengali, Cambodian, Farsi, French, Hebrew, Indonesian, Japanese, Persian, Punjabi, and Urdu). Most of the participants in this study were first- or second-generation immigrants who were Muslim by birth. Converts to Islam were interviewed as well.

The interviewees reported a wide range of ethnic backgrounds. The majority of participants (53 students) was of South Asian or Asian descent. Thirty students identified themselves as Arab or Arab-American. Eight students were Caucasian, four were African-American, three were Latino, and one was a Pacific Islander. However, these standard ethnic categories do not depict the true diversity of the sample population. The following are just some of the national backgrounds reported by the interviewees: Afghanistan, Albania, Bangladesh, Cambodia, Canada, Egypt, Germany, Great Britain, Greece, Guinea, Guyana, India, Indonesia, Iran, Japan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Morocco, Pakistan, Palestine, Puerto Rico, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Trinidad, Turkey, United States, Yemen, and Zimbabwe.

Finally, it is important to note that this sample population was self-selected and highly religious. This religious identification is based on my own observations, as well as the self-characterization of the majority of students. Almost all of the participants reported praying five times a day (one of the five fundamental pillars of Islam), fasting during the Muslim Holy Month of Ramadan (another fundamental pillar of Islam), being active members of religious organizations, and abstaining from religiously prohibited activities (such as drinking alcohol or eating pork). Most of the interviewees also chose to dress in an Islamic (modest) manner. The vast majority of women interviewed (over 90%) wore the *hijab*,<sup>6</sup> and two of the women wore the *niquaab*.<sup>7</sup> The men also dressed modestly. The level of religiosity and manner of dress of most of the interviewees—the fact that they were visibly identifiable as Muslim—certainly affected their individual experiences, and their interpretations of those experiences, after September 11th.

## Isolation from the Therapeutic Community

This section uses qualitative data to examine the feelings of community isolation reported by the Muslim students, and the consequences of those perceptions. In analyzing the data, four primary factors emerged (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), which represent the reasons why many of the students felt excluded from the post-September 11th national therapeutic community.

### Muslims as Blamed Category

Although disasters often motivate individuals and groups to behave in altruistic ways, it is also widely recognized that catastrophic events can result in a search for scapegoats to blame for the destruction and loss of life (Drabek and Quarantelli, 1967). As stated previously, disasters that are caused by intentional human acts seem most likely to produce the negative behaviors associated with blame attribution, such as social isolation, discrimination, harassment, and violence.

The Muslims interviewed after September 11th did not feel a part of the larger community because they were quickly portrayed as “the enemy” or “the other.” Therefore, the majority felt as if they were being blamed for the horrific events. On the morning of the attacks, some of the students had yet to learn what had transpired, but they were already implicated. Habeel,<sup>8</sup> whose family immigrated to the United States from Pakistan when he was a child, discussed what happened to him on September 11th:

I heard it from the bus operator. The first thing he told me was, “Your people have done this thing.” I was like, “What?” I didn’t even know anything at that point. I could see the clouds of dust. He said, “They took the planes and hit the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. Your people did that. The President is going to attack.” I thought he was just making fun of me. Then I went home and saw the TV. From the first minute I felt like they have cut off the Muslims.

As Allport (1954, p. 258), in his discussion of scapegoating so succinctly claimed, “Anger wants a personal victim, and it wants it now.” Some people in the United States directed their anger toward innocent civilians. It was this misdirected anger, and blaming, that led Muslims to feel disconnected from others. As time passed, some of the students indicated that they still felt as if others were holding them responsible for the events of September 11th. Fatima, a native of New York City, said the following:

Even now, weeks after it happened, we still get looks. People still look at you like, you know, you did something wrong. You just have to smile back and then they’re surprised. . . . I’m a person just like you. I didn’t do anything.

### Exclusion from Mourning, Bonding, and Helping Behaviors

Disasters may strengthen community identification by allowing extensive opportunities for participation in community-relevant activities (Quarantelli and Dynes, 1976). The acts of providing and receiving emotional support, in conjunction with assisting fellow victims, are a crucial aspect of the healing process and in large part characterize the therapeutic community (Barton, 1970). After the September 11th attacks, Muslims in this study reported feeling excluded from the process of mourning and social bonding. They also felt unable to engage in helping behaviors. The perceived or actual inability to participate in such emotional processes and behaviors naturally resulted in feelings of individual and group isolation.

