

Identity transformation among the Muslim youth in Canada

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Abstract

The rapid rise of ethnic diversity in immigrant-receiving countries has resulted in a general anti-diversity, anti-multiculturalism discourse, as well as a wave of anti-Muslim sentiments. Some existing studies have suggested that Canada might have been immune from these two largely European trends – an important but still largely unsubstantiated finding. *The objective of this project is to investigate the extent of, and the reasons for, this ‘Canadian exceptionalism’,* through addressing the following questions: **1)** How do Muslims compare to other religious groups, in terms of their attachment to, and satisfaction with their lives in, Canada? **2)** Within Canada’s Muslim population, what factors influence the strength of their attachment to Canadian society? **3)** Do the identities of Muslim immigrants go through any transformation during their lives in Canada? If yes, what is the nature of those transformations, and what contributes to them? The present paper addresses these questions using a variety of Canadian and international survey data, as well as the contents of a series of in-depth face-to-face interviews with Muslims living in Canada.

BACKGROUND

The rapid increase in the ethnic diversity of many industrial nations, given the influx of large numbers of immigrants from non-European countries, has created a so-called ‘challenge of diversity’ (Wuthnow, 2004). This challenge, it is argued, is leading to a loss of social capital (Arneil, 2006; Charles and Kline, 2006; Coffe and Geys, 2006; Leigh, 2006a; 2006b; Letki, 2008 forthcoming; Lloyd, 2006a; Putnam, 2003; 2007; 2006b; Ulph, 2006), decline of support for the welfare state (Alesina et. al., 1999; Alesina and Ferrara, 2000; 2002; van Parijs, 2003), heightened concerns for safety and security (Goodhart, 2004), and an erosion of common culture and identity (Griffiths, 2009; Huntington, 2005; Kaufmann, 2004; Sciolino, 2007). One consequence of this growing discomfort with diversity has been a retreat in many immigrant-receiving countries from Multiculturalism policies, and some of its closely associated concepts such as ‘transnationalism’ (Satzewich and Wong, 2006), which were initially adopted to celebrate the diversity resulting from immigration (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2006; Kymlicka, 2007; Modood, 2007; Parekh, 2006). In many of these countries, the strength of opposition to diversity and multiculturalism has been proportional to the size of their Muslim immigrant populations, who are increasingly viewed, particularly in the post-9/11 era, as being inassimilable, having a tendency to violence, holding illiberal values, and acting as importers of international and regional conflicts into the receiving societies (for discussions on this, see Arat-Koc, 2006; Bird, 2005; de Wenden and Wihtol, 2005; Giry, 2007; Kymlicka, 2005; 2009; Modood, 2005; Poynting and Perry, 2007; Rahnema, 2008; Ricucci, 2005; Safdar et. al., 2008; Sadeghi, 2007; Sheikh, 2007; Sirin et. al., 2008; Weld, 2003). This opposition has generated an intense debate about diversity and multiculturalism, in which special attention is paid to Muslim minorities.

Despite the main arguments of this largely European/American literature, the Canadian research on the issue of diversity in general, and that of Muslim minorities in particular, has raised the possibility of a ‘Canadian exceptionalism’ with regard to both diversity and Muslim issues. Several studies, for instance, have suggested that, in Canada, diversity has *not* resulted in the social ills cited in the European literature (Banting and Kymlicka, 2004; Garcia et. al., 2008; Hou and Wu, 2008; Kazemipur, 2006; 2009a; Kymlicka, 2007; 2009; Mulder and Krahn, 2005; Satzewich, 2008; Soroka et. al., 2007; Wong, 2007; and the contributions to a volume edited by Kay and Johnston, 2007). In addition, the studies seem to be pointing to a different, and much more positive, experience by Muslim immigrants in Canada (see, for example, Kazemipur, 2009b; McGown, 1999; Moghissi, 2009; Moghissi et. al., 2009; Valpy, 2006). The possibility of such a ‘Canadian exceptionalism’ can have far-reaching implications for the current debates on diversity and Muslims, provided two conditions are met: first, it is conclusively shown that such exceptionalism does indeed exist; and, second, if it does exist, that the factors behind it are identified.

