ABSTRACT

AMERICAN BORN IMAMS: NEGOTIATING CLERICAL RESPONSIBILITIES AND EXPECTATIONS

by

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This inductive, exploratory study seeks to understand in detail the personal perspectives and career paths that American born Imams experience as they become religious leaders. In doing so, this study will examine their objectives and goals for the religious communities in which they reside and are integrally related. More specifically, this study analyzes the responsibilities and expectations with which imams must contend on a daily basis. Symbolic interactionism frames these issues and, at the same time, is the driving force behind an understanding of the imams' experiences as well as those of other important actors in Muslim communities. Employing structured and in-depth interviews, this convenience sample of American born imams addresses key questions which inductively give rise to three major themes: imams currently receive inadequate training for their positions as religious leaders in their communities; the relationship between the mosque board and an imam can directly reinforce or mitigate against problems within the religious community; and certain fundamental advantages along with disadvantages emerge for imams who are American born.

AMERICAN BORN IMAMS: NEGOTIATING CLERICAL RESPONSIBILITIES AND EXPECTATIONS

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DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate my thesis to the Muslim community in general, and in specific to the imams who chose a career path full of headaches and stress.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Linguistically, the Arabic term imam may mean to go, betake, to lead the way, or to lead in prayer (Ansary 2009; Abuelezz 2011). Imam means someone therefore, who has the leadership capacity regardless of whether the individual is good or evil (Abuelezz 2011:3). However, this definition is insufficient when applied to imams residing in America as imams are expected to not only lead prayer, but also serve as teachers, counselors, and community leaders (Haddad 1999). An imam provides social services ranging from weddings to funerals while also representing Muslims in building bridges with non-Muslim communities (Haddad 1999). These expected roles of imams are similar to Christian and Jewish clergy members: "to lead prayers, deliver sermons, conduct religious ceremonies, provide religious and spiritual guidance" (Ali, Milstein and Marzuk 2005:202).

Christian efforts to reach millennials and younger Americans, who have expressed less interest in organized religion, frequently recommend that pastors undergo cultural changes by adapting to a new age of social media (Rainer 2014). This same process of being connected with the social media world is also applicable to imams as they also try to reach a wider audience.

When it comes to their personal education, imams are expected to display a command of the Arabic language including their understanding and ability to read classical canonic texts such as the Quran and the prophetic narrations. In addition, they are also expected to be culturally cognizant of different Muslim backgrounds and have the necessary communication skills to relate with different ethnicities. Given these expectations and objectives, then, it is not surprising

that imams encounter a variety of challenges and conflicts as they struggle to become leaders in their religious communities.

To accomplish this study, I interviewed imams born in the United States employing a convenience sample. Open-ended inductive questions are constructed in this exploratory study. This qualitative approach sought to answer the motivation of individuals who chose to be imams, the influence of other imams, radicalization, mental health, political and media rhetoric. Other topics of interest include how these imams deliver religious education and other vital needs to their Muslim congregants who live as minorities (1%) in the United States (Lipka 2017). Demographic characteristics of the individuals will also be collected and analyzed.

There are unfortunately few scholarly studies in the research literature on this subject. There are especially very few studies that highlight the experience and significance of American born imams as leaders of their mosque activities along with their relationships to the much broader non-Muslim communities of which they are a part. The scarcity of research conducted on imams born in America is connected with most imams being born outside of America. It is also because Islamic religious institutions are nascent. Imams, moreover, resemble iconic figures and are frequently viewed as intermediaries between Muslims and the neighboring communities.

Regarding the influence of religious figures, Weber said, “The power of ethical religion over the masses parallels the development of pastoral care. Wherever the power of an ethical religion is intact, the pastor will be consulted in all the situations of life by both private individuals and the functionaries of groups. Among those whose pastoral care has influenced the everyday life of the laity and the behavior of political officials in an enduring and often decisive manner include Muslim imams” (1993:76). Weber’s quote is quite applicable in assessing the attitudes that Muslims have towards imams whom they respect. Imams who are venerated for

various reasons are usually approached with different issues due to their scholarly knowledge and notable mannerisms (Ibn Khaldun 1967).

My study's findings address three major themes: imams currently receive inadequate training for their positions as religious leaders in their communities; the relationship between the mosque board and an imam can directly reinforce or mitigate against problems within the religious community; and certain fundamental advantages along with disadvantages emerge for imams who are American born.

By interaction with the masses, an imam, is seen as a symbol of guidance who has the potential to revive societies. Symbolic interactionism is the communication of symbols through interaction which thereby create common shared meanings (Babbie 2004). Since an imam by definition is at the forefront, naturally they are required to interact with congregants and community members. In the process of building relationships with community members, imams view themselves as leaders and liaisons in representing the interests of their communities. Conversely for congregants, daily interactions with an imam allows them to form their opinions accordingly which is the premise of symbolic interactionism. Guided by a symbolic interactionist perspective, this study hopes to understand the path to becoming an imam in America as public religious leaders and at the same time, how their position corresponds with future goals.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

Symbolic Interactionism

With an interest in human interaction, the European sociologist Georg Simmel took a micro approach in analyzing group behavior (Babbie 2004). Simmel's focus on interactions influenced American sociologists such George Mead, Charles Cooley and Herbert Blumer (Babbie 2004). Mead theorized that through empathy humans develop what he termed the "generalized other" which allows one to view life from the perspective of other people (Babbie 2004). A common understanding between individuals occurs through the use of language and symbols according to Mead (Babbie 2004). Another sociologist, who contributed to the interactionist approach, Cooley concluded that we see ourselves and the social world through the eyes of other people and often adopt those views through the "looking glass self" (Aronson, Wilson, Akert 2007).

The two main conceptual pillars of societal interactions are culture and social structure (Blumer 1969). Culture is the result of what people do and social structure is the result of how relationships impact the way people act towards one another (Blumer 1969). Charon writes, "Each individual depends on society for symbols, without other people each individual would be without a symbolic life and all the things which symbols make possible" (1979:36). Individuals that adhere to a specific religion display outward symbols as a form of identification with their religion and to create a sense of self-awareness (Durkheim 2001). Emblems through appearances

play a role in distinguishing various religions as the cross is associated with Christianity, but personalities regardless if they are real or mythic are also types of symbols (Durkhiem 2001).

When it comes to religious figures, Morgan identifies some symbols that societies attach to the profession of ministry (2010). Three overt symbols attributed to religious ministers are vocabulary, attire, and titles (Morgan 2010). Clergy members speak with a distinct diction, may appear different than congregants in the way they dress, and are addressed with specific titles all of which symbolize their profession (Morgan 2010). The significance of these symbols should not be undervalued by imams in America as symbols serve to reassure Muslim's confidence in an imam's knowledge and status within the wider society (Morgan 2010). The symbolism attached to religious figures allows them to form their own identity which for an American born imam may be influenced by globalization and cross-cultural social relations (Scheuringer 2016:398).

The theoretical approach of symbolic interactionist is fitting for this study due to what imams symbolize. Imams are viewed symbolically as iconic figures, as spiritual and community leaders. They are seen as representatives of their communities to not only Muslims, but to outside non-Muslim communities.

Masjid (Mosque) Role and Structure

The Arabic term masjid is defined as a place of worship and comes from the root word "sajada" which means to prostrate or bow down (Omar 2005:248). The Quran clarifies what the masjid symbolizes in chapter 9 verse 108: "Indeed, there is a mosque whose foundation was laid from the first day on devotion to Allah; it's more worthy of your standing forth for prayer in

there. In it are people who love to be purified and cleansed. And Allah loves those who become pure and clean" (Ahamed 2007:104-105).

Symbolic interactionism captures the subtle internal dimensions which the verse alludes to: purification and devotion to God (Allah). Seeking religious and spiritual purification is the essence of what a masjid symbolizes. On the other hand, the mere building of masjids as structures is contradictory to the purpose of what a masjid is supposed to symbolize. In fact, prophetic narrations indicate that competition in building masjids and their overdecoration is antithetical to what a masjid symbolizes as a place of worship that promotes simplicity and counters worldly consumerism and materialism (Al-Waabil 2008). While the masjid plays a significant role in Islam, its significance is not in its structure and lies in its symbolism of monotheism. This further elucidates why Muslims during the time of Prophet Muhamad did not have a mosque (without idols) to worship therein for more than 13 years (Al-Ghazali 1999). This is because the holy mosque in Makkah was surrounded by idols symbolizing polytheism, and this led to Muslims building their own mosque which symbolized monotheistic beliefs (Al-Ghazali 1999). With this historical background in mind, it becomes more evident that symbolic interactionism is an appropriately fitting theoretical framework.

One of the earliest studies that attempted to shed light on mosques in America as institutions was that of Haddad and Lummis (1987). The authors were interested in studying the role of mosques as institutions in promoting the integration of Muslims in American life (Haddad and Lummis 1987). In the American context with Muslims as minorities, mosques may be a symbol of integration into American culture as religion is reliant on communication and influence through church-like organizations where religious symbols can be propagated (Cooley 1927). A structural approach to interactionism relies on the concept that role identities are shaped

by one's position within society and the institutions to which an individual is attached (Howard 2000). Within interactionism, this structural approach is relevant because the position of the imam is often times exclusively connected to a mosque. Since the mosque revolves around the five daily prayers, an imam who leads the prayer is needed to fill that role. Durkheim concluded that religion at its core is social and Islam is no exception with the mosque serving as a gathering place for congregants to bond (2001). As a religious institution, the mosque is widely viewed as a medium of transferring values from one generation to the next (Nyang 1999). Ibn Khaldun noted that the purpose of mosques was to serve the Muslim's worship, educational and social needs (1967). Larger mosques were under the supervision of the caliph with an appointed imam who was held accountable by the Muslim government (Ibn Khaldun 1967).

Research conducted by social scientists tends to identify three main religious dimensions which the mosque as an institution may cultivate among its congregants (Gattino et al. 2016). Gattino and authors mentioned the three as: "religious identification (attachment to one's religious identity), beliefs (orthodoxy, or the knowledge and acceptance of religious doctrines), and practice (the observance of religious rules and rites, including dietary practices and worship" (2016:1195). A mosque is an institution that provides various services that are religious, cultural, and political (Al-Krenawi 2016). Similar is found among churches which historically served as a medium for civic engagement and influenced social change (Lumpkins et al. 2013:1095). In describing the function of Prophet Muhammad's mosque, Al-Krenawi wrote, "There are records of the mosque being used in the following capacities: a Judiciary Court, as a platform for oratory eloquence and poetry; a detention center for prisoners of war, the place where spoils of war were divided; a hospital; a home for the poor and travelers, a place where the pleasure of 'Allah'

(God) and good reputation is sought; a soup kitchen; and a place of socializing and celebrations" (Al-Krenawi 2016:362).

Understanding the stages of building Islamic institutions in America requires an investigative look into the history of Muslims in America. Some historians have proposed a pre-Columbus arrival of Muslims in America but some authors consider the evidence as speculative (Nyang 1999; Van Sertima 2003; Abu-Bader, Tirmazi and Ross-Sheriff 2011). A more credible report indicates that from the slaves that were forced to come to America via the Atlantic slave trade, roughly 30% of Africans were Muslims (Al-Islam 2006). Another avenue of Muslim arrival to the United States was through immigration and the first documented Muslims in America were Syrians and Lebanese during the period of 1875 to 1912 who settled in the Midwest (Nyang 1999; Al-Islam 2006). The first established Friday prayer took place in Ross, North Dakota in the early 20th century (Nyang 1999). Some of the earliest mosques built in America were constructed in Detroit, Michigan, and in Cedar Rapids, Iowa among other cities (Nyang 1999). Immigrants that came after 1965 built more institutions based on Islamic traditions and lobbied for their political and social recognition while also opposing complete assimilation into the American culture (Zaman 2008).

In a study on American Mosques, Bagby found that the total number of current mosques in America is 2,106 (2012). Out of these 2,106 mosques, more than three-fourths of present mosques were established since 1980 (Bagby 2012, please see Figure 1 in the appendix). While the majority of mosques are Sunni, 7% of American mosques are Shiite (Bagby 2012).

In terms of mosque governance, Nyang identifies four different models of Muslim leadership in America. The first type is a mosque which is founded by a single individual who exercises full control over the affairs of the mosque (Nyang 1999). A second type of mosque

leadership consists of a board of directors who may be the founding fathers of the mosque and they are responsible for hiring an imam (Nyang 1999). A third type of leadership is a mosque that is affiliated with a larger umbrella organization that usually imports an imam who is then responsible for its community while being held accountable from their base organizations (Nyang 1999). The fourth model of leadership is a hybrid model of the board of director's committee with a key difference being that members are voted in and consult other members of the community while desiring independence from larger organizations and the control of a single imam as the charismatic leader (Nyang 1999).

A more recent analysis of mosque governance models excludes Nyang's third model that is affiliated with larger umbrella organizations. An explanation may be that since the number of mosques have increased, it became difficult for organizations to manage them and instead placed affiliated members of these larger Muslim organizations to serve on mosque boards. Another explanation is found in the study by Abuelezz who stated that umbrella organizations have only recently began supervising mosques and imams (2011).

In Bagby's report on American mosques, there are three main mosque governance models. In 47% of American mosques, the board and imam share responsibilities (Bagby 2012). In this model, the board runs administrative aspects of the mosque and the imam runs religious and educational aspects (Bagby 2012). The second type of mosque model which accounts for 31% of American mosques, the imam is solely in charge of all mosque related matters (Bagby 2012). The third mosque model (22% of American mosques), the board supervises most aspects and the imam serves a minor role (Bagby 2012). As Weber noted, in Islam there is no official clergy class and the establishment of mosque governance models is intended to provide a type of organizational structure (Djedi 2011). While there are elements of functionalism within the

mosque, this is simply a byproduct of what a mosque symbolizes as a place of worship for congregants. If the mosque is non-existent, Muslims will lose out on the symbolism attached to the mosque as a place of worship and sacredness without considering the internal structure of the organization. This is evident in the Quran when the mosque is a symbol associated with sacredness, submission, devotion, prayer direction, history, and a homeland (Ahamed 2007).

To comprehend the strength in what a mosque symbolizes, it is reported in the late 1800s that once a Lebanese Muslim learned from the captain of the ship bound for America that there were no mosques in America, the man jumped off the boat (Nyang 1999). The image of spiritual strength attributed to mosques should not cast away the conflicts and resistance from the non-Muslim and the Muslim community. From non-Muslims, a right-wing individual killed six Muslims and injured others in a Quebec City mosque on January 29th of 2017 (Dougherty 2017). There has been reported opposition to mosques being built in cities such as Bayonne, NJ, South Milwaukee, WI, Fredericksburg, VA, and in Chicago, IL (Gray 2010; Scott et al. 2010; Lourgos 2016). Also, mosques are subjected to surveillance and scrutiny from law enforcement which amounted to profiling the Muslim community and illegally spying on them (Goldman and Apuzzo 2012; Hays 2016). In October of 2016, federal prosecutors charged three men who plotted to blow up a small mosque in Garden City, Kansas (Laughland 2017). According to an affidavit, the plot was supposed to occur one day after the 2016 election and some estimate could have been the deadliest domestic terror attack since Timothy McVeigh's Oklahoma bombing in 1995 (Laughland 2017).

From Muslims, Zarqa Nawaz highlights several mosques that didn't allow women to even pray in mosques and other mosques who constructed physical barriers between men and

women (2005). Nawaz's experience with mosques not willing to accommodate women is an extension of the overseas Muslim world's treatment of women who have no role in mosque activities (Bagby 2009). Bagby wrote, "One assessment of acculturation is the degree to which the American mosque has adjusted to its new American environment, specifically by allowing a greater role for women" (2009:480). This greater role of women in mosques was further expanded in light of Amina Wadud and Asra Nomani leading prayers with mixed genders (Sharify-Funk; Haddad 2012). On the idea of women leading prayer and becoming imams, the Muslim community was split on Wadud's leading prayer (Sharify-Funk; Haddad 2012). Some approved with the idea of advancing a feminist theoretical approach in comprehending Islamic texts and in conforming with western liberal values (Sharify-Funk; Haddad 2012). On the other hand, others disapproved citing the intended meanings attached to the religious texts (Sharify-Funk; Haddad 2012). As the protagonist in the documentary film *The Mosque in Morgantown*, Nomani believes there's an "ideological war" that mosques need to undergo who prevent men and women from praying next to one another (Huckabee 2009).

Imams

An imam is defined as: a leader, president, any object that is followed, a model, an example and it could be a human being or a book or path (Omar 2005:32). The term imam, and its different forms, appears in the Quran 11 times (Omar 2005:33). Other dictionaries add that an imam means a prayer leader, a standard, a criterion, a teaching authority or a spiritual leader in Islam (Wehr 1994:32). It's important to recognize that it was through interactions with the Prophet Muhammad, by Muslims and non-Muslims alike, that he was described as an honest and

trustworthy person (Al-Ghazali 1999). Based on these interactions, Muslims equated Prophet Muhammad with religious guidance and a path to salvation (Al-Ghazali 1999). On the other hand, non-Muslims who disbelieved in the message of Islam mentioned Prophet Muhammad as an imposter and a symbol of religious misguidance (Al-Ghazali 1999). This further adds credence to the symbolic interactionist approach when evaluating imams who themselves relate and aspire to emulate the prophet's tradition.