Interviewees commented that they could not talk about the events of September 11th as “normal” people, but rather had to respond as a “Muslim” person. Therefore, the students often did not have the opportunity to simply grieve or tell their stories of what happened on that day. They were busy answering questions about their faith, the meaning of *jihad*,<sup>9</sup> and whether or not they personally condone violence. In the United States, Muslims had to immediately mobilize to defend themselves and their religion, and many Islamic advocacy groups and scholars issued statements of Islam’s condemnation of attacks such as those perpetrated on September 11th (Council on American-Islamic Relations, 2002). Iffat, a native of New York City, discussed the inability to adequately express her grief:

I’m so sad about it, but you can’t really show that you’re sad because you have to be more defensive. We can’t express how we were just as sad as anyone else. I don’t think I felt included as one of them who were affected by it. I had to defend myself and defend my religion, more than being a New Yorker who was affected by it.

Many of the interviewees said that they wanted to participate in post-September 11th memorial services and volunteer activities, so that they could experience the opportunity to grieve for the victims, show support for the rescue workers, and connect with other survivors. However, Muslims reported a certain level of discomfort being a part of such events. The interviewees either were worried for their own safety, or were concerned that their visible presence might upset others. For example, Raja, whose family moved to the United States from Pakistan when she was 15, was acutely aware of her Muslim appearance, and the feelings that she might provoke:

In my neighborhood, there’s a fire station, and every time I would pass by it, there was a picture of one of the firefighters who passed away. It was so sad. All I wanted to do was go inside and hug every firefighter and tell them, “You guys are wow, amazing. I’m supporting and praying for you.” But then

I was like, if I do that . . . Every time they see me, probably I remind them of September 11th. Every time. Even every time I pass by, I'm like, oh God, I hope I don't remind them. And I know I do with my headscarf. Sometimes I feel ashamed. I really do.

Because of their apprehension, many of the Muslim students stayed at home or away from the disaster site, at least initially. Henna, a female graduate student whose educational background qualified her to volunteer at the World Trade Center, declined out of fear for her personal safety:

For me, I wanted to join those people who were volunteering downtown and do stuff. My undergraduate degree was in engineering and they needed engineers there to help with excavation at the site. They also needed people who could translate. To me, that was the American community coming together and trying to do what they can. But I didn't feel like I could for my own safety. I wear a headscarf. I wanted to be a part of that community, but I'm not really.

Muslims had a need, just as their fellow Americans did, to heal the psychological wounds of the attacks (Council on American-Islamic Relations, 2002). However, through actual or perceived exclusion, many of the Muslims interviewed did not have the same opportunities to recover from the devastation through normal post-disaster outlets.

### **Concern for Safety**

After September 11th, Muslims were worried about their personal safety and the security of the United States, as were other Americans. No one knew whether subsequent attacks were planned, and feelings of uncertainty and fear pervaded. However, Muslims also experienced another level of fear. Reports were soon released that the September 11th attacks had been perpetrated by "Muslim" men. In light of the history of backlash violence against Muslims in the United States, the interviewees recognized the imminent possibility of hostile repercussions against groups perceived as similar to the hijackers.

During interviews, participants described their intense concern for the safety of their friends and family members who were Muslim, as well as for their own safety. Sadiyah, a native of Syria, talked about her response to learning of the attacks:

I was on campus. I heard about it through a professor who happened to pass by our classroom. There was panic. Everybody got up and went to make phone calls. My immediate reaction was first, I couldn't believe it. I was shocked. Then I was like, safety. What's going to happen to me? I'm walking around the halls and people are giving me really dirty looks. So I came down here [to the MSA office]. There were Muslims gathered and a

couple of other groups like the Puerto Rican Alliance. They came over to us and said, "We advise that you guys go home. We don't know what's going to happen around campus."

Janan, the daughter of a West African immigrant and an African American convert, was born and raised in the United States. Because Janan wore a headscarf, and therefore was highly visible, she talked about how frightened she was to leave her home after learning of the attacks:

I was getting a lot of e-mails that were saying "Stay in the house, don't go out if you don't have to." It was freaking me out. I remember somebody was on the news talking about how they should put all the Muslims in concentration camps. When people are saying stuff like that, they were talking about it like it was a valid viewpoint, when people are talking about things like that, you're like . . . How can I leave the house? How can I go anywhere? I'm scared out of my wits.

This heightened concern for personal safety obviously differs from the fears expressed by survivors of natural disasters. For example, after an earthquake, victims may need to worry about aftershocks or lack of electricity. They do not need to fear being verbally or physically assaulted. These additional and unprecedented safety concerns contributed to increased feelings among Muslims of exclusion from the larger American community.