Canadian research is limited in both areas. On the issue of diversity, for instance, most studies seem to be arguing for a lack of convincing evidence that Canada is following the European path (see, for instance, Banting and Kymlicka, 2004; Kay and Johnston, 2007; Kymlicka, 2009) – an argument that is important but which does not show, positively and empirically, that Canada is following a different path. The few empirically-based studies that do exist show mixed results, with few or no clues as to the possible contributing factors (see Andrews et. al., 2008; Reitz et. al., 2009). With regard to Muslims in Canada, several studies

question the validity of the above-mentioned optimistic picture, by illustrating the particularly difficult situation of Muslim men in the Canadian labour market (Biles et. al., 2005; Model and Lin, 2002), and that of Muslim women who choose to wear the *hijab* (Persad and Lukas, 2002). On the flip side, the data show Muslims' dangerously low levels of social trust, life satisfaction, interaction with those outside their ethnic group, as well as their high levels of feeling out of place (see, Kazemipur, 2009b). The studies that have pointed to a more encouraging picture either have also reported a great deal of variations within the Muslim population (see Moghissi et. al., 2009), or that they have attributed this picture to some abstract and un-testable forces (e.g., references to 'political culture' in McGown, 1999, and to multiculturalism in Kymlicka, 2007). The possibility of a 'Canadian exceptionalism', therefore, has remained very real but largely unsubstantiated.

This proposed research aims to transcend the above shortcomings by comparing Canada and other industrial nations on the intertwined issues of diversity and Muslim minorities. I have identified four related studies currently underway: 1) a study known as the Equality, Security, and Community project on diversity, by colleagues at UBC (for a recent publication out of this project, see Kay and Johnston, 2007); 2) the Muslim Diaspora project, by colleagues at York (for recent publications out of this project, see Moghissi, 2003; 2006; Moghissi et. al., 2009; for a review of the latter, see Kazemipur, 2009c); 3) A potential CURA project, based at U of Ottawa, on religion and diversity in Canada (see Beaman, 2009); and 4) a project associated with the Canada Research Chair on Islam and Pluralism, University of Montreal. These projects have focuses different from the current study either because of their lack of a focus on Muslims (1st and 3rd), the adoption of a legalistic and/or a political philosophical approach (3rd); or a too narrow focus on only a few Muslim minorities (2nd). No publication out of the 4th project was found in English.

THE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The conceptual point of departure of the current study is recognition of the possibility that minorities, including Muslims, may develop new identities that have more commonality with those of the majority populations; and, that the latter may also develop new identities that are more receptive of diversity and/or minorities. The understanding of the factors influencing such identity transformation processes is, according to Putnam (2007), the current frontier of research on diversity. The current scholarly debates on the issue of diversity and/or Muslims seem to have acknowledged the centrality of the concept of identity. Most, however, seem to also treat identities as fixed and, as a result, have focused on finding a way to bridge the majority-minority identity gap – either by expecting the former to 'recognize' the identities of the latter, along the lines with a liberal philosophy (Abu-Laban and Stasiulis, 2000; Beaman, 2008; Islam, 2000; Kymlicka, 1989; 1996; 2007; 2009; McGown, 1999; Robinson, 2007; Taylor, 1994; Tierney, 2007; Zine, 2007); or expecting minorities to shed their own identities in favor of adopting those of the majority, along the lines with an assimilationist view (Brug and Verkuyten, 2007; Goodhart, 2004; Griffiths, 2009; Huntington, 2005). In viewing identity in this particular way, they have committed the fallacies of essentialism and/or reductionism. Few researchers have entertained the third possibility that people may combine multiple identities or may experience a transformation of their identities (see Howard-Hassman, 1999; 2000; Ichiyama et. al., 1996; Nyang, 1996; Phinney et. al., 2007; Ramazan, 1999; 2004; Rowe et. al., 1994; Sen, 2006). This

latter view constitutes the heart of the conceptual approach adopted in the research proposed here.

This conceptual approach can be situated within a broader theoretical view known as the *relational* perspective – starting with acknowledging the fluidity of social processes and the diversity of potential outcomes, none inevitable, all depending on the nature of social processes (see Depelteau, 2008; Perry and Shotwell, 2009; Tilly, 1984; 1998; 2006; 2007) – which detours the problems of determinism and voluntarism associated with the more conventional ‘structural’ and ‘agency-based’ approaches. The desired outcome in the case of the current study is the *formation of common identities* by the minority and majority. The main axioms of this conceptual approach are:

- a. The strength of the attachment of minority groups to the larger society is correlated with the extent of overlap between the former’s ethnic identities and the latter’s national identity (Putnam, 2007).
- b. Such overlaps are shaped by two sets of factors, *institutional* – which has received more attention in the literature, and includes things such as in/equalities in accessing vital economic and political resources – and *situational* – that is, relationships at micro-levels, among individuals and groups (see, Cerulo, 1997; Callero, 2003; Howard, 2000; Sanders, 2002; Satzewich and Wong, 2003).
- c. Social contacts among people of different ethnic/cultural backgrounds can shatter their pre-conceived negative stereotypes towards each other and, hence, generate new and common identities that will set new boundaries for in- and out-groups. This is the main premise of the social psychological hypothesis known as ‘contact theory’ (see Allport, 1979[1954]; DeYoung et. al., 2005; Dixon, 2006; Emerson et. al., 2002; Laar et. al., 2005; McLaren, 2003; Marschall and Stolle, 2004; Moody, 2001; Pettigrew, 1998; Powers and Ellison, 1995; Sacerdote and Marmaros, 2005; Sigelman et. al., 1996; Sigelman and Welch, 1993; Stein et. al., 2000; Yancey, 1999; Verkuyten, 2000, 2002, 2005, 2006, 2007).
- d. Identity transformations occur through four possible mechanisms: 1) *learning* about the out-group and the correcting of misperceptions; 2) *change of behaviour* among the members of the groups involved, which, in turn, can impose a modification of their previous attitudes; 3) development of *emotional and affective ties*; and 4) *weakening of ethnocentric views* (Pettigrew, 1998). Initial studies emphasized that such processes materialize only in situations marked by four key conditions: equal group status within the situation; common goals; intergroup cooperation; and the support of authorities, law, or custom. More recently, however, Pettigrew and Tropp (2006) have convincingly shown the robustness of the contact theory, even when these conditions are not fully met.
- e. Identity change does not necessarily mean the replacement of one identity by another. Rather, people may have multiple identities, with one being dominant, depending on the circumstances. So, the identity transformation may very well be signified by a change in the ‘identities portfolio’ of a group, minority or majority (for a discussion of this dynamics in Britain and in India, see Sen, 2006 and Varshney, 2001; in South Africa, Haile et. al., 2006;

in Singapore, Eng, 2002; Kadir, 2005; and in the 19th-century America, Costa and Kahn, 2003a; 2003b; 2006).

The adoption of this conceptual framework provides more flexibility in addressing all the four research questions of the proposed study, by adding the ‘interaction’ element to the ‘diversity’ debate, and by allowing the examination of how such differential interaction experiences may be related to different identity transformation experiences. Some recent works in this area indicate the rising appeal of the *relational* approach in Canada (see, for instance, Arat-Koc, 2006; Bouchard and Taylor, 2008; Nesbitt-Larking, 2008; Reitz, 2009; Reitz et. al., 2009; Wong et. al., 2008).