Ibn Khaldun mentions the term imam in different contexts where it can refer to a Muslim ruler or caliph, and imam could also mean a role model or prayer leader (1967). Islam is comprised of two main sects: Sunni and Shiite (Al-Krenawi 2016). The majority of Muslims subscribe to the Sunni tradition and make up about 90% of Muslims worldwide, while Shiites account for about 10% of Muslims (Al-Krenawi 2016). Explaining the theological differences, Al-Krenawi writes: "Sunni Islam places an emphasis on a direct, unmediated relationship between the Muslim and God (Allah). Shiite Islam has a hierarchical structure of authority, where legal scholars interpret the word of Allah. The authority of the legal scholars is based on the consensus of the Shiite community" (2016:361). In Shiite theology, the term imam is restricted to certain individuals who are sinless beginning with Ali (Ibn Khaldun 1967). The legitimacy of an imam lies mainly in the hereditary succession from the lineage of Ali and his wife Fatimah according to Shiites (Ibn Khaldun 1967).

Of the earliest records on imams in America is one about an imam originally from Sudan in 1927 who led Muslims in Pittsburgh (Nyang 1999). In the mid-20th century, imams were imported from overseas countries in order to further advance the new Islamic educational institutions (Nyang 1999). Hervieu-Leger said, "all religions need to be legitimated from tradition, linking past and present: each tradition, and particularly religious ones, needs to be re-

elaborated in the present by those people somehow invested of this task. Imams are often protagonists of the dynamic of re-elaborating tradition; they have to connect past and present, to say memory, core function of the religious power" (Fedele 2016:213).

Today, among full-time paid imams in America, only 15% were born in America (Bagby 2012). Not all mosques in America even have a part-time imam, and 19% of mosques have no imam at all (Bagby 2012). For imams who are full-time, they are expected to wear so many different hats which could lead to burnout. Faith leaders across different religions all have experienced overload as they rarely take vacations in order to become servants of God. Some religious figures have not had a vacation in 18 years which obviously takes a toll psychologically and emotionally (Vitello 2010). Burnout also exists among imams, as Imam Shamsi Ali said, "We have all of these problems, but imams are reluctant to express it because it will seem like a sign of weakness. Also, mosques do not pay much and many of them work two jobs" (Vitello 2010). In serving God and the congregants, religious figures embody what Cooley termed "social consciousness" (awareness of society) in relation to the needs of congregants which could lead to burnout (1927).

Building Islamic Learning Institutions

In displaying religious knowledge, imams may symbolize scholarship as they answer religiously related and secular questions. Imams are expected to combat ignorance with knowledge and education through the available channels of communication (Al-Waabil 2008). Zaman said, "the most successful leaders combine the learning of Al-Azhar with the charisma of an American celebrity" (2008:468). While Max Weber lauded Hinduism, the significance of religious knowledge is highlighted in his belief that Hindu reforms were accomplished by

aristocratic intellectuals but lacked theological training (1993). In comparison, Weber mentions that the difference with the Protestant Reformation in Europe is that it was led by educated men with theological training whereas Hinduism was led by intellectuals without clerical education (1993).

Muslim imams can learn from the experience of other faith leaders. Rabbis who immigrated to America in the 19th century transitioned from a traditional to a more secular culture that fits in Western society (Knobel and Staitman 2000). Classical Rabbinic training using Yiddish and Hebrew languages did not fit well as a model of an experienced clergy member and was a challenge initially as the Rabbi's skills did not meet demands in the American context (Goren 1970). Rabbis realized that leading Saturday services and teaching from the Talmud during the week to the youth were only the beginning steps to emulating what Christians came to expect from their clergy (Madison 1976). Accompanying the knowledge of religious sciences, clergy members within Christianity were required to be educated in secular sciences, public speaking and writing (Morgan 2013). Morgan said, "Jews very quickly established both the Hebrew Union College of Cincinnati and the Jewish Theological Seminary of New York for the training of American rabbis" (2013:31). Also, the Catholic Church established seminary schools with the goal of producing American educated priests (Morgan 2013).

In the past century, figures like Rashid Rida (1865-1935) viewed that reform comprised of mixing western values and applying them within an Islamic context (Armstrong 2001). Rida envisioned the establishment of a school where students were taught international law, sociology, world history, and western science in addition to the Islamic religious sciences (Armstrong 2001:193). The combination of religious and worldly sciences, according to Rida, would pave

the way for future scholarly imams that were different from the imams who studied in Al-Azhar University whom Rida considered to be out of touch with reality (Armstrong 2001:193).

Leading Muslim religious figures in America have struggled to combine the religious and secular knowledge. For example, African American Muslims were mostly involved in racial issues against white supremacy and had no formal religious training in Islam (Al-Islam 2006). With undeniable charisma, the early to mid-20th century witnessed African American figures such as Noble Drew Ali, Elijah Muhammad and Malcolm X as they emerged with a following yet did not prioritize formal religious education (Al-Islam 2006).

Efforts towards establishing institutions in America were stalled due to immigrant's believing in returning to their homelands after earning money, and that the overwhelming majority were illiterate (Nyang 1999). For one to become a qualified Muslim scholar, education and comprehension of key Islamic sciences were standardized throughout history. With the goal of preventing misinterpretations of the text, Muslim scholars concluded that one cannot sufficiently grasp the intended meaning from Islamic texts without proper knowledge (Nawawi 2003:99). Being grounded in Islamic sciences included knowledge of: Arabic, Quran, Prophetic narrations, the objectives of Islamic law, logic, and other sciences (Kamali 2003). Other subjects include mathematics, poetry, and calligraphy were noteworthy sciences depending on the level of individual erudition (Aboo Zayd 1987). The outward presentation of self was also stressed for imams to represent their religious mandates of cleanliness in body and clothing (Nawawi 2003).

The struggle to build Islamic educational institutions has advanced over the past few decades. Efforts to initiate large umbrella organizations didn't begin until 1977 as Muslim organizations were unorganized and fairly local (Nyang 1999). In the 1980s, a National Council

of Imams and Continental Council of Masajid (mosques) were established as larger representative bodies of cooperative Muslim organizations (Nyang 1999). In 1981, an American Islamic College opened in Chicago but closed in 2001 due to lack of support and funding only to again reopen in 2010 (Brachear 2010).

In comparison, Christian sects have 251 schools that prepare clergy for ministerial positions (Abuelezz 2011). Without adequate training, the grooming of domestic talent for the imam position will remain stagnant. Lack of resources locally leads many future imams to study overseas as 94% of all American imams who have a formal degree studied abroad to obtain their degree (Bagby 2012). Claremont Lincoln University, which already offered seminary training for Jewish and Christian clergy, was one of the first schools in America to add seminary training for Muslim imams (Nelson 2011). The first independent Muslim college, Zaytuna College in California, opened in 2010 and received accreditation in 2015 (Lee 2015). Although some are presently unaccredited, other religious institutions include Al-Qalam (Texas), Al-Maghrib (Texas), Mishkah (Florida), Bayyinah (Texas), Al-Huda (Texas), Alim (Michigan), Hartford (Connecticut) and other seminary programs. These programs offer certifications and some offer undergraduate and graduate degrees. Some have mentioned optimistically that a growing number of imams are American born, and are involved in cultivating institutions domestically for those who are potentially interested in becoming imams (Suleiman 2016).

Imams as Voices of Reason on Rhetoric and Radicalization

Many Muslim scholars, past and present, believe that it is their responsibility to publicly voice their opinions on relevant political affairs. An imam as a political symbol means having

awareness of current affairs, and being apolitical was not an option. Some imams wrote articles pleading their fellow colleagues to address modern issues occurring within Muslim minds and hearts (Shakir 2002). Unfortunately, Muslims are mainly reactive in responding to political matters related to Muslims instead of being proactive by being politically vocal. According to Edward Said, the political concern towards Muslims spiked in the late 1970s (1997). Said mentioned how the *LA Times* used jihad or holy war as one of the most important motifs in representing Islam in Western media (1997:114). Media outlets such as the *Times* in the late 1970s had classified Islam as either friendly or inimical to America's interests (Said 1997:91).

Since the terrorist attacks of September 11, Muslims in America have been put under the microscope in how they would proactively respond to prevent radicalization. Statements of condemnation were issued by Muslim imams, and organizations but was largely overlooked by the media (Hill and Awde 2003). Muslim American imams unanimously condemned the attacks, as statements were issued by organizations such as Sharia Scholars Association of North America and the Fiqh Council of North America (Hill and Awde 2003; Hauslohner 2016). Imam Muhammad Hanooti said, “Islam tells us that murdering one person is equal to murdering all humanity” (Hill and Awde 2003:199).

Imams are aware that the obsession with terrorism is not a reflection of the wider Muslim community. They also remind that the internet is largely seen as the medium for radicalization, and through the same medium nine Muslim scholars released a YouTube video refuting militants claiming to act in the name of Islam (Goodstein 2010). The need for imams’ involvement is not only domestic, but globally imams are addressing the issue of youth radicalization. For example, radicalization of youth online in Belgium is one of the many challenges that Imam Sulayman continues to combat through outreach (Vranckx 2015). Due to his rare ability as one of the few

imams in Belgium that is bi-lingual in Arabic and Dutch, he can reach many audiences (Vranckx 2015).

Researchers point to data gathered from 1980 to 2005, that only 6% of terrorist attacks on U.S. soil were perpetuated by Muslims, while 94% were carried out by other groups including Latinos, Christians and Jews, the far left, ecological activists, white supremacists, anti-government, anti-abortion, sovereigntist, and secessionist groups, and more (Gabon 2016:9). Kurzman's 2014 report also shows that since 9/11, Muslim-American domestic terrorism has killed between 0 and 2 for most years, with a maximum of 13 in 2009 (Gabon 2016:9). In a survey conducted in 2010 of mosque leaders, leaders were asked if radicalism and extremism was increasing among Muslim American youth in their respective region. The response of 87% of mosque leaders is that they did not believe that radicalism is increasing among Muslim youth (Bagby 2012). Rather, Muslim leaders remarked that the constant challenge is appealing to the youth and attracting them to their local mosque (Bagby 2012).

After the San Bernardino shootings, President Obama and some Muslims placed the onus on religious leaders to speak out against terrorism and to teach the proper understandings of Islam (Montanaro 2015; Healy 2016). Regardless of whether Muslims agree with the former president, a large number of imams and Muslim activists signed an online statement titled "A Joint Muslim Statement on the Carnage in Orlando" on June 13, 2016 condemning any violence in the name of Islam. For the complete statement on the Orlando shootings, one can visit http://orlandostatement.com/.

In addition to condemning the Orlando shooting, some imams called attention to the loose gun laws as a major contributing issue. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, from 2001 to 2013, 406,496 people died by firearms in America (Jones and Bower

2015). Jones and Bower wrote, “According to the U.S. State Department, the number of U.S. citizens killed overseas as a result of incidents of terrorism from 2001 to 2013 was 350. In addition, we compiled all terrorism incidents inside the U.S. and found that between 2001 and 2013, there were 3,030 people killed in domestic acts of terrorism. This brings the total to 3,380” (2015). Aside from condemning acts of extremism, Muslims point to the fact the they are victims of terrorism as well which included at least 30 Muslims who died in the Nice truck attack (Rubin and Blaise 2016).

Counseling and Mental Health

Counseling offered by Muslim religious leaders is not entirely new as there are instances where Prophet Muhammad himself took on the role of a religious counselor. Literature has suggested that congregants are more comfortable in approaching religious figures over professional counselors because religious clergy are symbols of spiritual healers. In a recorded interaction during the time of Prophet Muhammad, a companion said to a fellow friend, "Would you like me to point out to you a woman of paradise?" So the man replied: "Indeed, please do so." So the companion said: "Do you see the black lady? She approached the Prophet Muhammad and said: I suffer from epilepsy and during a seizure, my body becomes exposed. So please supplicate to God (Allah) on my behalf. Then the Prophet said to her: “You have the option of choice, you may choose to be patient and you will be rewarded with paradise on account of it. Or if you like, I will beseech God (Allah) to cure you.” So she said: “I choose to bear it patiently. But my body gets exposed, so please beseech God (Allah) that my body will no longer be exposed.” So the Prophet then beseeched Allah for this" (Al-Bukhari 1997:311).

This narration gives a glimpse of how Prophet Muhammad was approached for illnesses and perhaps due to the available medicine known at that time, there were no known cures for her specific case. This understanding is concluded from another recorded narration in which a group of Bedouins asked Prophet Muhammad: "Should we not seek medical treatment?" He replied: "Yes, O worshippers of God (Allah), you should seek medical treatment, for indeed God (Allah) has not set forth a disease without setting forth for it its cure, with the exception of one disease." They asked: "O Messenger of God (Allah), what disease is that?" He replied: "Old age" (Ibn Majah 2007:406).

In the tenth century, mental illness was treated by Muslims clinically in hospitals that offered care (Dallal 1999:208). The treatment facilities that Muslims provided positively impacted other faiths it encountered. In 1409, the first mental hospital was founded in Spain by Father Gilabert Jofre after he saw mentally ill individuals teased in the streets (Cockerham 2006:14). While other countries continued to mistreat mentally ill during the Middle Ages, Spain developed a tolerant attitude towards the mentally ill most likely due to the interaction with the Arab world (Cockerham 2006). The Arab countries in North Africa and the Middle East approached mental illness from a humane point of view in knowing that sanity is not a prerequisite to being loved by Allah (Cockerham 2006).

Scholarly research has examined how religious traditions reacted to the changing definition of mental disorders and emotional health in the 19th and early 20th century. During this time, Roman Catholics and some Protestants began accepting the medical diagnoses of mental illnesses and as a result accepted their medical treatments (Meador 2003; O'Connell 1986). On the other hand, white Evangelical Protestants continued to dispute the secular understanding of mental disorders (Adams 1970; Malony 1998). Some still believe that mental

illnesses are a result of sins, and that only religious clergy are appropriate sources of care (Adams 1970; Malony 1998).

This attitude of tolerance in the Muslim world has lost weight in American communities as the stigmatization of mental illness prevents families from seeking treatment. Erving Goffman defined stigma as a feature that is discrediting and mentioned that the term originated from the Greeks when they described physical defects (Cockerham 2006:271). In more current times, Goffman mentioned mental illness and religion as the main sources of stigmas in which individuals are negatively outcast by societies (Cockerham 2006:272). American born imams can serve as mediums with families who may be in denial about mental illness due to understanding the culture that leads to stigmatization. In fact, recent data from the National Comorbidity Survey concluded that religious clergy offer more mental health counseling than psychiatrists which includes serious mental disorders (Ali et al. 2005:202). About 25% of individual congregants that sought care for a mental disorder approached clergy for their disorder (Frenk 2012).

Amongst the studies on Muslims and counseling, the authors found that half of imams surveyed spent up to five hours a week counseling their congregants, and about 30% spent six to ten hours a week counseling (Ali et al. 2005:203). Imams are approached with a range of counseling related issues not limited to: religious guidance, family relations, discrimination, depression, anxiety, financial concerns, problem with drugs or alcohol, and suicidal thoughts (Ali et al. 2005). Other studies have estimated that about 82% of religious congregations sponsor social services in which most address ephemeral needs while others address more serious ailments (Frenk 2012). Most congregations address needs such as: food, clothing, shelter and others provide support to individuals that may carry HIV/AIDS (Frenk 2012).

To summarize, in analyzing what an imam symbolizes, one needs to have some Islamic historical background to fully comprehend the position. The imam can be a symbol of leadership, erudition, counseling, and a balanced ideology away from extremist thought. Few scholarly studies have been dedicated to detailed research on American born imams. There are especially very few studies that highlight the experience and significance of American born imams as leaders of their mosque activities along with their relationships to the much broader non-Muslim communities of which they are a part. The research literature paves the way for studies to further examine the phenomenon of imams in America to understand the trajectory of Muslim American communities.

Chapter 3

Methods

The qualitative inductive approach in this study will seek to answer the motivation for imams choosing their profession, the influence of other imams, radicalization, mental health, political and media rhetoric, non-Muslim relations, and how these imams intend to deliver their message to their congregants and the non-Muslim population. The significance of this study lay in the qualitative approach, as quantitative studies on imams have been previously conducted. The qualitative approach allowed me to gain access into the lives of imams as individuals, who, using their own language, told their narratives. This resulted in rich and detailed data, which is the objective of qualitative research as it aims to capture the individual's point of view more thoroughly through in-depth interviews and observation (Denzin and Lincoln 2013).