### **Discrimination**

The apprehension that Muslims expressed regarding their safety was not unfounded. Since the attacks, increased incidents of harassment and physical violence have been reported across the nation. The September 11th disaster was followed by the most dramatic rise in anti-Muslim hate crimes to date (Council on American-Islamic Relations, 2002; Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2002; Human Rights Watch, 2002).

Whether the students reported being personally targeted or not, they were emotionally disturbed and frightened simply knowing that family members, friends, or members of their community had been the victims of some form of backlash. Indeed, one aspect that characterizes bias-motivated crimes is that not only does the direct victim of the crime suffer, but non-victims of the targeted group do as well (Cogan, 2002; Cogan and Marcus-Newhall, 2002). Recognition of the magnitude of anti-Muslim acts further served to isolate and alienate this already marginalized minority group.

The Muslim students reported a variety of discriminatory impacts in the aftermath of September 11th. A small number of participants had a difficult time finding or keeping a place to live. This was particularly true for those students who arrived in the United States just before the attacks. Khalid, a

graduate student from Turkey who had been in New York City for only a few days before September 11th, was unable to secure a place to live for several weeks after the disaster. Thus, he was forced to sleep in the library at his university (which fortunately was open 24 hours a day), and to shower at the on-campus gym. Although Khalid initially blamed his problem on the general lack of affordable housing in the city, he later revealed that several of the people he had contacted in his attempt to find an apartment had hung up on him when they heard his Middle Eastern accent.

The majority of the interviewees reported receiving some form of verbal harassment in the days and weeks following the attacks. This verbal discrimination ranged from someone muttering “terrorist” as they passed by on the street, to shouts and threatening comments. Additionally, some of the respondents described physical incidents, such as being spit on, shoved in the subway, or having things thrown at them while walking down the street. Some of the women reported having their headscarves yanked or pulled off. Being stared at or given “dirty looks” was the most common form of discrimination reported by the Muslim students. Janan discussed her experiences following September 11th:

I was so upset. I said, Please, God, don't let it be a Muslim. I think it was really hard for me in my freshman year, because this was my second week of being a freshman in college. I was adjusting. I was really loving being here. And all of the sudden, having to defend myself in classrooms, getting dirty looks from people, even my neighbors. I remember people staring at me. There were these guys who kept driving past me and giving me these looks, just for no reason, just to freak me out when I was walking in town. So I was even scared to go out of my house. I was thinking about taking off my headscarf. That was the initial thing.

Perhaps most difficult to measure, fear, tension, depression, and psychological strain were reported by the students. Some of the participants missed several days or even weeks of their college classes. Physical manifestations of stress included problems with sleeping, weight loss, and recurring headaches. When asked about the effects of feeling discriminated against, Najah, a first generation immigrant from Trinidad, said:

It ruins my day. Sometimes it ruins my week. Last semester I got extremely, extremely depressed. When I hear the stuff on the news that's happening, the portrayal that the media is giving of Muslims, I wish I could have a microphone and tell people, “We're not like that.” It would really, really aggravate me. I was so tired, I was having headaches every day. It definitely hurts. It made me feel like, I wanted to do something, tell people more.

It is impossible to understand the feelings and perceptions of the Muslims interviewed without recognizing that these discriminatory acts occurred after the September 11th disaster. Even so, the Muslim students often remarked that although the backlash was bad, it was not nearly as bad as it might have been.<sup>10</sup> However, the definition of “bad” must be placed in context. For example, I considered the harassment, verbal threats, and physical violence reported by the interviewees as significant enough to warrant concern. On the other hand, given the larger fears that many interviewees expressed—such as the possibility of being detained, deported (even though most were U.S. citizens), or “placed in internment camps like the Japanese during World War II”—less substantial acts of discrimination perhaps seemed insignificant in comparison.

### Increased Group Solidarity

After September 11th, one of the major themes conveyed by the interviewees was that their isolation from the larger U.S. community led to an increased sense of group solidarity among Muslims. This response is not necessarily unique. Several scholars have noted that one reaction to real or perceived group threats is increased group solidarity (Bozorgmehr, 2000; Coser, 1964; Doosje and Ellemers, 1997; Durkheim, [1893] 1984; Portes and Sensenbrenner, 1993; Simmel, 1955; Turkel, 2002; Yancey et al., 1976). Indeed, social scientists have documented ethnic and religious minority groups coming together in the face of adversity throughout U.S. history, such as Japanese citizens during and following World War II (Bonacich and Modell, 1980; Fujita and O’Brien, 1985; Montero, 1981), and among the Irish who immigrated to America during the potato famine (Ignatiev, 1995).