METHODOLOGY

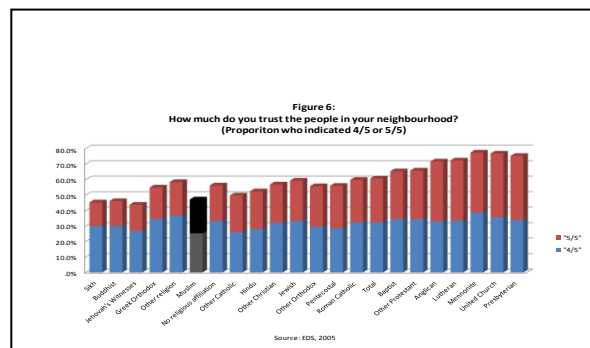
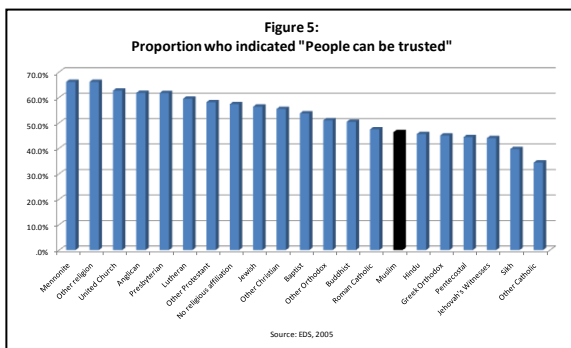
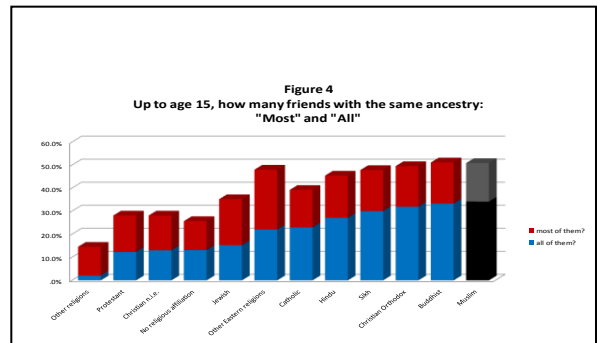
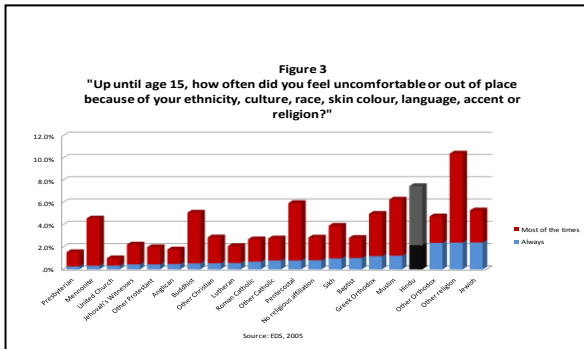
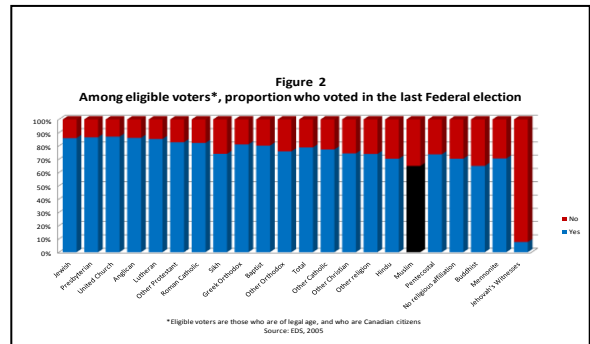
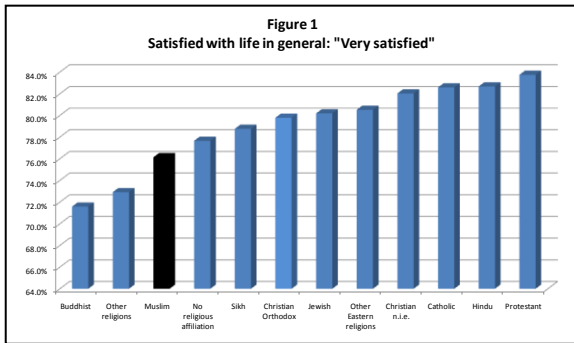
The data for the quantitative part of the study have come from Canadian General Social Survey (GSS17-2003) and Ethnic Diversity Survey (2005). Also, a series of face-to-face interviews have been conducted with Muslims living in Western Canada, in order to capture some of the deep-running currents related to their experiences in Canada. To analyze these data, a variety of statistical procedures and content analysis techniques have been used.

FINDINGS

The findings reported here are some partial results of the broader project.