The in-depth interviews with respondents include open-ended inductive questions in this exploratory study. Blumer stated that an in-depth exploratory study that produces rich data can on its own identify certain societal issues without the need to cite a theoretic framework (Hammersley 2010). The advantages noted for open-ended questions include the respondents' freedom to express themselves, and work better for sensitive topics that provide rich quotes for further analysis (Stark and Roberts 1996). This study on American born imams is based on a convenience sample, as a list of imams' names were compiled through online directories with biographies as well as referrals. The total number of respondents amounted to ten as the interviews began with demographic questions before shifting to the main research questions.

Online databases are now readily available with profiles and biographies of the imams that lead different mosques in America. This was my starting point of compiling a list of

potential imam respondents to participate in my study. First, my search for imams began locally in my state as this was convenient for me to coordinate a time to commute to the imams' preferred meeting location. After conducting an in-state search, the imams that agreed to participate in my interview were asked if they can refer another imam that would be willing to participate. This process is called snowball sampling which is when the respondent refers another potential respondent to the researcher (Babbie 2004). Snowball sampling, as I realized, is effective in finding respondents that are difficult to locate or reach through the researcher individually contacting them (Babbie 2004). Through snowball sampling, this will help in easing the awkward introductions that may result when a stranger requests an interview on sensitive topics. Once the contacted imam who is a potential respondent hears that a certain imam participated, then it will open a door into wider access to more imams.

Other ways of contacting an imam to participate was through mutual community friends that may personally know both the imam and me. In fact, the only two imams who I tried to contact directly on my own resulted in a non-response from both imams. This is possibly because they do not know me personally (which is based on trusting the researcher), and nobody had reached out to them to recommend participation in my study. This communication between mutual friends built trust and assured the imams that my study was safe and their identities will be confidential. The protection of identity and confidentiality was stressed in my study to the respondents due to the sensitivity of the topic in the current political climate. Building trust between a researcher and the respondent is paramount to the data collecting process. A respondent who feels the study will expose them may give appeasing or misleading answers thereby impacting the veracity of the study and negatively influencing the results (Denzin and

Lincoln 2013). In addition, the ethics and professionalism attached to informed consent is part of social science research (Denzin and Lincoln 2013).

Snowball sampling from imams that agree to complete the interview will lead to more imams participating in the interview. It was important that I had prior contact with imams to prove that I am a serious researcher. Imams who participated in my study, would often refer me to someone they thought would be interested in my study as I would ask them after I finished the interview. Building trust is key, as some imams may not care about an IRB approval as much as they trust a referral from someone they know and respect who participated in my study. Respondents who feel that the study will identify them are less likely to participate.

For my study, a potential respondent was any Muslim religious figure with Islamic knowledge regardless of ideology, and as long as they were born in America. A list of more than twenty potential imam respondents were contacted by email. The challenge of scheduling an appointment in order to conduct an interview was obvious from the start. Imams are busy and responsible for many aspects within their community, and also have lives outside their workspace. Some imams are bi-vocational and participate in various activities that make it difficult to interview them. In addition, the current political climate and focus on Muslims was possibly an added barrier to scheduling an appointment with an imam.

Imams who agreed to participate in this study were presented options for how the interview could be conducted. This allowed the respondent to feel more comfortable in controlling the medium of communication through which the interview was conducted. If respondents feel comfortable enough to speak their mind, this will permit me to study the respondents in their natural setting without them feeling the need to mince their words (Denzin and Lincoln 2013). Three respondents participated in the interview face to face, and seven respondents conducted

the interview by phone. Contact with other potential respondents was made at an Islamic conference.

The length of the interviews ranged from 30 minutes to an hour and 20 minutes which accounted for more than 130 pages of transcribed interview notes. I'm grateful to imams who helped me contact respondent imams via email to participate in my study. I'm also thankful to other imams reaching out to their colleagues by spreading the word about my study through snowball sampling after participating. My study was approved by the IRB in late June of 2016 and IRB stamped consent forms were signed by all respondents.

This study is exploratory, inductive and based on a convenience sample. Therefore, generalizations cannot be assumed as hard evidence commensurate with quantitative research objectives (Denzin and Lincoln 2013). Rather, my study hopes to serve as a springboard for future research in providing descriptive data that may lead to other studies confirming my findings (Denzin and Lincoln 2013).

Chapter 4

Findings

Theme #1: Inadequate Training for Imams

Regardless of the religious educational attainment of the ten imams, a major theme amongst most respondents is the absence of specific vocational training. This same sentiment was echoed at Islamic conferences by imams who felt that the vast majority of Islamic seminaries do not properly train one how to be an imam. In addition, some imams opine that a PhD does not prepare one to become an imam because a doctorate by definition is a research degree emphasizing professional competence restricted to specific, limited topics. Imams that familiarize themselves in the religious sciences (which tend to focus on theoretical knowledge) realize that their knowledge is only helpful in answering a specific set of questions. At a conference, Dr. Ramadan said that 90% of Islamic jurisprudence is not the text per se, but rather knowledge based upon implementation in the real world outside educational institutions. Without relevant experience to complement their religious knowledge, the demands placed upon the imams may render their formal religious training obsolete.

Communities and committee boards that hire imams expect a well-versed individual with a variety of different skill sets. However, the data suggests it is possible that religious institutions do not develop these necessary skill sets in imams. Despite their experience teaching in mosques and having knowledge based in the religious sciences, Imams William and Jacob still view themselves as unqualified to fill the imam position. This is evident in the response of Imam Jacob. When asked if he overcame his feelings of not being qualified as an imam, he said, “No, I still have those feelings constantly. Just knowing, knowing how much there is and knowing how

much of a responsibility it is and how I feel that my training was not adequate for the responsibility that's placed on me, I constantly feel that."

Similar to imams in America, most imams in Europe are also from foreign countries such as Turkey and Africa which is due to a lack of adequate training programs in the European countries (Al-Krenawi 2016). Inadequate training for the imam position is linked to the many roles every imam needs to fulfill in his respective community. Having credentials to become the ideal imam who may be prepared for many of the daily challenges is, according to the interviews, seldom the case. When speaking about the need for training in pastoral care, Imam William said,

> …that type of training is even rare in Islamic seminaries, people that are trained don't necessarily have that skill set and it's very highly demanded. Whether that's in family and marital issues, or youth advice and counseling, whether that's substance abuse, whether that's domestic abuse, and a host of other issues. And that's a very rare skill set to find that's often demanded of imams.

For example, on the one hand an imam is expected to have general knowledge of Islamic sciences, but on the other he is often expected to address the media, and be an eloquent public speaker. When speaking about the board who hires the imam, imam respondent Tim said,

> They discover when they hired him to be one of those functionary imams, that he only specializes in one or two things. The assumption now is that not only is he trained in the Islamic sciences but also should be trained in American social sciences. So they expect the imam to do counseling and so this is an evolving role and now the imam has to be a counselor. And a public speaker, and maybe is

> media savvy and so they have to do media work and then the imam may have to do interfaith work.

About interfaith, cooperation and tolerance has historical roots in the past as tensions between Muslims, Christians, Jews and other religions took a back seat when Spain flourished into a melting pot due to political tolerance in the 10th century (Hill and Awde 2003). The terrorist attacks of 9/11 have conditioned certain stereotypes that Muslims are a threat, as historically overlooked is that Muslim Turks allowed freedom of worship to Jews and Christians in a time which European Christians had harmed Jews and Muslims (Loewen 2007:34). In contemporary times, other faith leaders have defended Muslims who were targeted for Islamophobic hate speech which is a byproduct of interfaith relations (Stack 2015).

There is also no formal process towards becoming an imam as Morgan found in comparison to ordaining ministers in other religious faiths (2010). He said, "When that formalized occasion is absent, there is the absence of both an opportunity to proclaim to the general public that a faith community has and is commissioning its own clergy, and to the faith community itself that it has and is commissioning its own religious leader, a leader who has conformed to the faith community's traditional expectations regarding training and education" (Morgan 2010:121).

Imams also require self-care in terms of mental preparation due to being unaware of what to expect from the position. Abbasi and Gassas found that imams are distressed by factors related to family issues, current political affairs, mental health and other stressors (2016). One imam, who spoke at an Islamic conference, recounted his struggle of coping with the tragedy of a board member who took their own life. The imam was shocked upon later knowing that the board member suffered from a mental illness. In addition, the imam's difficulty in coping was

exacerbated by feeling that he was responsible and attempted to find the strength to confront the children in telling them about their father's suicide. As a result of the overwhelming mental stress, the imam mentioned that he gained 70 pounds within three years and lost part of his hair until he finally changed his routine. He took up boxing, and instead of meeting congregants in his office he would speak with fellow Muslims while walking. The telling fact is that this particular imam was initially hired at a mosque to serve as an imam at the tender age of 25 years which further underscores the concept of inadequate overall training and preparation. The need for religious figures to find hobbies and develop interests outside of pastoral work is prevalent across religions (Vitello 2010; Pooler 2011).

According to the data, there are reasons that hint to why there are insufficient institutions that train imams which include: an obscure definition of the term imam, general education that does not account for the American context, and stereotypes attached to imams which devalues the position from the attention it demands.

Causes for Inadequate Training of Imams

A. An Obscure Definition of the Term Imam

In addressing a major cause for inadequate training for imams, a possible reason is due to a lack of a unified definition of the term imam. The absence of a standardized understanding and a set definition is largely expressed by the respondents. Some imams themselves admitted difficulty in defining the term imam. Imam Tim said, "So this becomes one of the challenges, when you say imam, what does it mean?" Similarly, Imam Stanley said, "Though I knew you were going to ask about that, I didn't really unfortunately give it the thought that it deserves. I

don't think I really have a definition of the word imam. But just now thinking very quickly and what comes to mind is someone who provides leadership to the masjid, a spiritual leader."

Goffman proposed the idea that people construct and negotiate their identities in order to develop meanings of situations which is essentially a form of impression management (Howard 2000). All the respondents provided their own definition of the term imam and most of the respondents mentioned there's not one unified definition. This negotiation of identity is further elucidated as most respondents agreed on the idea that an imam in the American context is more than simply an individual that leads prayer as is the case in many Muslim countries. Abuelezz wrote on his experience as an imam in Egypt, "I can state that the main official duties of the imam in Egypt are leading the prayer, delivering the Friday sermon, and being a religious teacher for the community of the mosque. In contrast, the American imam has to play a wide variety of roles" (2011:4). The respondents contrasted the expected roles of imams in America with imams abroad. Imam Erick said,

> So I think that's like a million-dollar question that Muslim Americans don't yet have any clear answer on. So the most traditional sense of most immigrants when they think of an imam, they think of someone who leads the prayers, in addition to giving formal religious talks. Whether that be in the form of a Friday sermon or even if it meant just certain religious reminders. And to me, that is not what an imam does and that's a very small part of his job. For me, the imam is the community leader, a visionary, the one who drives the direction where the community goes and that really does require someone who has a long-term plan.

Concurring with the concept that an imam is more than a prayer leader, Imam Malcolm gave a metaphoric answer when he said,

> So the word imam means more to me than just a prayer leader. A lot of folks believe that that's what it is and in fact if you go to other countries that's basically what an imam does, he just leads the prayer. So they memorize the Quran and then they lead the prayer and that's it, they don't do other things. But the imam, the word itself has a root for the word mother. It comes from the same root word in Arabic, so it's like a mother.

The metaphoric comparison of an imam to a mother is expressed by some Arabic linguists who say that the word imam comes from double "umm" which means mother (Omar 2005:32). This double "umm" in the term imam evokes a caretaker's mentality about one's congregants similar to a mother is to her children (Omar 2005:32). According to some respondents, the term imam defined is not definitive and inclusive of the encompassing role of an imam in the American context. Imam Jacob said,

> I think terms are very relative and they mean different things in different times so an imam can mean many different things…I pretty much take it as a scholar or someone who is well versed and studied the different sciences of Islam so that is one meaning. It could be a scholar, someone who answers questions and gives religious advice. An imam could also potentially mean someone who is a community leader or the figurehead of the community and sometimes both of them are mixed together in the same person. So imam can mean so many things.

Imam William said,

> And really, imam means a thousand things to a thousand people, and it means a thousand things to a thousand different institutions…we have to be aware of what the word means, that it means something genuinely different in an American

> context. I'm not saying better or worse I'm just saying different. When we come to that understanding and are honest with our expectations, and honestly you can search online for imam job descriptions, and you see the breadth of demand which is the natural demand of the congregation but then we are having an unreasonable expectation in one individual. Some job descriptions have requirements that are putting requirements quite outside, even the religious expectations to the point that you think they're trying to hire a Superman if you will.

One respondent gave a personal definition based on his experience and eventual resignation from the position but also indicated that the term can differ in meaning. Imam Steven said,

> Technically it's the person who's standing in front. Comedically, it's the person whose back is the clearest target. The person who is leading in front, often times practically speaking when we think of imams in our communities they have more of a diverse role. That could mean a whole lot of different things but essentially it's a leader of the community.

While the respondents addressed the term imam's obscure definition, they agree that the position entails more than simply a prayer leader, that the imam's role differs depending on the context, and is the community's leader and visionary. The absence of a clear definition of the term imam does not bode well for the position as Imam Erick said,

> And then so to answer your question I think this discussion needs to happen so much more because of the cultural differences of what an imam looks like from country to country varies so much. And when we all come to America and grow as a Muslim community, there's no coherent definition then it's a position that is doomed to fail.

B. General Education Lacking Cultural Context

A second cause for a lack of imam training is that foreign religious institutions do not account for cultural contexts. This means that since most Islamic religious seminaries in America are in the building phase, most imams in turn study abroad for the religious sciences. While imams seize the opportunity to learn Arabic and Islamic sciences abroad, they are not taught specific cultural knowledge that is applicable in America. It's important to note that 48% of imams in America have obtained at least a Bachelor of Arts degree in Islamic studies (Bagby 2012). While only 6% of imams received their Islamic studies degree in America, the majority (94%) of imams studied overseas to obtain their degree (Bagby 2012).

"I can count the number of institutions that prepare imams in the U.S. on three fingers," says Jihad Turk, who is the president the Bayan Claremont Islamic graduate school in Southern California (Burnett 2013). Addressing opportunities in Islamic studies, Imam Stanley said, "There are opportunities to go overseas and studying there in an Islamic school but…sometimes it's difficult to translate that and to apply it here in America." The lack of pertinent educational training is captured in what Imam Erick said, "I advise people if they want to go overseas to go into a university that they think number one is going to preach a version of Islam that fits with America. And what I mean by that is that I tell people to be very concerned about going to a place that is a very rigid version in understanding that when you come back it's not really going to fit." This further creates a dearth in competent American imams that is already in short supply. As Imam William said, "…that you feel like, in a sense the supply of imams particularly those with some cultural awareness and competence along with Islamic training is at really, it's at an

alarming low. And a lot of people with the talent are not necessarily serving in that role they're serving in other roles for a variety of reasons."

Religious seminaries domestically and abroad provide only general training, but lack the cultural context in developing imams suitable for America. This is evident as graduates from overseas Islamic universities had difficulty applying their Islamic knowledge to issues in America due to being unfamiliar with the American context (Abdul-Hakeem 2015). Imam Stanley said,

> Because the school again was essentially a seminary and they were preparing you to be imams, to be spiritual leaders. And so many of them mentioned that you are studying and making the sacrifice being away from your families for a number of years and we are also sacrificing for you and hoping that you can go back to America or wherever, China, Kenya, Middle East and what have you.

Obviously, the issues present in China will differ from Kenya which will differ from America as well as the Middle East. Understanding one's own culture and language may soothe the transition of imams that study overseas as contexts are not universal although we live in a globalized world. This is a daunting task as America is a melting pot of many unique cultures as Imam Tristan said,

> So you're serving all different minds and cultures in and this and that. So when I was studying, for example my primary area was in theology, it's not a practical area. And I'm not saying that it's not practical, but it's only really for scholars. And sometimes I would give a khutbah (Friday sermon) that was maybe above the heads of the people.

Other respondents echoed the same sentiment of diversity in cultures as Imam William said,

> As according to Pew if not Pew, then according to Gallup, the research shows that the Muslim community is the most racially diverse faith community in America. And in an Islamic center there was a study that found that more than 75 different nationalities represented the Islamic center. And so with that diversity comes a diverse understanding of the role.