Similarly, Goffman (1963) argues that members of a stigmatized group have a tendency to come together into small social groups whose membership derives from the stigmatization. Malik, who was raised in Saudi Arabia and moved to the United States for college, anticipated that alienation from the larger community would bring Muslims together:

You can see that it’s only natural that something like this would foster group cohesion. You’re being identified in a particular way. When that is the case, in order to feel stronger, you’ll identify with that group. You want to get closer to that group. It’s a natural urge.

The internal cohesion and structure of a minority group may sometimes arise as a result of the development of an awareness of being considered different (Tajfel, 1978). Likewise, a distinct form of “therapeutic community” emerged among Muslims following the attacks. Because they felt, and often were, excluded from much of the post-September 11th nationalistic sentiment, they began to rely more heavily on fellow Muslims for social support.

## Muslim Community Cohesion

During the interviews, the students reported that although they were close friends with other Muslims before September 11th, there was an increased level of bonding within the community after the disaster. The participants said that this was primarily due to a common level of understanding among fellow Muslims, as many Muslims came to share similar fears and uncertainties, on personal, local, national, and international levels, after the disaster. Hanan explained how her relationships changed after September 11th:

Everyone was so concerned and so understanding, especially my Muslim friends. They were scared, too. That made me realize that they're really there for me. Because of that I feel a lot closer to them than I did before. I think whenever people go through something like that, it's a bonding process. Now I see them a lot more than I used to.

Because the students felt isolated from the non-Muslim community, other Muslims served as an important source of emotional support. Muslim student groups offered a safe space to express emotional responses, fear, and anger, and to receive empathy.<sup>11</sup>

An enhanced sense of community within the Muslim group also resulted from increased amounts of time spent together. Much of this time was related to additional efforts to educate the U.S. community about Islam and Muslims in America. The interviewees described a multitude of activities that they had developed and implemented to improve the public's cultural awareness and general understanding of Islam. Most of the students helped organize or chose to participate in one or all of the following activities: presenting guest lectures to their university classes; visiting local churches, synagogues, and schools through community outreach projects; or speaking at campus-wide educational events.

When I returned to New York City to conduct a third set of interviews, almost seven months after the attacks, the students were more hopeful about their futures as Muslim Americans. This increased optimism seemed directly related to the extensive efforts that they had undertaken as a community following September 11th, as well as the positive reception that they received from non-Muslims.

Along with incidents of harassment, the attacks were also followed by a surge of public interest in Islam and Muslims. One of the most encouraging aspects reported by the students was that they believed that people were genuinely interested in learning about Islam and understanding them and their faith. The participants talked about how they believed much of the anger and blame they initially received from others was beginning to be replaced by interest and engagement. Sanae, who moved from Pakistan to New York City to attend college, talked about this shift:

Initially things were very rough, like when you came last time. People were cursing you out. Every time they saw us they'd make this face. Then it slowly got better, but it's still not back to normal. Even now, sometimes when you're sitting in the subway, you do get looks. But now it's more interest than anything else. Before it was fear, like, "Oh, my God, I hope she doesn't have a bomb." Now it's more like interest, "Okay, so she's a Muslim." They observe what I'm wearing, how I'm talking. If I'm with my friend and I'm talking English, or if I talk about something, we're business majors, we talk about finance and this and that all the time. They're kind of, I can see surprise on their face, like, "Oh, these really are normal people." It's getting better now.

The interviewees agreed that many of their concerns and fears had gradually decreased over time, particularly after the initial ethnic and religious backlash subsided. However, some wondered whether things would ever "return to normal" for the Muslim community, or if the aftermath of September 11th would continue to impact their lives, relationships, and futures in America. Ahmad, a second-generation immigrant of Palestinian descent, worried not only about his future, but also about the prospects for his children:

Our main concern here is, what is our future? That's what it comes down to. You get these new history books: "Muslims Attack America." What's going to happen when kids in school read them? Your people attacked my culture. How do you raise children in such an environment? It all comes into effect in the long run. You've really got to look into the future perspective rather than what's just now, about what's going to happen a month, a year, ten years, a few generations from now. What is this country going to fall back on?