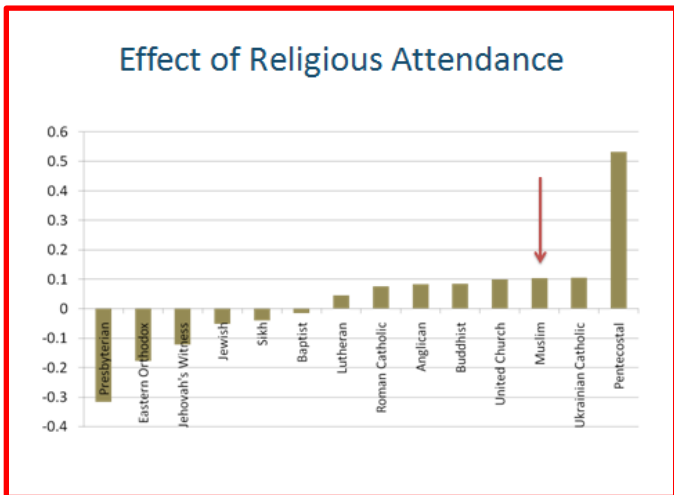
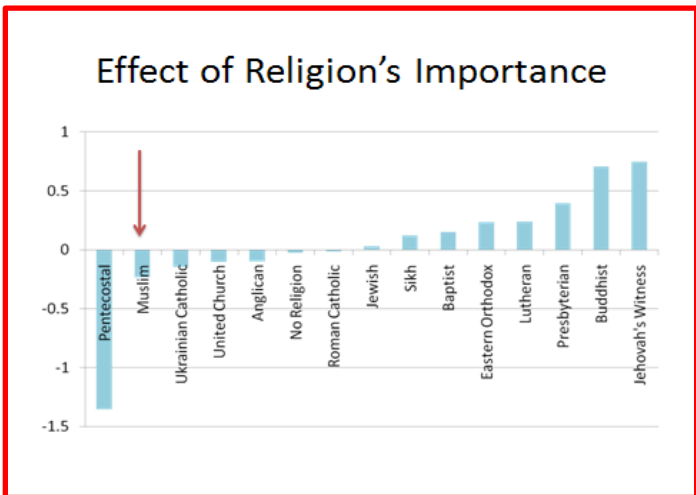
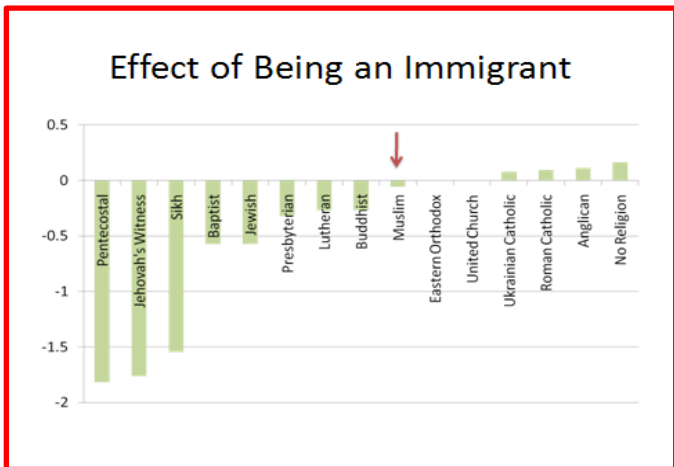
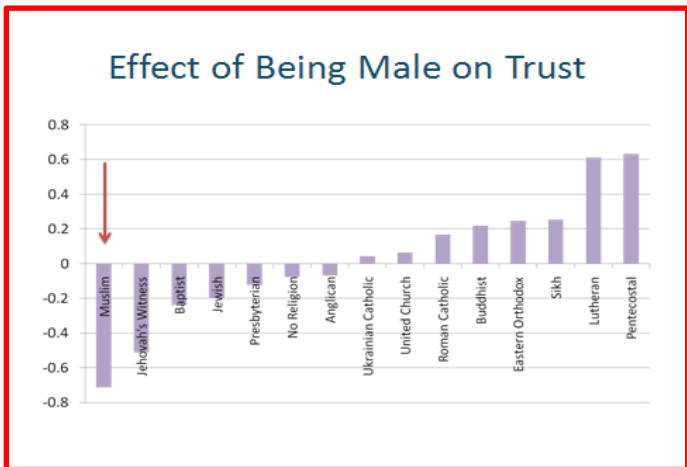
Part A) Canada’s Muslims, compared to people of other religious backgrounds

Figures 1 through 6 report the breakdown by religion of responses given by Canadians to a variety of questions on the general feelings of happiness, trust, isolation, and political engagement. In all of these figures, the percentages reported for Muslims are worrisome: among the lowest in terms of trust in general public, trust in neighbours, life satisfaction, voting, and among the highest in terms feeling out of place due to their ethnicity/religion/culture/race and interacting only with co-ethnics.



Part B) Focusing on trust and its predictors

Given the extremely low level of trust that Muslims have expressed towards the larger population, a series of logistic regression models have been run, in order to identify some of potential predictors of trust. Interestingly enough, the four graphs below show that while being an immigrant, a male, and a strongly religious conviction reduces the likelihood of trust among Muslims, their participation in their religious functions raises their tendency to trust the general public. This positive impact could be attributed to two potential factors: the positive feelings associated with the public recognition of their religion by allowing them to participate in such events, and the greater exposure to the diversity of Muslim population (in terms of racial, ethnic, and national origins) which may generate a greater degree of tolerance among them.



Part C) Identity transformation among the Muslim youth

Switching from a distrusting to a trusting view involves the shattering of some previously strong stereotypes. Changing the composition and strength of various stereotypes can be equaled to an identity change. The findings reported in this section point to some of the psychological processes through which Muslim youth experience such identity transformations.