Some respondents mentioned training deficiencies when it comes to interfaith relations and dealing with mental illness as well as other issues. Imams as counselors is similar to Rabbis who learned from Christian priests to take on roles of counselors in order to deal with individual and family related issues (Morgan 2013). Lack of training in mental health and counseling is viewed as a major flaw among educating imams (Al-Krenawi 2016). On interfaith relations, Imam Tim said, "Which if you come from Jordan you don't know anything about interfaith work. But the expectation now that you are in America, the rabbi and a priest etc. We'll get together and usually you sit with them and try to figure out what do we do now. Well he has no training in that." Imam Tim's statement holds some credence as mosques with immigrant congregants are the least likely to be involved interfaith activities as 49% of them have not participated in an interfaith event (Bagby 2012). All the respondents affirmed their involvement in interfaith dialogues and outreach activities. The respondents' involvement in interfaith related activities is congruent with a growing trend of American mosques as more than 79% of all mosques have been involved in an interfaith program (Bagby 2012). Morgan said, "Bringing members of the wider community into the geopolitical space of the faith community's worship arena sends a positive message to the entire community" (2010:118).

One respondent noted that there has been some progress domestically in building American religious institutions with more chaplaincy and educational programs. Imam Malcolm said,

> Because one of the positions I have presently is that I am the president of the association of Muslim chaplains which is a national organization. And we have military chaplains, college chaplains, correctional chaplains, hospital chaplains, and community chaplains under that umbrella. And so the only program right now that deals with the issue of chaplaincy is Hartford seminary where they have a graduate certificate program in Islamic chaplaincy. And they have a doctor of ministry degree that you can get in Islamic studies and Christian-Muslim relations, and they now have a PhD program in Islamic studies and Christian and Muslim relations.

The necessity of theoretical knowledge is part of the profession of being an imam and a clergy member of any religion for that matter. Morgan said, "Without doubt, the formal training of a professional, whether in law, medicine, or ministry, is one of the first and most striking characteristics of the practitioner, a characteristic which decidedly sets him apart from everyone else within his community of service" (2010:116). Some Muslim traditional seminaries offer intensive training that begins from early life to one's twenties (Morgan 2010). Nevertheless, much of the training presently offered is broad and does not address the specific American context which will require much needed refinement. In Abuelezz's study, he found that more than half (55.3%) of his respondents believed that establishing a new comprehensive training program in America is the best way to train future imams (2011:112).

C. Imam Stereotypes and Devaluing of the Position

A third cause for inadequate training for imams is that the position suffers from an image problem. Stereotypes have led to the devalue of the position which naturally leads to a lack of

interest. Positions that are already in short supply and stereotyped are less likely to receive the required attention needed for improvement. Nouman Ali Khan mentioned that the majority of the mosques he has traveled to (about 150 in America) do not employ a full-time imam but are in need of hiring one (Burnett 2013).

Communication with fellow congregants is paramount for imams in order to dispel misconceptions attributed to them. Some imams have accommodated deaf congregants by introducing sign language experts as translators for their lectures (Javed 2010). The respondents mentioned stereotypes they face that range from being money driven, culturally backwards, incompetent, and too spiritual for one to approach. Even some respondents admitted holding their own stereotypes on imams when they were youth, as Imam Erick said, "I know by my own experience growing up as a young teenager in America, I look at all the imams around me and the first thing that comes to my mind is that these guys are from another planet."

On the one hand, Muslim congregants may feel that imams are overpaid and are financially motivated. On the other, imams address the reverse concept of imams being underpaid due to their position of service. Imam Calvin said,

> The perception that the imam is someone who should be paid a very modest income I think is a very bad and if you want to call this a stereotype. You know, in terms of how the community sometimes perceives the imam, they should not be receiving a comfortable salary but should actually be receiving a modest income. And then this idea well he's an imam, so what does he want. Which is a very…again once again, antithetical idea to the perception of the imam historically where as you said the imam was honored and regarded and respected in a particular way.

When advising youth who expressed interest in becoming future imams, Imam Tim said, "…but don't try to send kids to college with the idea that I'm going to grow up to be the imam and they're going to pay me $80,000 a year. We're not there yet. So that's what I tell the young people you know that the profession is not there yet." Other respondents mentioned that the position's image is improving financially. Imam Erick noted,

> I began to realize that the market for imams was actually improving. And I think it has to do with generational changes, that when I was growing up you mostly had immigrant imams and in a primarily immigrant population in that the wages were much lower. But as the demographics changed with the majority of congregants being born in this country, the community realized that you have to raise the salary to get more qualified individuals.

Another stereotype that arose in the interviews is the idea that imams are too spiritual for congregants to approach. This is evident in what Imam Michael mentioned, "I think one of them, and again this is within certain segments of the community, one would be that you're some kind of spiritual person that every word that comes out of your mouth is alhamdillah (thanks due to God Allah) and somehow you will portray that type of end. Where I am just a regular person." Likewise, Imam Tristan said, "…in some countries imams and khateebs (speakers) are extremely respected. Maybe in some places they are venerated like saintly figures and in another place they are disrespected. Some people have some kind of superstition and they might think you're a holy person or Allah is going to answer your prayer or something like that." On the other hand, an imam may seem unapproachable by some congregants out of fear of religious censure. Imam Stanley highlighted, "I have heard several people that said they were surprised when an imam who didn't fulfill their stereotypes and I heard this directly. Well the imam will just shame me, just shame shame shame and will not understand what I'm going through anyway."

Other stereotypes that imams address revolve around incompetence and cultural backwardness. In resisting the stereotype that imams are ignorant, Imam Jacob opined,

> There are stereotypes that imams are unreliable, they're hungry for money, or hungry for power, and they don't know much about the world and they are very backwards. They don't know about science and technology. So I try to sometimes go out of my way to kind of undo some of those stereotypes and let you know that hey I do have a science background, I do understand that the earth is round and it's not flat.

Another respondent clarified the underlying reason for why the public image of imams being uneducated is entrenched in the minds of Muslim congregants. Upon explaining the process of becoming an imam overseas, Imam William said,

> The number one highest scoring students usually attend medical school, number two go to engineering and literally the lowest achieving students go to Arabic and Islamic studies. And so there becomes a stereotype among people that, forgive me for the word, that imams are kind of fakes or they're drop outs which is not true.

Some studies have indicated that some Muslim countries' imams play a secondary role that focus on leading prayer because the imam's autonomy is generally framed by the national state (Fedele 2016). In terms of cultural backwardness, Imam Steven recalls when he was first hired,

> I consciously actually didn't play to people's expectations or stereotypes. Like I was the imam who basically never came to work wearing a thobe (traditional clothing) for example and rarely gave khutbahs (sermons) in thobes. But I was trying to wear decent things, I didn't come to work in jeans, I would go to work like I would go to any professional job. Point being, I wasn't playing to the

> stereotypes, I wasn't trying to manipulate people's expectations in order to get more acceptance.

While some authors have commented on the importance of upholding attire that distinguish clergy, symbols if used improperly will attract negative attention (Morgan 2010). In turn, imams may be viewed as haughty by Muslims as well as non-Muslims and will be turned off by an imam with misplaced pride (Morgan 2010). Morgan wrote, "The clerical collar on a priest or a skull cap on a rabbi is readily recognized and their meaning is self-evident, but when an imam from Saudi Arabia wears a traditional attire at the shopping mall of any western city, rather than infusing confidence and public affirmation, he might unwittingly foster a negative view of Islam" (2010:125).

When a position is stereotyped, it takes time to undo and change perceptions that are deeply embedded within society. Negative perceptions seem to exist among younger generation Muslims according to some respondents. Imam William said, "I think that the role of service of imam is an incredibly underserved and undervalued one among young people in particular." Imam Michael agreed and said, "Hmmm...imam is a heavy word for me, it's a word that I feel unfortunately is devalued." Muslims have transferred the concept that the position of imam is a devalued position by discouraging their children from ever pursuing being an imam as a career. Imam Jacob said,

> There's a lot of people who discourage, a lot of families who discourage people from or their kids from becoming imams, a lot of people say you know what it's so much of a headache and there's so much politics involved and there's so much burden of responsibility, so you just shouldn't do it. And so you should go back into a proper career.

At an Islamic conference, one imam cited his family's disapproval of him becoming an imam and mentioned that his family believed that for him to scrub toilets as a janitor is more honorable than becoming an imam. The data suggests that the respondents feel that imams are not well prepared for the position. This is also confirmed in other studies that many graduates of Islamic universities abroad have not been adequately trained to become imams in America despite being educated in the religious sciences (Abuelezz 2011). According to the data, the reasons cited that indicate why there is insufficient training for imams include: an obscure definition of the term imam, general education that does not account for the American context, and stereotypes attached to imams which devalue the position from the attention it demands. One will conclude that Al-Hibri's statement that any knowledgeable Muslim can become an imam is an oversimplification of the many needed qualities for an imam in America (Al-Krenawi 2016).

Theme #2: Board Politics

Presently, there are three different models of mosque organization (please see Figure 2 in the appendix). The first type of mosque by design is managed mostly by a board which handles the mundane activities of the mosque, which includes the hiring of staff such as the imam. A second mosque model is when the imam is the founder of the mosque and singlehandedly runs the day-to-day affairs of the center. A third type of model is where a mosque features a board as a council of members with the imam being a member of the council as well. Usually, the board is a group of community members who originally founded and established the mosque from its first inception. The dynamic relationship between the imam and mosque board affects the broader community in terms of fulfilling a specific vision and goal. In *The Athaan in the Bull City*,

Abdul-Hakeem chronicles the history of a mosque in Durham, North Carolina (2015). Two of the most salient challenges that stand out to the reader are the difficulty of hiring a full-time imam and divisiveness within the mosque board between Black Americans and immigrant community members (Abdul-Hakeem 2015).

Challenges arise when the board disagrees with the vision of the imam on certain subjects which led to frustration and unhappiness among some respondents with their respective boards. Some respondents in my study, acting on their dissonance with the board, resigned from their imam position after their realization that their desired change would not occur with the current board in place. Two other respondents explicitly blamed the board for their resignation, while one indirectly mentioned the disorganization of the board for why he left the imam position. Only one respondent mentioned that he was not involved in board politics albeit acknowledged board politics was his main reservation from accepting an imam position in the past. Imam Calvin said,

> I think there are kinds of metrics that would gauge happiness in terms of what kind of atmosphere cultivates happiness and I think for me the environment of the masjid, it is a very positive environment in the community, it's a very humble and gentle community and appreciative community. I don't deal with any politics or bureaucracy and I think all of that is what basically kept me away from even thinking about being an imam is because I did not want to waste my time with internal politics and community politics and bureaucracy and all the things that have plagued many of the mosques that I'm familiar with. So one of the blessings bifadlillah (by the grace of God Allah) that I have is that I don't have to be dealing with that. So all that I have to really focus on is work.

Imams and boards not getting along could result in an imam resigning from the position. Two respondents left the position to pursue positions in academia, but other respondents left the position due to flawed administrative boards. After being unable to reach a compromise with the board, Imam Steven said,

> And then I came to the meeting and they started asking me those questions, so you know it was basically an interrogation. And then after some more time they came back to me and said essentially more or less were not going to do anything that you said, and that was it. There was not a whole lot conversation there. Then it was two weeks later that I called them into my office and I told them I was resigning. But it was unfortunate, because in the end everything was fine except for one person, but that one person had control.

On the other hand, one respondent mentioned the unprofessional board atmosphere and his own lack of knowledge needed for the position. Imam Erick said,

> So I think that seeing a lack of interest or lower motivation in certain demographics pushed me to actually go back to graduate school. And to study how people learn and why they pursue their interests and so on and so forth. I think that's one component, but the other component was what we spoke about earlier in that I do believe there is a mismatch between my vision of how I'd like to build a community and how the board members and the institution and direction that they wanted to go. So a combination of a lack of professionalism, perhaps not the clearest path outlined by the community board, the difference in vision. So I decided to pursue my own education was a perfect storm for me that led me to leave the position.

At an Islamic conference, an imam recounted certain challenges with his mosque board after he was newly hired. The imam envisioned implementing a certain educational program that included Islamic history and modern applicable lessons from the Quran. However, the board disapproved and rejected his pedagogical model by citing a lack of interest in his proposed ideas. The imam then suggested the idea of analyzing the biography of Prophet Muhammad through a series of sermons in order to inculcate the love and relevance of Prophet Muhammad's message. The board surprisingly liked and concurred with the imam's idea, however they admitted to not knowing what the word inculcate meant.

There are other studies that have confirmed the challenges that imams encounter with their board and community members (Abuelezz 2011). Imams have written articles urging their fellow colleagues to become financially independent of their imam positions by living a bi-vocational lifestyle in following the model of Imam W.D. Muhammad (Rashaad 2015). The data suggests that there are some underlying causes for why imams encounter challenges with the board. From the interviews, responses suggest that board challenges occur due to organizational, cultural and visionary differences.

A. Organizational Challenges

My data suggests that board and imam relations are hindered by organizational and structural issues. According to the respondents, mosque boards lack the experience necessary in managing a functional staff of individuals that make up the mosque. The board itself searches for an imam whom they deem compatible fits for their community. On this, Imam William said, "I think even step one of the awareness of what we are expecting of imams is quite lacking among

hiring teams and among masjid boards, the congregation and all across America." On the board's unusual hiring process, Imam Michael said,

> I heard later from somebody that was very close to me, and was on the imam search committee that said we never even saw your application. So I chalked it up to weird masjid politics and God knows what their own internal issues are and that was a sign to me that that's not a place I really want to be in. And I chalk that up to poor administration and management and that kind of thing.

It is pertinent here to mention the experience of some imams who felt strongly that the board was deserving of criticism. The hampered relations and disorganization in the cases of Imams Michael, Steven, and Erick caused them to leave their positions. For Imams Michael and Steven specifically, their difficult encounters with the board resulted in their resignation from the position. It's not uncommon for imams to resign from their positions as Marc Manley on his blog announced his resignation due to discrimination since his first day on the job, little institutional support, and a discordant community vision (2015). Imam Michael said,

> Yes, I feel it's a huge issue, I feel it's a huge issue. Because at the end of the day the community is trying to move forward with good leadership and if you have good leadership but the structure is dysfunctional, then it's rendered ineffective and it's as if it doesn't exist to begin with. And people run away from those leadership roles as I did in a sense. So yeah absolutely it's a huge issue and I think we're at a very important juncture in seeking good successful models of masajid (mosques) that are properly run so that they can attract and maintain good religious leadership and administrative leadership too. In these major masajid you need to have executive directors and organizational managers and people with

> non-profit backgrounds that are running these places. So it's absolutely one of the premier issues facing our masajid today.

From his response, Imam Michael believes that there is no lack for professional and well qualified imams, rather the issue lies within the disorganized board. The difficult day to day politics with the board may leave a negative impression on future imams in considering certain mosque hiring positions. Another imam who left the position specifically blamed the board for his resignation. Imam Steven said, “Sure, it was issues with the board. Essentially, first of all there was a lot of volatility within the board, and in just over the two years that I was there I went through 4 different kinds of boards. 3 of those were perfectly fine and tolerable, and the last one wasn’t.” This quote suggests that the board within some mosques is highly unstable and constantly changing members as a part and parcel of a disorganized system as a whole. Likewise, Imam Michael had a similar experience when it came to his board’s unsteady atmosphere. Imam Michael said,

> And then even just the way the board is structured it’s a very revolving door board, so there's nobody who’s really going to take the bull by its horns and see it through. It's just not, that's not how this board is setup, and the administration of the masjid works it's not set up that way. Even if there was feelings from individuals, they didn't have the ability to turn around with the system set up as it is.

Other respondents also felt that mosque boards were disorganized, however none experienced the instability of board members routinely changing in a short period of time like Imams Michael and Steven underwent.

The respondents were shocked at the disorganization of mosque boards because they mostly came from professional backgrounds. Only one of the ten imams in my study actively sought out the position and imams with an Islamic studies degree originally intended on pursuing a career in education. Other imams with a non-religious degree voluntarily left their professional fields to accept imam positions upon being contacted and interviewed. Only one accepted the imam position due to economic constraints and lack of other options. Their backgrounds in professional settings gave them a structured outlook on how to run an organization and when they came to see the disorganization of mosque boards, they were perplexed. Imam Erick, another imam who left the position, remarked,

> I think there's always, coming from the corporate world I worked for a very large company. I'm coming from the corporate world there's a certain level of professionalism that you learn and there's a way to navigate when it comes to hiring and negotiating these types of things and I came to see that in the nonprofit Islamic world and the imam world was very different. There seemed to be a lot of confusion on the side of the employer, there seemed to be just a lack of a process and I found myself trying to drive that process instead of being like, ok, we know how the hiring process goes and we kind of know what the salary range is, and we know what the whole package looks like. So I found myself scrambling to call other people in the industry, other imams, and saying look how do you negotiate this package and what are the things that I need to ask for and what are the typical....And so yeah I think it was a little bit of a confusing process but I was blessed to have a prior imam who did a pretty good job outlining some of the basics and so I definitely think I had it better than most imams.

Not only does the board not know who to hire, the imams themselves struggled with knowing what to expect from the position without advice from other imams who have experienced the entire process. Imam Michael said,

> And that affected me and my job, and the organization as a whole and I felt the daily brunt of that in terms of things that just functioned so ridiculously at the masjid and there was no willingness to change. And I never worked in an environment like that in my previous professional work places and stuff like that and I couldn't and didn't have the wherewithal to make those changes in the capacity that I was in to the larger system and it wasn't going to change on its own.