### **Conclusion**

The Muslims interviewed for this study felt isolated from the national therapeutic community that emerged after the events of September 11th for four primary reasons: feeling blamed for the attacks; being excluded from mourning, bonding, and helping behaviors; having to manage increased concerns for individual safety; and witnessing acts of discrimination and violence perpetrated against Muslims in the United States. This social exclusion led to increased group solidarity and identification with the Muslim community. Like all citizens, Muslim Americans were significantly impacted by the events and aftermath of September 11th. As a group, they suffered the same shock, anger, and grief as the rest of the nation. However, because they were immediately placed on the defensive after the attacks, they were victimized not only by the disaster, but also by the public reaction that followed.

A recurring theme of sociological investigations of natural disasters has been that mass emergencies create a sense of solidarity out of which emerges a therapeutic community response. In a therapeutic community, it is rare for segments of the impacted population to be excluded from the post-disaster unity, such as occurred with the Muslim community after September 11th. Therefore, when an intentional, human-conceived disaster is considered, traditional ways of understanding and responding to emergent social processes must be re-evaluated.

It is obvious that a richer and more sophisticated exploration of post-disaster therapeutic communities is necessary. Immediately after September 11th, we witnessed communities develop through both inclusion and exclusion. The existence of these types of emergent communities warrants inquiry into how violent and intentional acts, including terrorist attacks, are likely to encourage anger and blame, creating an “us” sentiment that can only take shape in relation to a “them” or “other” sentiment. Consideration of this issue is important because the resultant division may lead to illegal acts of discrimination and bias-motivated crimes, which are socially disruptive to the larger community and may be emotionally devastating to minority communities (Cogan, 2002).

Furthermore, the focus on the physical and economic devastation caused by the September 11th attacks, and their potential psychological impacts on U.S. citizens, should be extended to explore their specific impacts on ethnic and religious minority groups who have been victimized twice by disaster: first by the actual attacks themselves, and second by the backlash that followed. It has often gone unrecognized that the emotional devastation from a disaster can be at least as great as the physical devastation (Clizbe, 2003). Therefore, this longitudinal research is necessary to understand the unique social and psychological impacts for dual-victimized minority communities.

Outreach efforts should be offered to vulnerable communities to provide opportunities to enhance public dialogue—before disaster strikes. Moreover, local and federal policy should be used to help promote tolerance, build community, and decrease social isolation among individuals and groups, particularly in light of the unprecedented severity of the backlash that followed the September 11th attacks. It is imperative that future social research and public policy address issues of religious and ethnic discrimination and social exclusion after terrorist attacks and other intentional, human-conceived disasters.

## NOTES

1. Conflict certainly may occur after natural disasters, although it is much less widespread—at least during the initial aftermath—than that which has been

documented after technological disasters or intentional acts of violence (see Quarantelli and Dynes, 1976).

2. Advocacy groups for Arab and Muslim Americans documented a combined total of over 2,000 reported incidents of harassment, violence, and other discriminatory acts in the year following the September 11th attacks (American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee, 2002; Council on American-Islamic Relations, 2002; Human Rights Watch, 2002; Ibish, 2002).

The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) reported a dramatic rise in hate crimes against Muslims following the September 11th attacks. In 2000, the FBI received reports of only 28 hate crimes against Muslims in the United States. In 2001, that number increased to 481, which represents a 1700% increase. As of January 2003, the U.S. Department of Justice was investigating approximately 380 hate crime cases that were directly linked to the backlash that followed September 11th. Prosecutors contend most of the crimes—including threats, assaults, bombing plots, acts of vandalism, arson, shootings, and murders—were in retaliation for the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon.

3. Because there is no official record of Muslims living in the United States, one of the most viable ways to find a large population of Muslims in New York City was through campus Muslim Student Associations (MSAs), a nationally recognized student organization. Within the MSAs, I relied on key contacts who helped to organize interviews and recruit other students. Initially, to gain acceptance and permission to conduct the interviews, I faxed or e-mailed a detailed description of the project to each of the contacts at the colleges and universities. This description defined the purpose and goals of the research project, the sample population I was seeking, and the broad themes that I would be exploring. I included a cover letter verifying my credentials as a doctoral student and research assistant. Once I had received approval to interview the students, I sent a shortened version of the research description that could be posted to e-mail listservs and flyers to be placed in the MSA office. The e-mails, flyers, and support from the student contacts helped with recruitment for the study. All those who responded to the recruitment efforts were interviewed.
4. One of the five fundamental pillars of Islam requires that adherents fast during the Holy Month of Ramadan. From before dawn until sunset, those who are observing the fast are forbidden to eat, drink, smoke, or have sexual relations. The Muslim lunar year is shorter than the solar year by approximately 11 days. Thus, Ramadan occurs at slightly different times each year, according to the solar calendar followed in the United States (Denny, 1994, p.126-130). My second site visit, in December 2001, coincided with Ramadan. Therefore, I was able to break the fast, listen to the calls to prayer, and eat Ramadan dinners with the interviewees.
5. More females than males were interviewed for two reasons. First, as with many on-campus student organizations, most of the MSAs that I visited had a majority

female membership. Secondly, my position as a female researcher allowed me more access to the females than the males.