The main themes that the findings are:

1. Muslim youth immigrants go through an identity transformation after arrival in Canada, and as a result of their exposure to realities of life in Canadian society.
2. Despite the secular nature of Canadian society, as well as the secular environment in their families back in the home countries, in some cases, such transformations make them more religious and devout.
3. This implies that religious extremism is not necessarily an imported phenomenon, but a byproduct of the realities of life in Canada.
4. The main predictor of the content of such identity transformation experiences is the positive nature of their interactions with 'Canadians' – whether at the institutional or individual level.
5. Another predictor is the minority/majority status that some of these immigrants had enjoyed back in their home countries.

The Voices behind Statistics:

Male, Pakistani origin, in his 20s, living in Prairie region

- *“Reasons for **low level of trust among Muslims**: it might be because they get singled out, taken advantage of, simply because of our religious beliefs; that can damage/scar one’s wanting to belong to this country. They may assume that everyone mistrusts them, so they don’t trust anyone...”*

The Voices behind Statistics:

Female, in her 20s, less than 5 years in Canada, Lebanese immigrant

- "it was only when I came to Canada that I started learning about my own original identity"
- "See, Lebanese people - and I think that this is a general thing about many cultures, like Egyptians – think of themselves too highly back in Egypt and [Lebanon] ... [they] feel like they are the most educated and civilized Arabs in that region. And I never felt that one day I could make friend with Yemeni people, and befriends with Syrians, ... here all my friends are of different Arab backgrounds and that's not very... that's strange back home."
- "I think it humbled me and it created this **new identity** and now that I think about it, I think that I have this new identity...it's very mythical, ... I feel united with all the Arabs."
- "I never used to pray in Lebanon, ... [it was here that] I started building this attachment to this new kind of Islam that I wasn't very familiar with."
- "people are, you know, developing their own individual identities. There is no communal, united Arab. There is in Canada, but not in the Middle East."

The Voices behind Statistics:

Female, in her 20s, less than 5 years in Canada, Lebanese immigrant

- **Q. What about Canada allows you to do that, whereas in Lebanon you wouldn't talk about ...**
- "A: I think people here like **diversity**. They like that whole diversity thing. Over there, it's more, like, y'know: "being Lebanese is the best breed you can, we need to keep that pure race". That's a myth as well, right? ...And now I can feel I am closer and closer to identifying myself as **Canadian-Arab**."
- "... I feel that the longer I live here, the more I am accustomed to **Canadian values**, and I accept a lot of it. And I feel that it **can really be fused in with my Arab identity**."
- "I also **don't want my kids to have to be Arab-Muslim**. Especially if I don't know who my future partner will be, but assuming that this partner is not going to be neither Arab, nor Muslim, then I have to accommodate for the other party as well because they're not my only children [only my children], right?"

The Voices behind Statistics:

Male, Pakistani origin, in his 20s, living in the Prairie region

- "To me, Canada is the land of milk and honey ..."
- "When I came first, I expected to see only snow and white people; but, when I went to school and saw Asian people are sitting next to me, or other Pakistanis, I felt a lot more comfortable...I [now] have **friends from all kinds of backgrounds**; from India, Kenya, here, Christian, Hindu, no religion, Sikhs, 1st generation, 2nd/3rd, etc. These are my close friends."
- "When you **interact** with others, you start asking a lot of questions: why do I speak this language? Why do I dress this way? etc. You start questioning yourself, and then you start questioning other people; it has to do with human curiosity."

The Voices behind Statistics:

Male, in his 30s, married, Pakistani immigrant, living in the Prairie region

- "I don't think being of a minority background would limit anyone in any way; ...This country is founded upon **diversity and the recognition of diversity**; that would have been different in Pakistan ..."
- "When I came to Canada as an immigrant, I was a Pakistani Muslim; now, I am a Canadian Muslim ... Because Canadian culture is so diverse, I don't have to say that I am a Pakistani Canadian Muslim; I can simply say that I am a **Canadian Muslim**."

CONCLUSIONS

The following points could be considered as the main implications of the study:

1. The rise of the 'identity challenge' in Diaspora
2. The evolving nature of (Muslims') identities
3. The contents/nature of the new identities are influenced by Interactions with different 'others'
4. Depending on who the 'others' are, the newly-found identities can be different.
5. The development of a common Arab identity shows that the development of a common Canadian identity is possible, and through the same process.
6. Inter-cultural understanding is not necessarily the solution
7. Time, by itself, is not necessarily the solution