In order to improve and enhance board relations, several respondents offered suggestions in attempting to solve organizational issues. Recommendations included a change in the board structure itself, hiring experienced non-profit staff, and looking after the imams' needs and requests. On modifying the board structure, Imam Tim said,

> I think that Sulayman Nyang wrote on two fundamentally different styles of organizations. In the immigrant board of director's style is one and the charismatic leader is the other. I believe that the best structure is a hybridized structure. The hybrid structure allows you to have institutional memory and organization, specialization while at the same time being able to have a centralized leadership with a clear focus and direction for the teaching and understanding of the community. So the imam is the sort of standard bearer, public face, leading the direction that the community should go in and begins to take on the character of its leader. And when that leader needs to be replaced you

> have a board that will continue that legacy that will identify new leadership to support that vision, direction and so on. Essentially if you have one without the other you often times lift the dynamism of the charismatic leader or if you're on the other side you become almost the cult of personality. So whatever the weaknesses individually of the imam, those weaknesses get amplified within the organization. So the hybrid model I believe is really the best one where you have a charismatic leader coupled with sound administrative board.

This kind of response from Imam Tim presents a system approach where although there is an imam as the leader, the board is setup to provide a type of checks and balances within the system. If all else fails, some respondents emphasized the importance of fitting in a system that is accepting of change if it's broken. There has been a shift towards imams being leaders of their mosques, as in 55% of mosques the imam is considered the leader (Bagby 2012). This is a noteworthy percentage change from the year 2000 when 41% of mosques considered the imam as the leader (Bagby 2012). As one respondent answered on what advice he offers to aspiring imams, Imam Jacob said,

> But with the board it's usually quite a bit. A quite a bit of politics when it comes to the board and also just dealing with people as well. So I think yea, the politics with the board is usually a major, major problem. Umm, I've experienced different models in how to deal with that, and so I tell them not to get scared of it and there's a line you need to draw. So there's politics in every field, there's politics in every job, so I tell them, there's a line to draw where you don't compromise on certain principles, if you can work within the system then you should go in that system. Because there's so much good that you can do, but if the

> system is so bad that you can't work in that system then don't walk in there in the first place and kind of work for, outside the system and provide similar services without having to go through that whole system.

Another point that imams emphasize is that boards need to hire staff with non-profit experience. Imam Michael said,

> We do need to bring in experts or at least professionals from the nonprofit management field to run our large centers. Because you should have, just like any nonprofit organization works for the most part, you have a head of the organization who is a paid employee who is responsible for actualizing the goals and the vision of the board and implementing whatever strategic plan that the organization has. They are the day to day go to lead person, and what happens in most of our masajid is the board is the one that takes the role. And they don't have the capacity or the know-how, and then there is a revolving door for many masajid where if you didn't invest in that person or in hiring a person or persons, and administrative body to run the masjid, there's going to be huge gaps.

American mosques are under-staffed with 44% of imams who are paid full-time (Bagby 2012, please see Figure 3 in the appendix). About half of all American mosques have no full-time staff (Bagby 2012, please see Figures 4 and 5 in the appendix). Highlighting the inexperience of the board, Imam Erick said, “Yeah, there's a board of community members who none of them have any experience in nonprofits or any formal training in nonprofits and for that matter no formal knowledge of religion. So it's an odd situation, to be reporting to people who don't have expertise in what they're actually doing.” By surrounding imams with well-versed individuals with non-

profit background knowledge, this allows imams to be able to address their own family and unrelated work needs. Imam Steven said,

> And so essentially it came to a point where I didn't feel that, I didn't feel that…how should I say it? I don't think that a community can do well if the imam is not doing well. And so that entails, basically it has to be a symbiotic relationship that the imam is there and taking care of the community, looking after people and so on. And part of the role of the board is to make sure that that individual and family is taken care of and I don't think that they understood that.

The effect of a poorly run administrative board speaks volumes for the interaction with imams and future of the position. Many respondents felt that a poor working relationship with a board due its dysfunction is a turnoff for well qualified imams who purposely shy away from the imam position. On board relations, Imam Erick said,

> Oh absolutely. I think it's the number one impediment for the imams to feel punishable in their position. And also when it comes to longevity, when you have a group of people who you work with who you feel lack the professional skill set help and guide you, and to manage your work, then it's tough for you stay in that position long term.

The present description of a dysfunctional board system will not be able to attract imams who are already shying away from the position. The system is unsustainable according to the respondents in even keeping the imams that are currently serving the position, and they would ideally prefer to interact with a board with non-profit experience.

B. Cultural Challenges

Another reason for the challenging relationship between the board and imams is related to culture. The interviews suggest that some boards are homogenous when it comes to ethnic and racial backgrounds which may lead to differences in vision. The respondents associate the board members with terms that range from successful professionals, to power-driven, and unyielding. This gives an image of the board, according to some respondents, as a group of individuals that desire power and control over the entire mosque. Assuming a board operates on a business model with the board being the CEO, the board may feel that an imam as a community leader encroaches on the board's authority. Imam Erick said,

> And this is something that I began to notice, look when an imam wants to venture into this very large holistic way of dealing with the community, the board gets very uneasy because you end up becoming the CEO of your community. And you're no longer just this, you know, leading prayers and just giving religious reminders. And so the board often likes to drive the community and I think for me this clash about what the board sees as an imam, and what the imams sees as an imam and what I see as an imam, this makes it very hard for it to be strong marriage between the two sides.

The board's desired control may extend to even what an imam may be allowed to speak about as Imam Malcolm said,

> A lot of the imams they may not feel comfortable especially since you're in a paid position that sometimes you have to bite your tongue because this board that sits over you tells you to do this and do that, so we have a counselor that we have

> established where certain cases may come to us and we will decide and in that way nobody will say it was the imam of the masjid.

The struggle of power between the board and imam is evident in what Imam Tim noticed from his own experience with different mosque boards. Imam Tim said,

> I find that in many of the immigrant led masajid (mosques) that the board hires the imam. And they pay him, they hire him and they fire him. So that's how they work and quite often they may have a person who they hired and I don't know maybe this is outside the scope of your thing but they may hire somebody as the imam, but he's not hired as the imam. He's hired let's say to teach Quran, or he's hired to run hifz (Quran memorization) programs and he leads the salat but he doesn't have any authority, he doesn't have the religious authority of the leader of the community. The African-American context, the imam has the sole authority as the community's leader, not as the community employee. So I come out of the experiences of both, I have both experiences.

Coming from a background of being the sole leader in control of the affairs of his community, Imam Tim notes a cultural disparity when immigrants mainly control the board while the imam loses the influence that he once had. Another respondent noticed a similar pattern among board members, as Imam Stanley said,

> And lastly, one of the challenges of being an imam that you always have a struggle for power. Many times the boards are led by successful people, meaning successful in their careers or their education so a lot of times they have positions of shot calling or they feel that because of their great success, or wealth or education they should be just as influential as an imam. And many may have

> studied 15 or 20 years literally, and they may feel that I'm more educated than this imam as the imam only has a bachelor's or whatever even though it is in Islamic studies, but I'm just as qualified. So I have seen this personally a lot and this is part of the challenges here in America and I think especially for American born Muslims as well.

The balance of power in mosques when it comes to decision making is tilted towards the board as 69% of mosque boards hold the final decision (Bagby 2012, please see Figure 6 in the appendix). There is a noticeable difference in African American led mosques as the board has the final word in 25% of their mosques (Bagby 2012). In comparison, the opposite is true among some Christian denominations as religious clergy are viewed as the least regulated group of caregivers with little oversight or accountability (Pooler 2011). Similar feelings of trust are expressed among African Americans towards the church as it's seen as one of the most trusted institutions (Lumpkins et al. 2013:1095).

Other respondents confirmed similarly the same ideas that Imam Stanley noted, as some mosque boards are made up of successful professionals that invest heavily in having their input implemented within the mosque system. This is apparent in the experience of Imam Steven who eventually left the position due to the influence of only one board member. Imam Steven said,

> So, unfortunately like I said because this person was so professionally advanced, everyone else on the board abdicated their own personal thoughts and deferred with him on pretty much everything. And so he treated it like he would treat a resignation as an executive of a company. It's like so you decided to leave, oh ok, we'll just find someone else.

Another example of cultural differences is evident in the attitude of some imams in seeking their own independence and space within the mosque system. On imams displaying a certain level of confidence, Imam Calvin said,

> They're not the type of people that you can really push out. I mean one thing to be an American is to kind of have a little bit of an edge to yourself and so to be pushed around and to be told XY and Z is not something that many American born shuyookh (scholars) are going to tolerate. And that's why you see so many American shuyookh leaving masajid. Because...and I don't think that's a healthy sign, I don't think that's a healthy sign for shuyookh themselves, or the institutions. I don't necessarily blame shuyookh, but I think it's an indicator that the sooner rather than later masajid are going to have to get hip to the fact you can't treat people like this. And can't treat your imams like this because you're not going to have anyone who's going to accept the role in your space. The historical model is no longer effective.

Embracing a culture of looking after oneself, which Imam Calvin said is part of being American, imams counsel other colleagues in negotiating roles and salaries. This conclusion is explicitly captured in the statement of Imam Jacob who said, “I encourage them to do so, I'm trying to give them some pointers and tips in how to talk to people, what subjects to study or focus on. I actually help also with salary negotiations for some of them, as I helped two of them get a job just a few weeks ago.” This feeling of independence could be a reason for an imam to not relent control to the board over the fear of job security. Imam Michael said,

> I'm a father first and foremost, I'm a husband, Alhamdillah (thanks to God Allah) I love my family and my kids and I want to be there for them first before anyone

> else and so if I were to last in that capacity it meant neglecting my own family, and I couldn't do that. So there was great relief attached to that and I can still go on and I won't be tied down in any way that I don't want to for the rest of my life. Alhamdillah I am bi-vocational and have a whole other skill set and profession that I can lean back to, so I'm not stuck in going back to having to be an imam. There was a relief in that and the fact that my lifestyle would be lightened also, there was a sense of relief in that as well.

All the imam respondents view themselves as the leaders and representatives of their communities. Imam William said, “It's quite common, this is possibly due to the expectations of a religious leader/clergy and also due to the reason that the imam is the focal point of the community that is visible which comes due to the nature of the job.” The respondents would like to see themselves as community leaders due to the nature of their job which is not a 9 to 5 field. Imam Tim said, “Umm no, again in the board driven...imam could be a scholar, so you have an imam who’s a scholar and his work is to teach and might lead the prayers. There might be somebody who is the imam and the ameer (the leader of the community).” Although boards may struggle with the idea that imams are the face of an organization, American culture has ingrained individuals who are hired in key positions to view themselves as leaders and representatives of a larger institution.

C. Differences in Vision

All the aforementioned causes for the often times turbulent relationship between the board and imam are interrelated. A disorganized system with the balance of power tilted towards

the board will affect the vision of the imam if it opposes the perspective of the board. This eventually leads to differences in vision and reaching a compromise is the next step. In simply explaining the role of the imam which extends beyond someone who leads the prayer, sometimes the board may approve of the overall direction and vision of an imam while some community members may not agree with the imam.

Speaking about his own mosque, Imam William said,

> The American imam, and I don't think people are very cognizant of this, have a really different role. And I know at our center, with all due respect to the prayers is one of the imams' roles here, but one of the last one that the board is concerned for not that it's not important as it's very honored in our religion, but there are other people that could help with that if needed. There are many people that can read the Quran, have it memorized and have proper recitation. I felt the symptoms of a lot of our American Muslim Islamic centers and mosques some of which are a little bit less mature just in terms of their institutionalization, that may be a little bit more focused on worship perhaps the prayers and school, but not necessarily that same dynamic role, and I think this is a shared struggle with many young professionals across America.

Imam William may feel that his respective board allows him to develop into an imam who is not focused on leading prayers, but he acknowledges that other Islamic centers have yet to follow suit. On the other hand, another respondent expressed his frustration with the board's treatment of a guest imam who led the prayers. Imam Tristan said,

> You know one time you know and in every Ramadan we bring different imams and sometimes we bring imams from different countries. So I brought one from

> overseas. They didn't provide him with good accommodation and they took him to a very poor hotel because they got a cheap discount from there. So I had a big confrontation at that time with a board member and he said to me that you know a few years ago we brought an imam from overseas and he slept on the floor of the classroom. Oh, so this is how you treat your guest and not only just a guest, somebody who is coming to serve your community in Ramadan and has knowledge and Quran and you let them sleep on the floor of the classroom. Ok, this is so...shows you different attitudes of different people.

Two respondents cited their inability to continue their studies as a reason for why the left the imam position. Both imams mentioned to their respective boards that they needed to further educate themselves in order to serve the position and give it the justice it deserves. Both boards denied to address the requests of the imams to study as Imam Steven said,

> So I was trying to say that if I'm supposed to lead and guide this community, I need time to study, even if it's just a handful of hours a week. To that degree it's a priority, and regardless of how busy things are I can cut that time out. And they didn't see the need for that, so for me that was kind of like the last straw. Because I knew that if that was their philosophy, the work was going to destroy me that's not going to be healthy.

Similarly, Imam Erick said, "…so I think that in my case it was definitely an issue of lack of religious knowledge that played into it to do with the combination of lack of community building knowledge which is general nonprofit community building skills."

Other examples of differences in community vision with the board from imams revolve around financial and hiring practices. In the majority of mosques (61%) with a full-time paid

imam, the imam is often times the only hired staff individual (Bagby 2012). Surprisingly, there has been a decrease in mosques hiring at least one part-time staff person in 2011 (28%) in comparison to the year 2000 (39%, Bagby 2012). Aside from the hired imam, most part-time employees working in a mosque were custodial staff (Bagby 2012, please see Figures 7 and 8 in the appendix). Many boards rely heavily on volunteers to oversee mosque related activities. This often results in burnout for some volunteers and overburdens the imam in trying to recruit volunteers as the board may object to hiring staff. This is evident in the statement of Imam Michael,

> And I think we need to acknowledge that and we need to put our money where our mouth is if we say we want to run professional organizations. We have to take actual steps towards doing that and a volunteer board cannot run a large organization or the day-to-day activities of the place. And I think that's where that mismatch is taking place. And perhaps there is a model or two in there where they are starting to get that get that function right and we need to consciously work towards building that model.

When it comes to financial conflicts with the board, some imams cited a difference in vision in allocating resources towards building a larger Islamic center as opposed to investing in human capital. This explicitly was cited by two imams as major reasons for their resignations. Imam Erick said,

> And then also, financial constraints of the community especially in my case, the community wanted to build a mega center and divert all resources over a period of several years towards that project. And for me, as a vested member of that community, it is not what I want. I want resources to be diverted to or develop the

> people in the community and I don't want to build simply large structures. But there's also a clash in vision between the imam and the board in addition to all the things that we spoke about.

Another imam who left is Imam Steven who said,

> …the big reason for that is because that one of the issues that came up is masjid expansion. And I among many other imams and by far the majority, are not in favor of using zakat (charity) money for masjid expansion. Except in very rare cases, maybe inner city communities that are very poor or something like that, but the community that I was in was very wealthy. And that was the position that I had and when I was gone they definitely were sure to move quickly, in adopting the other position. There's no shortage of people that are in need. In a wealthy community to use the zakat money, while the expansion is definitely necessary, there's no question about that. We have to move, the masjid has to move, because of parking and other things, it's just, that there's needy families and refugees that can't pay rent. You know, I just don't think that its right.

Similar to imams and the relationship with their boards, Ibn Khaldun often wrote about "asabiya" (which Rosenthal has translated to group feeling) and its correlation with the success of organizations and civilizations. Authors have differed as to what is an accurate translation of Ibn Khaldun's concept of asabiya, and some have argued that the closest translation to the term asabiya is the emotional and conscious sense of group solidarity (Simon 2006). Individualism and a strong sense of asabiya are antithetical according to Ibn Khaldun, and an organization without asabiya is doomed to collapse (Simon 2006). He routinely associates group feeling with

the function of a religious leader who galvanizes support from the general public and cultivates a sense of solidarity crucial to societal development (Simon 2006).

The existing board politics is a challenge for imams to implement their vision for their respective communities. None of the respondents singlehandedly were in control of their affiliated mosques, and all the respondents have had to deal with a board to some degree. Sometimes imams feel the board presents roadblocks as they exert their control over the imam and mosque as a whole. At an Islamic conference, an imam mentioned that some mosque boards stipulate in the contract that an imam is not allowed to purchase fancy vehicle makes such as Mercedes, Lexus, Infiniti and other car models. Some of the causes for the difficult relationship between the board are related to a disorganized board structure, as well as differences in culture and vision. It remains to be seen whether the disconnect between the board and the imam is a generational gap or a constant power struggle regardless of who the board composes.