6. The word *hijab* comes from the Arabic word for hiding or concealing, and for women, also denotes covering the body completely with loose clothing to ensure modesty. The head covering typically drapes around the neck and covers the bosom as well.
7. The *niquaab* is a face veil that covers the hair, neck, and face, leaving only the eyes visible.
8. For the purposes of anonymity, all interviewee names have been changed. Pseudonyms are used throughout the paper.
9. The word *jihad* has been frequently referenced in the U.S. media—particularly since September 11th—and is often translated as “holy war.” The word *jihad* actually means “striving” or “to strive for a better way of life.” In its primary sense, it is an inner striving to rid the self from debased actions or inclinations, and to exercise constancy and perseverance in achieving a higher moral standard.
10. It is also important to note that after recounting negative experiences, the interviewees would often focus on positive, kind responses from friends, classmates, professors, and strangers after the disaster. The students regularly commented that they recognized that hateful acts were only being committed by a small minority of ignorant individuals who did not represent the United States as a whole. This topic warrants further consideration, but is beyond the scope of this paper.
11. This is similar to the findings reported by Edelstein (1988, pp. 110-117), in his study of a community contaminated by residential toxic exposure. He found that as the victims came to feel increasingly isolated from friends, relatives, and co-workers living outside the community, they became more reliant on fellow victims as sources of social support. Edelstein refers to this phenomenon as “outsiders don’t know what we went through,” and reports that this sentiment is echoed in virtually every toxic exposure incident he has investigated.

## References

- Adler, Patricia A. and Peter Adler. 1987. *Membership Roles in Field Research*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.
- Alexander, David. 2002. "Nature's Impartiality, Man's Inhumanity: Reflections on Terrorism and World Crisis in a Context of Historical Disaster." *Disasters* 26(1): 1–9.
- Allport, Gordon W. 1954. *The Nature of Prejudice*. Cambridge, MA: Perseus Books.
- American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee. 2002. <http://www.adc.org/>.
- Barton, Allen H. 1970. *Communities in Disaster: A Sociological Analysis of Collective Stress Situations*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Company, Inc.
- Baum, Andrew, Raymond Fleming, and Laura M. Davidson. 1983. "Natural Disasters and Technological Catastrophe." *Environment and Behavior* 15(3): 333–354.
- Bonacich, Edna and John Modell. 1980. *The Economic Basis of Ethnic Solidarity: Small Business in the Japanese American Community*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Bozorgmehr, Mehdi. 2000. "Does Host Hostility Create Ethnic Solidarity? The Experience of Iranians in the United States." *Bulletin of the Royal Institute for Inter-Faith Studies* 2(1): 159–178.
- Bucher, Rue. 1957. "Blame and Hostility in Disaster." *American Journal of Sociology* 62(5): 467–475.
- Clizbe, John. 2003. "Emerging Research and Practice in Disaster Mental Health." *Natural Hazards Observer* 27(3): 12–13.
- Cogan, Jeanine C. 2002. "Hate Crime as a Crime Category Worthy of Policy Attention." *American Behavioral Scientist* 46(1): 173–185.
- Cogan, Jeanine C. and Amy Marcus-Newhall. 2002. "Introduction." *American Behavioral Scientist* 46(1): 8–13.
- Coser, Lewis A. 1964. *The Functions of Social Conflict*. 2nd edition. Glencoe, IL: Free Press.
- Couch, Stephen R. and J. Stephen Kroll-Smith. 1985. "The Chronic Technical Disaster: Toward a Social Scientific Perspective." *Social Science Quarterly* 66: 564–575.
- Couch, Stephen R. and J. Stephen Kroll-Smith, eds. 1991. *Communities at Risk: Collective Responses to Technological Hazards*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing.