Theme #3: Whether it's Advantageous being an American Born Imam

The scope of this study is not to compare the differences between an American born imam with a foreign-born imam. This research question could be addressed in future studies and would require analysis from the perspective of foreign born imams. The differentiation between the preference of an American or foreign born imam may assist in predicting the trajectory of Muslim American communities. A leading scholar at an Islamic conference quickly commented on the continuing need to import imams from overseas. The reason cited was due to the clarity and fluent Arabic tongue of foreign imams in reciting the Quran and understanding of the Arabic language from a young age which is not found in American youth presently.

However, a question that was posed in the interviews was regarding the potential differences between a foreign and an American born imam from the outlook of the respondents. The answers were somewhat varied as two respondents cited little to no difference in effectiveness as an imam based on birthland. Both respondents similarly stipulated a qualifier which was dependent on if the imam would be able to relate to American culture and become well versed on domestic issues. If this was the case, they saw no difference and may prefer a foreign-born imam over an American born imam simply based on being culturally cognizant. Another consideration depends on the specific needs of the community in recognizing the best fitting imam based on their mutual agreements of responsibilities. Most respondents, seven imams in total, unequivocally stated that there is a positive advantage to being American born and hoped for more imams to be hired domestically.

A. No True Advantage to being American Born

In answering the question of whether its advantageous for an American born imam to lead an Islamic institution over a foreign-born imam, two respondents did not seem to favor one over the other. Imams William and Tristan did not believe that birthplace was an indicator for an effective imam. However, the two respondents were outliers and the only respondents who expressed this viewpoint as most respondents strongly preferred an American born imam. Upon being asked as an imam born in America what Imam Tristan thought were some of the advantages and disadvantages, Imam Tristan mentioned, “I don't know, I guess it works both ways. If you’re white people say something about you, if you’re brown, or if your black. Everybody has those

kinds of things, so some people are predisposed to liking you and some people are predisposed to not like you."

What is noticeable is that Imam Tristan begins with stating the negative aspects of being an American born imam and dealing with barriers and racial stereotypes. From his experience, one will observe that Imam Tristan struggles to genuinely find a place as an imam without skepticism and judgment regardless of the fact that he is American born. Imam Tristan continues to remark, "Some people think you're a spy, so for example I might find it easier to deal with black people than some white people. So I think there are positives and negatives, it doesn't end up making it very significant."

All in all, the advantages and disadvantages according to Imam Tristan are insignificant in preferring one imam over another. Regardless of origin, an imam faces an uphill battle in convincing the community of their qualifications as there is some congregant distrust based on perceptions. When questioned about whether an American born imam is a better fit for the position here in America, Imam Tristan responded,

> You know every, the...different Islamic centers have things in common but also differences so it doesn't work the same everywhere. So you won't necessarily have a good fit in some communities. So usually communities figure out what works for them, and so a lot of imams don't last more than a couple of years in one locality. And it's obvious to everyone, when they start looking for someone else or the community does. So the diversity makes it...there's always going to be someplace you're going to find that will work for you inshAllah (God willing). But it's hard to generalize about that.

Also, drawing attention to specific community needs, Imam William said,

> We have to be honest with this and understand that eventually to really meet the needs of a large Muslim community here in America, across that breadth, it's essentially impossible to find a single individual that achieves at a high-level across all those areas that I was talking about. Media, pastoral care, youth work. In some mosques the imams have facilities and logistics and administrative roles. And so each one has to define what the congregations' needs are, obviously people can come in with a breath of experience and they have competence in some areas but particularly larger communities some have been largely successful employing a team of clergy like some of the churches or large religious institutions each of which have broad experience but may have specific or strong experience in a particular area of need.

In addition, Imams William and Tristan felt that a key feature of an imam that renders birthplace insignificant is the ability of the imam to understand and adapt to a given culture. Balancing religious knowledge with an understanding of the American context allows a foreign-born imam to seamlessly fulfill the necessary tasks at hand regardless of English being their second language. Both respondents highlighted the importance of cultural awareness as vital to a foreign-born imam successfully reaching their audience, to which both note is not unrealistic. Imam William said,

> And when you recognize that, I find generalizations quite unhelpful, in Islamic tradition it's not just knowledge of the text that's important to help people, but knowledge of the context, right. And when I understand that that's the objective, there are immigrant imams that have been quite impactful on me precisely because they had the courage and the cosmopolitan skill if you will, to come to a totally different area and bring a huge breadth of Islamic traditional experience, but also immerse themselves in American culture and

> understand the context and perhaps even raise their students who are more naturally versed in the context by virtue of being raised in the culture here, with that traditional knowledge to then extend on their contributions after. I should not look down upon that because they were born somewhere else or they were labeled with the label immigrant. Similarly, there are people that are born in America that have no idea what the people's needs are here or are very isolated or are uninterested. Or they may have all the cultural knowledge but none of the religious traditional background, or have both the cultural and religious background but don't have the wisdom and patience to deal with people and their problems and their sharp words and their natural challenges.

Similarly, Imam Tristan noted that if a foreign-born imam can immerse oneself into the culture, he sees little to no difference between an American and foreign born imam in terms of effectiveness. Imam Tristan said,

> You may notice that I don't really think that ethnicity of the imam is really that important. And the American born, may not be related to the community at all. And you may have someone, and it happens, and they come in it's well-known from another country and they don't know anything about this society. But a lot of times they are quick to adapt and learn and become great leaders in the community. So I think if you talk to a lot of people you'll see that, I think that's my guess. And Allah knows best.

Making broad generalizations that do not take into consideration specific communities does an injustice to the entire imam search process according to Imam William. The Islamic center's system and community will deem best the type of imam who fits the system already in place. Depending on the community's preferences, a foreign-born imam may be favored over an

American born imam and vice versa. Concurring with Imam Tristan, this conclusion was stated by Imam William who said,

> And really, imam means a thousand things to a thousand people, and it means a thousand things to a thousand different institutions. And I personally advocate that institutions take an honest hard look at what their needs of their congregation and its particular make-up and diversity and proximity to other institutions are, and the imams take an honest look even if they are incredibly well versed and incredibly strong they are not a strong match for every Islamic center in America, because the needs vary. And I think the best marriages if you will are when both have an honest representation of their needs and their capabilities and you find a match. And that doesn't come by matching an imam candidate to a mosque, you have to go deeper than that title to see what's needed.

At first glance, Imams William and Tristan agree to the overall idea that depending on community needs, there is no concrete generalization that one can reach that favors one type of imam over another. An interesting yet subtle conclusion is made from Imam William in that he never explicitly states that an American born imam is a better fit in any type of community. However, he does mention that a foreign-born imam is a better fit for smaller communities. Imam William said,

> So there are some small centers that are primarily oriented around the needs of prayer, perhaps there is a school, perhaps there is a nearby bigger mosque that covers a lot of the other needs. And so that's what they need, they need daily prayers that are convenient to their homes. In that case, the type of imam (foreign born) that you described would be perhaps a very strong fit for that type of community because that's the skill set that they're looking for. In other

> communities, it's big, it has a school, they have outreach and media needs, but the imam is so busy running around that it's hard for them to be present five times a day. They need somebody that's kind of that traditional, to anchor the mosque. So that person could be a great fit in a team, a dynamic team that covers those needs.

Even when differentiating the expectations of imams in larger vs. smaller community centers, he never favors an American born imam for wider tasks. Rather, he cites the need for larger communities to hire an imam that works with a team as the imam cannot shoulder the responsibility as a single individual. In this, one may gather that Imam William may lean towards hiring a foreign imam for smaller communities, but does not necessarily favor the hiring of any type of individual imam in a larger community as they work collaboratively among a team of employees.

B. An American Born Imam is Preferred

While only two respondents believed that birthplace of the imam is non-significant, six respondents explicitly felt otherwise with one respondent implicitly leaning towards hiring more American born imams. According to the data, respondents cited advantages for more American born imams to be hired that include: political (especially following 9/11), social and cultural, and linguistic advantages.

Acculturation is mainly used to describe the transition from one culture to another along with its social ramifications (Kabir 2016). Researchers have concluded that mosques have been used as a tool for integration and acculturation (Bagby 2009). However, studies on the acculturation of elder immigrants note that Muslim adults undergo depression due to living in a

new land, speaking a new language, separating from family and losing other social networks (Abu-Bader et al. 2011:427). A major factor cited for the paradigm shift in American born imams was 9/11. Restrictions on visas granted for imams to work in the United States led to a growing need of American imams to fill the void. Recently, an emphasis on stricter immigration may also contribute to a decrease in religious visas offered to imams from overseas. Only time will tell what percentage of imams will come from overseas, but since the year 2000, 47% of imams have come from overseas (Bagby 2012). Surprisingly, 9/11 was not a leading factor for acculturation as imams prior to 9/11 demonstrated the same high level in favor of community and political involvement (Bagby 2009). Rather, 9/11 only reinforced the concept of Muslim engagement in communities and politics (Bagby 2009). Mosques in America have been giving platforms for Muslim advocacy groups to run voter registration drives and other outreach activities (Al-Krenawi 2016).

Imam Tim said,

> Before 9/11, which we should've had enough time by now to compensate and maybe in many other ways maybe we are compensating, but before 9/11 you would import your imam. And then after 9/11 it became very difficult to get religious visas, as well as people being afraid of what the imam might say because they don't really understand America. So internally and externally there was a fear that we don't want to go there but since that time the mold has been to identify an American born and raised imams. And so I think of a whole rack of imams now serving these kind of generalist imams who talk about everything. They could talk about alcoholism or they can talk about the area that they have some

> specialization but that whole new generation of imams are coming into that generalist type of population.

Muslim American communities in the mid-20th century searched for an imam from an overseas country who could only partially fulfil their tasks due to an insufficient understanding of American culture and society (Nyang 1999). In terms of cultural understanding, an emphasis was made by respondents on the concept that American born imams have already immersed themselves in American culture. In fact, they were adamant without hesitation that the trend should tilt towards hiring only American born imams. The insistence of imams is supported by literature as Muslim congregants become unhappy when an imam cannot relate to modern problems which Muslims encounter (Al-Krenawi 2016). Al-Krenawi said, "In the Netherlands, young Dutch Muslims do not believe that their non-Dutch Imams have the answers for current religious problems they face, specifically regarding their confusion on how to combine the Dutch culture they know as second and third generation Dutch youth with their Muslim religious identity in today's world" (2016:365).

Imam Jacob said,

> I feel that there a lot of challenges that come with overseas imams. There are some good things that they bring as well, but I think that what we need to work towards, we have probably about 85-90% immigrant imams which is a rough figure I am throwing out, it probably needs to be the other way around where 85-90% of imams are born and raised here in America. Or at least raised in America at minimum, to have a good understanding of American culture to be able to relate to people and for many other reasons as well. The other 10% can be immigrant imams who have a very good contribution to the community and

> society. There are definitely some Eastern values that American born imams may not have or may be lacking or may have not developed to a certain extent, because certain cultural values are very strong and do help an individual, so I would like to see at least some immigrant imams continue to come, but at the same time the vast majority need to be home grown.

Particular regions in America may even oppose the idea of an overseas imam as a leader of their community. This is in part due to their communities being accustomed and comfortable with an American born imam. In another study, many Muslim youth expressed a distance between Muslim leadership and themselves citing a lack of participation with youth activities because the majority of imams came from "back home" and had "back home" values and wanted the youth to adapt to their culture instead of vice versa (Ul Mobeen 2012). Imam Steven said, "I work for an institution that has seven or eight imams on staff now who are from the area. So I think at least where I am at, it's very common in the expectation is that the imam needs to be from here so it works in my favor for the most part."

A premium is placed on an imam's ability to connect with the youth in the community according to Nouman Ali Khan (Burnett 2013). Relating to the millennial generation according to Imam Jacob has helped him in communicating with youth and non-Muslims since there is a common understanding of American culture. Mundane daily American life is obviously understood by Americans since they live it, and this is an obstacle for an overseas imam that may steepen the learning curve. Imam Michael said, "A foreign born imam doesn't know what it means to work a 9 to 5 job. Doesn't know what it means to have a household where say for example the father is working and the mother is working and the kids have their schedule,

because they didn't grow up with that and didn't see that." About two-thirds of imams agree that there is a gap between the imam of the mosque and the youth in the community (Abuelezz 2011).

According to the respondents, it seems logical that countries, including America, turn to their own institutions and leaders without outsourcing positions unnecessarily. Imam Stanley said,

> No doubt I would say in order to serve the country and the people better, it's better to just like every country now they raise their own imams and muftis (scholars who give religious verdicts) and what have you. In Nigeria, Malaysia, Philippines, Jordan they all have their own muftis and they don't call and resort to another country. Even minorities, small places which there are minorities like in Uganda have their own institutions and muftis even though they're less than 20% maybe about 12%, and I know we're not even close to that. So I think we have to get to that place also and it only makes sense.

Specifically for Imam Michael, the realization that overseas imams were out of touch with reality ultimately led him to the path of becoming an imam and abandoning the secular professional workforce. Imam Michael spoke about his experience and said,

> And so I saw people in the masjid who don't understand the American Muslim experience and they are lecturing me about how to live, and I couldn't sit knowing that ability you had in giving more. And giving more to me translated as helping individuals. So until there was actually a formal opening in one of the masajid (mosques) for a position, that's when I first started considering the position. And I felt that I had more to offer because I was born and raised here and I know the American mindset, why not go into this field? And that's kind of how I went into it all the way.

Some respondents went as far as citing future prognostications on the Muslim community's cultural makeup. Imam Stanley remarked,

> Because the research according to Pew research, that within the next maybe 15 years the actual majority of people will be American born. And so we are almost at that threshold which all makes sense because the majority of people will be people who relate to the American experience and not be Egyptian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi experience. So to import someone will be difficult, and the reason why I say many of the older generations are passionate is because they have tried it.

When it comes to social capital, American born imams will have access to resources and education that is unavailable to overseas imams. Identifying community resources allows imams to build bridges with other minorities who may share similar struggles in the American context. Imam Erick mentioned some advantages for an American born imam and said,

> I mean clearly there's a number of advantages and the advantages are easy to state. Number one, we are privy to be and have more access to education I think. Traditionally back in Muslim countries the sad fact is that the more educated people or the highly-educated people will almost never go into religious education. That's just the way their society operates.

Two other respondents mentioned the importance of imams recognizing the need to lean on and support other communities, namely African American communities. Imam Malcolm spoke about both access to education and building connections with African Americans as he commented,

> I think one of the biggest advantages is knowing the topography of this land and we know...and actually being an African-American. Because we've struggled and

> came out if slavery, there's people here and we're better equipped to deal with them and so it was a mistake for any of the immigrants not to align themselves with us. Many of them recognize now that they should've done that and not set themselves up somewhere else because we know how to deal with that. There's an advantage of being here, there's an advantage of what we've learned in school, you know in terms of what I have said about the social sciences is very important. If an imam is going to be equipped in this society, they need to have Islamic knowledge but they need to also learn the social sciences, they need the humanities, they really do. Because it helps you to work in this environment and I think that's an advantage that we have. We have the schools that give you this knowledge so that you could be equipped to deal with whatever happens in the society.

In terms of leaning on African Americans, similar comments were mentioned by Imam Stanley who said,

> So getting their expertise and experience, and I do believe that even African-Americans have a very important role to play in this too because they have lived a life of understanding discrimination. And because of that, the reality is that they may be able to change certain things that other people can't, that's the America that we live in. But I think we have to recognize that as well. So to answer that with the American born Muslim context, they have some social capital that others maybe recent immigrants do not have. So I think that in general they will be good to resort to.

Other reasons for why the respondents felt that imams should be American born include the proficiency in the English language. While the respondents who believed that foreign born imams can adapt to their cultural environment, imams who prefer an American born imam were skeptical of foreign imams and their ability to deliver a message to an English-speaking audience. Upon being asked if there are advantages to being an American born imam, Imam Jacob said,

> Yeah, I think there's quite a few advantages because the people here generally speak English the ones who I'm talking to and they share a similar cultural background that I can relate to them a little bit more. Especially the younger generation of young Muslims and the non-Muslim generation who kind of grew up here. So I think I have an advantage in that sense.

The command of the English language was a commonly cited reason for the need for imams to be hired domestically. Many have cited that community members and non-Muslims are turned off by individuals who speak English as their second language. Venting his feelings Imam Michael said,

> The language is so important, the language is so important and I'll be very honest, I'm still frustrated on a national stage, it sort of seems you see thick accented people where their command of English is fine maybe, but it's a disconnect that you're building with society. Look this is who Muslims are, no that's not who Muslims are and why is this person representing who I am and what I am about. These guys are well spoken, why would you actively put up foreign sounding individuals who is representing Muslims in America when that's the whole point?

> We are trying to represent the Muslim American faith, so those kinds of things are very frustrating and the also translates into how we address communities.

Others have mentioned the advantage that American born imams display in speaking English properly not just to their neighboring community, but the global community. Imam Jacob said, "So I think that because the unique position we have in terms of the English language and how many people in this world know English, I think that can be a great benefit throughout the world in many parts of the world from American imams." The inability to speak English clearly hinders the message and diminishes the potential impact of reaching a wider audience. The concern for being able to fluently speak English that the respondents alluded to is confirmed and validated by some studies. A common theme that prevailed among immigrant clergy whether they were Christian, Jewish, or Muslim was that a heavy foreign accent was a turn off for their congregations and with the broader external community at large (Morgan 2013).

Addressing contemporary issues and the wider non-Muslim community, having an imam who is articulate and eloquent allows American born imams to become spokespeople for Muslims. Imam Stanley said,

> I think and I don't mean that in a biased sense that I'm disparaging someone else, but if we were in Egypt and essentially the same thing is happening I think it would be obvious. So here I am saying that to address some of these issues, just having an American born imam would be helpful for example because of the thick accent and knowing the history and culture that would be helpful.

Although some respondents remind that with vast generational changes within America, communication is achievable as the commonality is the ability to speak the same language. Imam

Steven said, “There is still a generational divide, but at the same time at least we speak the same language and we might share similar cultural references. So there is still a lot to connect on even though there are differences.” In capturing the connection with Americans through language, Imam Malcolm said,

> In fact, there have been some studies and some works saying that we need more American born imams not imams shipped from overseas that can't really speak English. So I think you have that now and even like here we have imams that are American born and his English is crisp, and he has his Arabic, he's tight. Where you have others that come over here that have that inability to speak English so they lose people.

The theme of comparing the effectiveness of an American born and a foreign-born imam is beyond the scope of this study. However, the theme is evident in the interviews conducted and the respondents stated their opinions on whether there is a preference of one type of imam over the other. On the one hand, you have most respondents that mentioned their views on what they felt were qualities that work in favor of American born imams and would like to see the trend continue towards hiring American born imams. On the other hand, two respondents didn’t generalize and concluded that there is no real significant difference as long as imams exude cultural competency.

Chapter 5

Discussion

The goal of my inductive and exploratory study was to understand in detail the personal perspectives and career paths that American born Imams experience as they became religious leaders. Symbolic interactionism frames these issues and, at the same time, is the driving force behind an understanding of the imams' experiences as well as those of other important actors in Muslim communities. The theory is tied to my three major themes which are: imams currently receive inadequate training for their positions as religious leaders in their communities; the relationship between the mosque board and an imam can directly reinforce or mitigate against problems within the religious community; and certain fundamental advantages along with disadvantages emerge for imams who are American.

The first theme in my study was related to the inadequate training that imams currently receive. According to Blumer, social theorists have focused on meanings and interpretations ascribed to certain actions, but it was Herbert Mead who truly analyzed human interactions through the understanding of the "self" (Blumer 1969:79). In the process of understanding themselves, imams continue to struggle to collectively agree on a standardized definition of the term imam. While the respondents evidently understand what they symbolize and what they offer, they do not seem to cite a universally agreed on definition of their position as imams. The application of symbolic interactionism from a congregants' perspective is in their association of stereotypes to imams. Based on their interactions and those of their parents, Muslims may attribute negative stereotypes to imams based on experiences that shape their attitudes.

The second theme in my study addressed the relationship between the mosque board and the imam. Blumer emphasized that organizations of human society is the framework inside of which social action takes place and is not the determinant of that action (1969:87). He also noted that changes within an organization are the product of activity of acting units (Blumer 1969:87). Essentially, imams operate as actors within the framework of mosques but their action is not determined by the structure of the mosque. Imams act as individual organisms based on how they interpret their relationship with the mosque board. The respondents based on their interactions with the board concluded that challenges with the board revolve around a lack of mosque organization, cultural differences, and differences in vision.

Considering the importance of history, Blumer stressed that actions and their attached meanings do not occur spontaneously and are historically linked (1969:20). This theory is applicable when one understands glimpses of Islamic history. It is important to know that prayer in the city of Madinah's mosque is better than 1,000 prayers elsewhere except in the mosque in Makkah, in which one prayer in the Makkan mosque is better than 100,000 prayers elsewhere (Ibn Majah 2007:345). This concept of sacredness attached to Makkah was additionally the birthland of Prophet Muhammad to which he held dearly in his heart. Eventually the Muslims conquered Makkah and removed the idols therein during the life of Prophet Muhammad. As a result, the Muslims originally from Madinah were saddened as they were sure that the Prophet would not return to living in Madinah. They viewed Prophet Muhammad as an indispensable part of their lives, and they could not imagine their lives without their prophet and neighbor for ten years (Emerick 2002:252).

Although prayers in the Makkan mosque is more rewarding and served as the original homeland and birthplace of Prophet Muhammad, however he decided to continue living in

Madinah despite conquering Makkah and removing the idols therein (Emerick 2002:252). This further elucidates that religious figures in Islam are mostly venerated due to what they symbolize based on the profound impact of their interactions with people, and not the structures which they built.

The third theme in my study covered certain fundamental advantages along with disadvantages that emerge for imams who are American born. This theme is related to symbolic interactionism by Mead who emphasized that individuals recognize themselves as students or doctors because of a series of social interactions they experience (Blumer 1969:12). It is through this process (and not a structure), that an individual undergoes in order to fulfill what Mead called "role-taking" (Blumer 1969:12, 62). Seven of my respondents believed they fit better in American communities searching for imams because they were born in America. Based on the process of not only living in America, but being able to communicate with young generations by understanding their culture and speaking the English language proficiently allows American born imams to take on the role. This role-taking process by American born imams is a result of comparing themselves to foreign born imams citing skills more appropriate for the American context.

Conclusion

Based on my interviews, the respondents feel burdened from a variety of perspectives. The role of an imam in serving and representing the Muslims is a rather daunting expectation. After completing an Islamic studies degree, imams quickly realized their religious education has not adequately prepared them for the imam position. Imams themselves required first-hand

experience to fully understand their communal responsibilities. No longer were imams simply expected to be educated in the religious sciences, instead they were viewed as spokespeople and building blocks of their communities. Developing religious institutions domestically helps alleviate the need for religious understanding accompanied with the nuances of American culture. However, these institutions again only address the religious or more theoretical aspects of learning.

A more applied approach to becoming an imam will help smooth the transition from being a student to being the representative of a Muslim community. In order to implement an applied approach to Muslim leadership, I propose that imams seriously consider a professional internship in a Muslim community. This program could be a summer or seasonal internship involving the shadowing of another imam. Since all the respondents indicated that the imam position took them out of their comfort zone, I am suggesting that an imam internship program requires an applicant to intern in a completely different community outside of their local hometown. Being away from family, friends, and one's hometown can offer direct exposure to what the imam position entails.

For example, this internship should not be limited to simply leading prayers because many seminaries already have youth who have memorized the Quran and lead some daily prayers. Rather, I would suggest that the intern should undergo a formal interview process, meet with board members, prepare lectures and sermons for both Muslims and non-Muslim audiences, be involved in service projects, visit college campuses, attend counseling sessions, and meet with the local media representatives.

At the same time, I would also suggest certain recommendations to board members so that imams can fulfill their tasks and expectations. According to the movie *Unmosqued,* the

average age of a current board member in American mosques is 52 (Eid, Aly, and Mahmoud 2014). A constant message from Muslim elders centers on the importance of the Muslim youth living in America. However, Muslim youth continue to feel marginalized and silenced by not having a physical and vocal presence within mosque boards (Eid et al. 2014). If Muslim adults truly want to empower Muslim youth, it is my recommendation that they encourage their youth to run for board elections.

At one Islamic conference I attended, an entire session was dedicated to mosque boards concerned with improving their working relationships with imams. One of the panelists remarked that the current board at his mosque contained no one older than 40 years of age; this included the imam. The panelist also mentioned that the board had a strong and cordial relationship with the imam even though the board was a mix of different backgrounds and contained both men and women on it.

Based upon my research, I believe these remarks from this panelist are a representation of what imams would prefer to materialize at their own mosques. Unfortunately, there was a low turnout for the session which could be a reflection of the disengagement that many Muslim youth feel towards mosques. My respondents would like to see a concerted effort from Muslim youth similar to the proactive actions of Ohio congregants, who successfully won seats in their mosque's board elections (Eid et al. 2014).

Based upon my research, adults do not need to feel threatened by youth in their mosque but should begin to realize that the value and leadership of this segment of Muslim congregants is priceless. A young person who wants to be more involved in becoming a mosque board member is, at one level of understanding, simply asking for help and guidance from an older and more experienced generation. If everyone can begin to agree that the best interests of mosques

are served when different kinds of congregants are engaged in mosque activities, then my recommendations could lead to establishing stronger and more positive board relations with the imam.

The significance of these findings are vital to the internal vitality and external image of mosques in America. Imams play a profound role in advancing the mosque as a religious institution and their visions allow one to better understand the trajectory of the future generations of Muslim Americans. I hope, therefore, that my study serves as a springboard for more research on Muslim religious leadership in America.

In this regard, future research recommendations may seek to compare leadership differences between American born imams and foreign born imams by recognizing the legitimacy of the perspectives of foreign born imams. Also, researchers may want to investigate Muslim religious leaders and activists across the demographic spectrum. In addition, future research may want to focus on the perspective of mosque boards. Comparisons can be made between different mosque governance models to evaluate the effectiveness and productivity of different governance models. Lastly, further research could address the involvement of Muslim youth inside and outside of the mosque in attempting to better understand and appreciate our next generation of Muslim Americans.

Chapter 6

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Chapter 7

Figure 1 (Bagby 2012:9. Total N equals number of mosques accounted for)

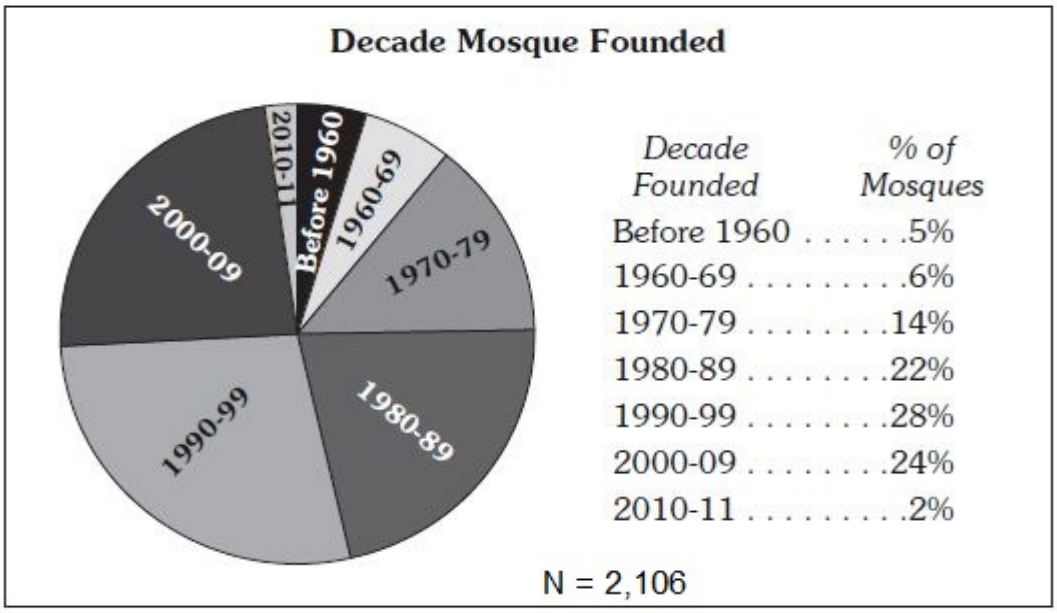
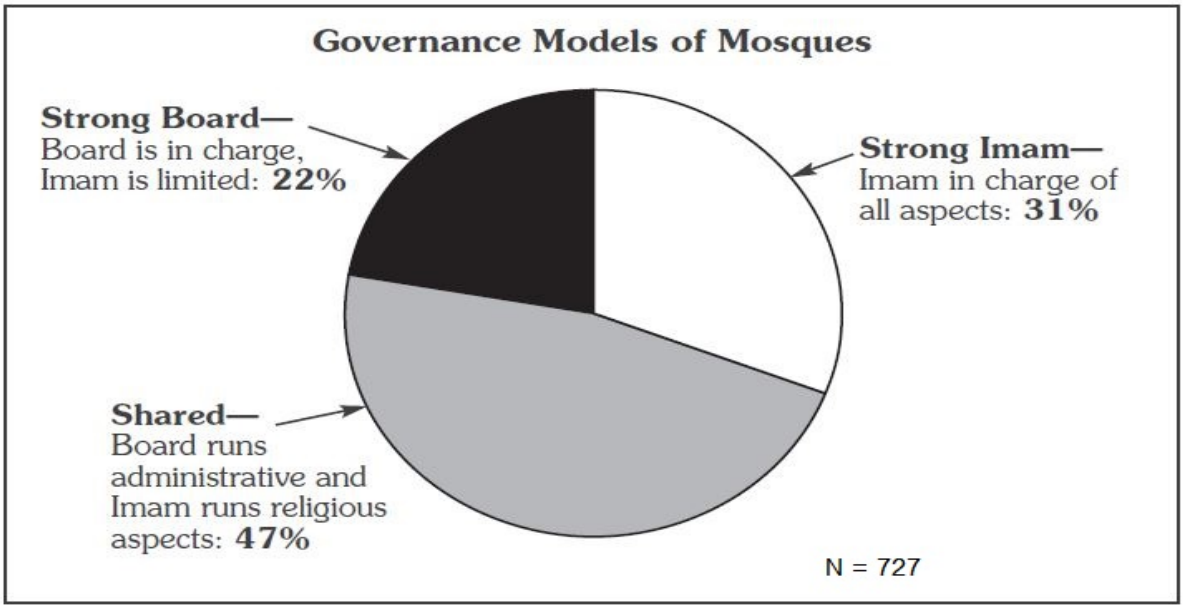


Figure 2 (Bagby 2012:17. Total N equals number of mosques surveyed)



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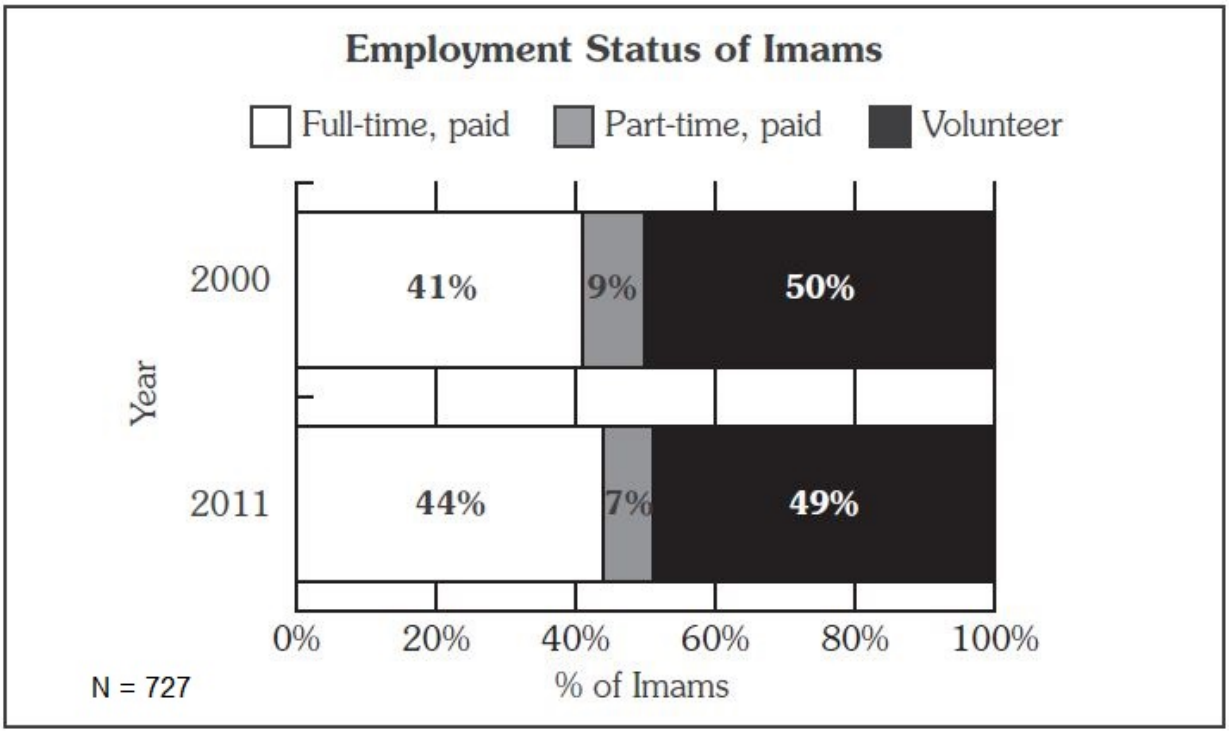