- Council on American Islamic Relations. 2002. *American Muslims: One Year After 9-11*. Washington, D.C.: Council on American-Islamic Relations Research Center.
- Cuthbertson, Beverley H. and Joanne M. Nigg. 1987. "Technological Disaster and the Nontherapeutic Community: A Question of True Victimization." *Environment and Behavior* 19(4): 462–483.
- Dacy, Douglas C. and Howard Kunreuther. 1969. *The Economics of Natural Disasters*. New York: The Free Press.
- Demerath, Nicholas J. and Anthony F.C. Wallace. 1957. "Human Adaptation to Disaster." *Human Organization* 16: 1–2.
- Denny, Frederic Mathewson. 1994. *An Introduction to Islam*. 2nd edition. New York: Macmillan Publishing Company.
- Doosje, Bertjan and Naomi Ellemers. 1997. "Stereotyping Under Threat: The Role of Group Identification." Pp. 257–273 in R. Spears et al., eds., *The Social Psychology of Stereotyping and Group Life*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Drabek, Thomas E. 1970. "Methodology of Studying Disasters: Past Patterns and Future Possibilities." *American Behavioral Scientist* 13(3): 331–343.
- Drabek, Thomas E. 1986a. *Human System Responses to Disaster: An Inventory of Sociological Findings*. New York: Springer-Verlag.
- Drabek, Thomas E. 1986b. "The Problem of Taxonomy in Disaster Research." Presentation at the annual meeting of the American Sociological Association, New York City, August.
- Drabek, Thomas E. and Enrico L. Quarantelli. 1967. "Scapegoats, Villains, and Disasters." *Trans-action* (March): 12–17.
- Durkheim, Emile. [1893] 1984. *The Division of Labor in Society*. Translated by W. D. Halls. New York: The Free Press.
- Dynes, Russell R. 1970. *Organized Behavior in Disaster*. Lexington, MA: Heath Lexington Books.
- Edelstein, Michael R. 1988. *Contaminated Communities: The Social and Psychological Impacts of Residential Toxic Exposure*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Erikson, Kai. 1994. *A New Species of Trouble: The Human Experience of Modern Disasters*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.
- Erikson, Kai T. 1976. *Everything in Its Path: Destruction of Community in the Buffalo Creek Flood*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

- Federal Bureau of Investigation. 2002. "Crime in the United States–2001." <http://www.fbi.gov/ucr/01cius.htm>.
- Fritz, Charles E. 1961. "Disaster." Pp. 651–694 in R.K. Merton and R.A. Nisbet, eds., *Contemporary Social Problems*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc.
- Fujita, Stephen S. and David J. O'Brien. 1985. "Structural Assimilation, Ethnic Group Membership, and Political Participation among Japanese Americans: A Research Note." *Social Forces* 63(4): 986–995.
- Glaser, Barney, and Anselm Strauss. 1967. *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*. New York: Aldine de Gruyter.
- Goffman, Erving. 1963. *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*. New York: Simon & Schuster Inc.
- Gunn, S.W.A. 2001. "On Man-Conceived Disasters." *Journal of Humanitarian Medicine* 1(2): 7–8.
- Hewitt, Kenneth. 1997. *Regions of Risk: A Geographical Introduction to Disasters*. Boston: Addison Wesley Longman, Inc.
- Human Rights Watch. 2002. "We Are Not the Enemy: Hate Crimes against Arabs, Muslims, and Those Perceived to be Arab or Muslim after September 11." *Human Rights Watch Report* 14(6): 1–42.
- Ibish, Hussein. 2002. Personal communication with Lori Peek on September 25.
- Ignatiev, Noel. 1995. *How the Irish Became White*. New York: Routledge.
- Juergensmeyer, Mark. 2000. *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Kendra, James M. and Tricia Wachtendorf. 2001. "Rebel Food . . . Renegade Supplies: Convergence after the World Trade Center Attack." Preliminary Paper #316. Newark, DE: Disaster Research Center, University of Delaware.
- Kroll-Smith, J. Stephen and Stephen Robert Couch. 1990. *The Real Disaster is Above Ground: A Mine Fire & Social Conflict*. Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky.
- Krueger, Richard A. 1988. *Focus Groups: A Practical Guide for Applied Research*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.
- Lofland, John and Lyn H. Lofland. 1995. *Analyzing Social Settings: A Guide to Qualitative Observation and Analysis*. 3rd edition. New York: Wadsworth Publishing Company.