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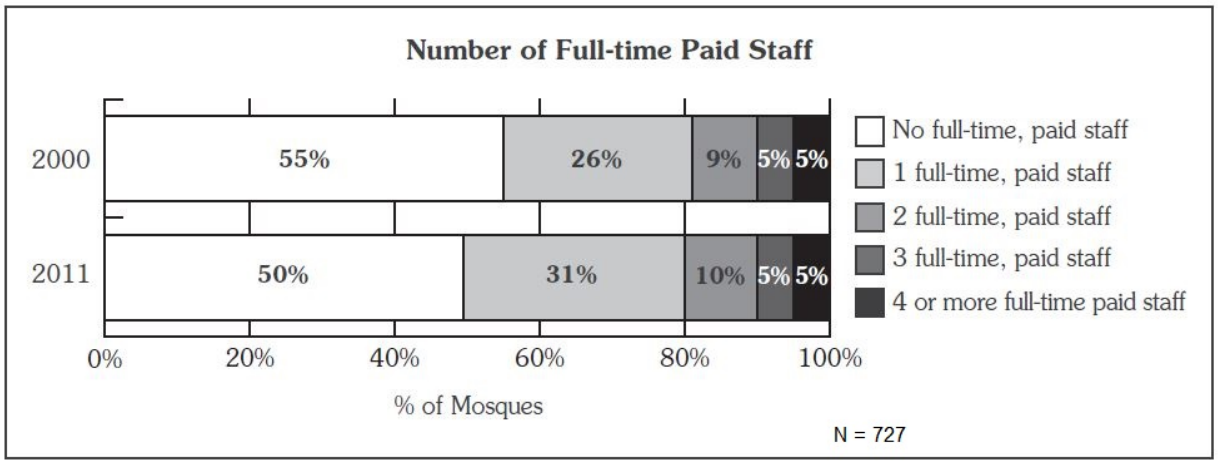

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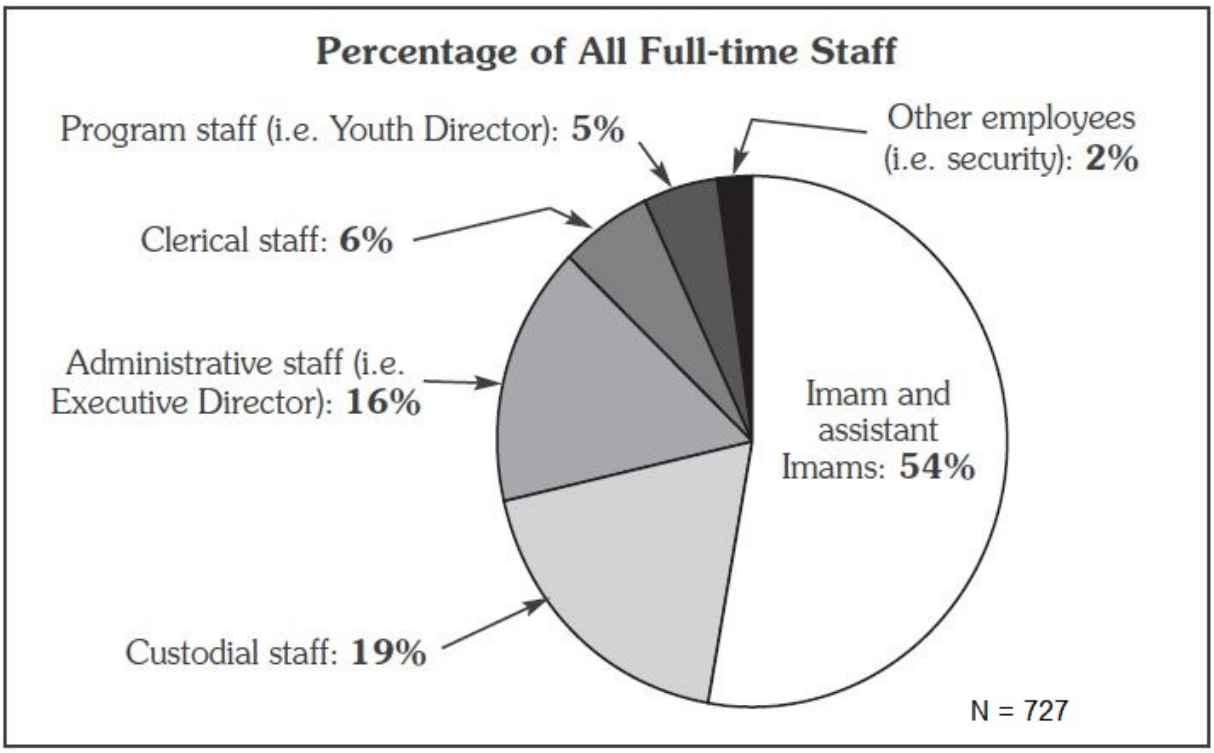

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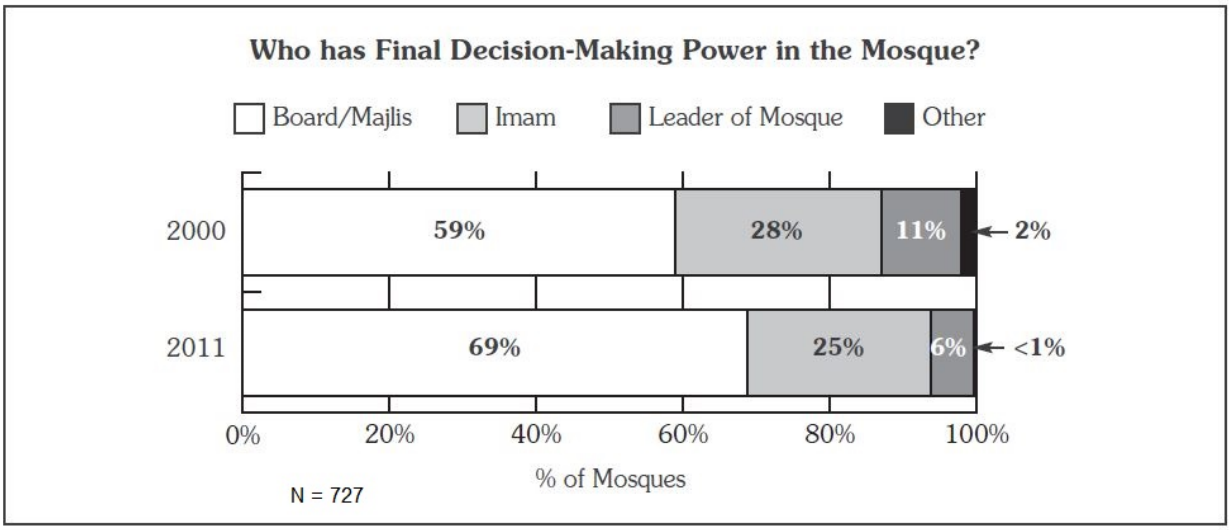

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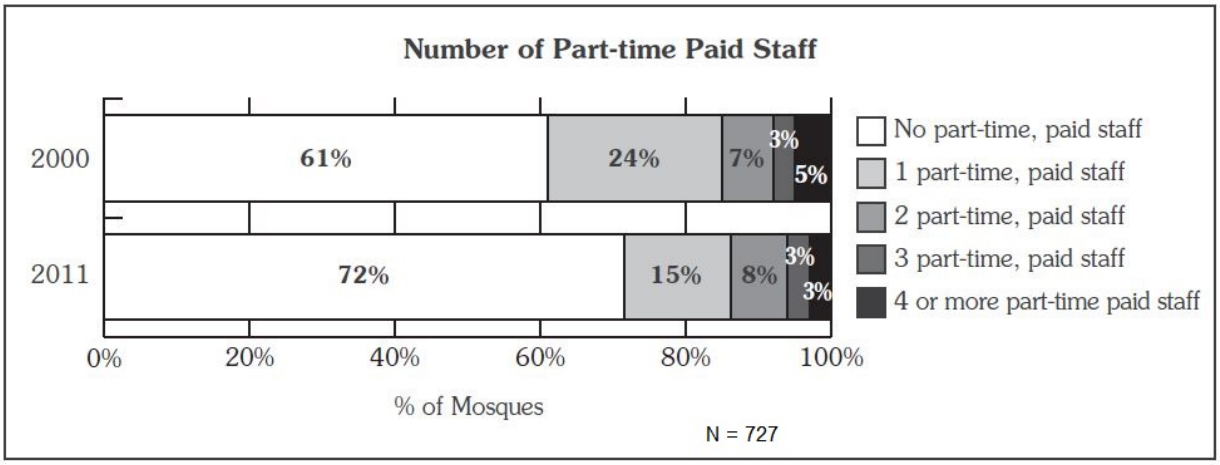

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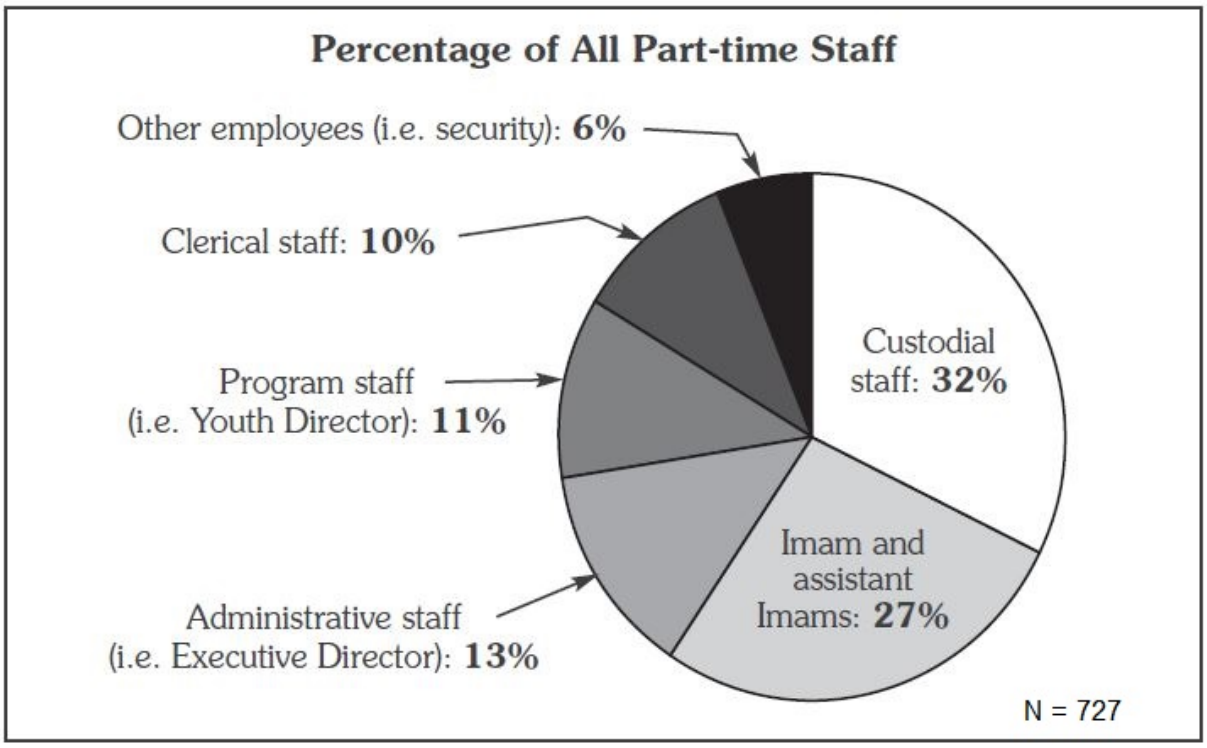

Appendix A - Questionnaire

Introductory statement: How's everything? Hope you're doing well. This is a simple interview for my thesis that I want you to be patient and give your own opinions. Your participation in this recorded interview is voluntary and you will remain anonymous.

1. How long have you been an imam?

2. In what year were you born?

3. Where were you born?

4. What is your non-religious educational background?

Probe: what is your religious educational background?

5. Do you speak multiple languages?

Probe: which languages are you fluent in?

6. Do you have experience serving as an imam of a mosque?

Probe: how were you contacted to fill the imam position?

Probe: how was the interview process?

Probe: how many congregants attend the Friday prayer at your local mosque?

7. Why did you decide to become an imam?

Probe: do you like being an imam?

8. Muslims today continue to follow one of the four famous imams, why do you think that is the case?

Probe: do you personally admire one of the four?

Probe: do you follow a specific classical or contemporary imam?

9. How do you interact with fellow Muslims?

Probe: is there an open relationship that Muslims feel comfortable enough to approach you about sensitive issues?

Probe: what are common issues that Muslims consult with you on?

10. How do you interact with other faiths?

Probe: is there open dialogue that exists between you and other faith leaders?

11. In the current political climate, how do you feel Muslims should respond?

Probe: why should a Muslim be politically active?

12. There is a stigma around mental illness, how do you address this stigma?

Probe: how much of your time is devoted to counseling?

Probe: what are the different types of topics that you may counsel community members on?

13. Being that you were born in America, what are some advantages that help you deliver your message?

Probe: do you face some resistance with elder first generation immigrants?

Probe: any disadvantages to being born in America as an imam?

14. Why is it important to reach a wider audience?

Probe: how do you relate to the youth?

Probe: how do you prepare sermons that are interesting to all age groups?

15. Do you have American born Muslims that approach you that want to be future imams?

Probe: what kind of advice do you give them?

Do you have anything extra you would like to say or ask?

Exit statement: Thanks a lot you for your time and participation.

Appendix B – IRB Forms

EAST CAROLINA UNIVERSITY
University & Medical Center Institutional Review Board Office
4N-70 Brody Medical Sciences Building· Mail Stop 682
600 Moye Boulevard · Greenville, NC 27834
Office **252-744-2914** · Fax **252-744-2284** · **www.ecu.edu/irb**

Notification of Initial Approval: Expedited

From:	Social/Behavioral IRB
To:	Anas Askar
CC:	Robert Maril
Date:	7/1/2016
Re:	UMCIRB 16-000790 American Born Clerics: Responsibilities and Expectations

I am pleased to inform you that your Expedited Application was approved. Approval of the study and any consent form(s) is for the period of 6/30/2016 to 6/29/2017. The research study is eligible for review under expedited category # 6, 7. The Chairperson (or designee) deemed this study no more than minimal risk.

Changes to this approved research may not be initiated without UMCIRB review except when necessary to eliminate an apparent immediate hazard to the participant. All unanticipated problems involving risks to participants and others must be promptly reported to the UMCIRB. The investigator must submit a continuing review/closure application to the UMCIRB prior to the date of study expiration. The Investigator must adhere to all reporting requirements for this study.

Approved consent documents with the IRB approval date stamped on the document should be used to consent participants (consent documents with the IRB approval date stamp are found

under the Documents tab in the study workspace).

The approval includes the following items:

Name	Description
Consent Form	Consent Forms
Interview Questions	Interview/Focus Group Scripts/Questions
Thesis Proposal	Study Protocol or Grant Application

The Chairperson (or designee) does not have a potential for conflict of interest on this study.

IRB00000705 East Carolina U IRB #1 (Biomedical) IORG0000418
IRB00003781 East Carolina U IRB #2 (Behavioral/SS) IORG0000418

IRB Consent Form

Study ID:UMCIRB 16-000790 Date Approved: 6/30/2016 Expiration Date: 6/29/2017

Interview "cover letter"

Dear Participant,

I am a graduate student at East Carolina University in the Sociology department. I am asking you to take part in my research study entitled, "American Born Clerics: Responsibilities and Expectations."

The purpose of this research is to understand the path to becoming an Imam in America as public religious leaders, and how their position corresponds with their future goals. By doing this research, I hope to learn what motivational factors led clerics on choosing their career paths. Your participation is completely voluntary.

You are being invited to take part in this research because of a referral. The amount of time it will take you to complete this interview is 1-2 hours.

If you agree to take part in this survey, you will be asked questions that relate to your life story and how you plan on addressing modern day issues. This is a simple interview for my thesis that I want you to be patient and give your own opinions. This interview whether through skype or in person will be recorded by phone simply for my data collection. Your participation in this recorded interview is voluntary and you will remain anonymous.

This research is overseen by the ECU Institutional Review Board. Therefore some of the IRB members or the IRB staff may need to review my research data. However, the information you provide will not be linked to you. Therefore, your responses cannot be traced back to you by anyone, including me.

If you have questions about your rights when taking part in this research, call the Office of Research Integrity & Compliance (ORIC) at phone number 252-744-2914 (days, 8:00 am-5:00 pm). If you would like to report a complaint or concern about this research study, call the Director of ORIC, at 252-744-1971.

You do not have to take part in this research, and you can stop at any time. If you decide you are willing to take part in this study, continue on with the interview.

Thank you for taking the time to participate in my research.

Sincerely,

Anas Askar, Principal Investigator