- Mileti, Dennis. 2001. "Rising from the Ashes: In Disasters, We Are All the Same." *The Denver Post* (September 16): E-01.
- Montero, Darrel. 1981. "The Japanese Americans: Changing Patterns of Assimilation Over Three Generations." *American Sociological Review* 46(6): 829–839.
- Morgan, David L. 1997. *Focus Groups as Qualitative Research*. 2nd edition. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Neal, David M. 1984. "Blame Assignment in a Diffuse Disaster Situation: A Case Example of the Role of an Emergent Citizen Group." *International Journal of Mass Emergencies and Disasters* 2(2): 251–266.
- Oliver-Smith, Anthony. 1979. "Post Disaster Consensus and Conflict in a Traditional Society. The 1970 Avalanche of Yungay, Peru." *Mass Emergencies* 4: 39–52.
- Peek, Lori A. 2002. *Religious and Ethnic Issues After September 11, 2001: Examining Muslim University Student Experiences*. Quick Response Report #156. Boulder, CO: Natural Hazards Research and Applications Information Center, University of Colorado. <http://www.colorado.edu/hazards/qr/qr156/qr156.html>.
- Portes, Alejandro and Julia Sensenbrenner. 1993. "Embeddedness and Immigration: Notes on the Social Determinants of Economic Action." *American Journal of Sociology* 98: 1320–1350.
- Quarantelli, E.L. 1993. "Community Crises: An Exploratory Comparison of the Characteristics and Consequences of Disasters and Riots." *Journal of Contingencies and Crisis Management* 1(2): 67–78.
- Quarantelli, E.L., ed. 1998. *What is a Disaster? Perspectives on the Question*. New York: Routledge.
- Quarantelli, E.L. and Russell R. Dynes. 1976. "Community Conflict: Its Absence and Its Presence in Natural Disasters." *Mass Emergencies* 1: 139–152.
- Quarantelli, E.L. and Russell R. Dynes. 1977. "Response to Social Crisis and Disaster." *Annual Review of Sociology* 3: 23–49.
- Reinharz, Shulamit. 1992. *Feminist Methods in Social Research*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Scanlon, J. 1988. "Planning for Peace and War Emergencies – Learning from 70 Years of Disaster Research." *Disaster Management* 1(2): 3–8.
- Simmel, Georg. 1955. *Conflict and the Web of Group Affiliations*. Glencoe, IL: Free Press.

Tajfel, Henri. 1978. "The Social Psychology of Minorities." Report #38. New York: Minority Rights Group.

Tierney, Kathleen. 2002. "September 11 and Beyond: Shifting Concerns and Cross-Cutting Lessons." Plenary Session Presentation at the 27th Annual Workshop on Hazards Research and Applications. Boulder, Colorado, July.

Turkel, Gerald. 2002. "Sudden Solidarity and the Rush to Normalization: Toward an Alternative Approach." *Sociological Focus* 35: 73–79.

United States Department of Justice. 2002. <http://www.usdoj.gov/>.

Warheit, George J. 1976. "A Note on Natural Disasters and Civil Disturbances: Similarities and Differences." *Mass Emergencies* 1(2): 131–137.

Webb, Gary R. 2002. "Sociology, Disasters, and Terrorism: Understanding Threats of the New Millennium." *Sociological Focus* 35(1): 87–95.

Yancey, William L., Eugene P. Ericksen, and Richard N. Juliani. 1976. "Emergent Ethnicity: A Review and Reformulation." *American Sociological Review* 41(3): 391–403.

### Acknowledgments

This work was supported by the Graduate School at the University of Colorado, the Natural Hazards Research and Applications Information Center, and the National Science Foundation, Grant Number 0200.05.0203B, which is gratefully acknowledged. However, only the author is responsible for the interpretations and conclusions made in this paper.

I would like to thank Syed Ali, Gary David, Julie Gailus, Sayaros Mohamed, Mary Fran Myers, and Joyce Nielsen for commenting on earlier versions of this paper. I am also grateful for the suggestions provided by two anonymous reviewers. Wendy Steinhacker offered valuable editorial advice, and Sandy Adler assisted with the interview transcriptions for this project. Norbert Baer and Dean Savage kindly assisted with my research efforts in New York City. Jacki Monday provided sound editorial and intellectual guidance, which I sincerely appreciate. Finally, I wish to thank the Muslim students who made this research possible through their willingness to share their time, thoughts, and experiences.

Correspondence should be addressed to Lori A. Peek, Doctoral Student, Department of Sociology, Research Assistant, Natural Hazards Research and Applications Information Center, University of Colorado–Boulder, 482 UCB, Boulder, CO 80309-0482; (303) 492-1028; e-mail: [lori.peek@colorado.edu](mailto:lori.peek@colorado.edu).