

Living Biculturally

Noor Mohamed Hassan

Abstract

Immigrant youth navigate a number of environments. Oftentimes these young people find themselves in between two spaces: one environment where they have to act a specific way in order to fit in with their peers and another environment where they can truly be themselves because there is a shared sense of culture with their peers. The following essay provides a glimpse into the life of one young person as she navigates what she refers to as a "split reality." Highlighting experiences around use of language and religion, this essay provides insightful perspectives for youth development practitioners.

Key words: hijabi, cultural identity, fitting in, split reality

"What are you?"

"Yeah, no, where are you *really* from?"

"What's that thing your mom's wearing?"

"Oh, you speak really good English."

Nobody likes to feel different. We all want to fit in. In doing so, we often end up staying in our own areas with our own people. But not all people do this. Some people leave behind their people, their families, their languages, and their cultures in hopes of starting a new life.

My family is originally from Egypt. My mom is a first-generation Egyptian American and my dad left Egypt some twenty years ago. I grew up speaking Arabic and feeling extremely proud of my Egyptian culture. I remember asking a girl on my soccer team where she was from just so I could show my Egyptian heritage off. Back then, I did not view asking someone where they were from as a problem because I would always get asked where I was from by the people at my Mosque. It was just typical for an older man or woman to ask anyone where they were

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from. Now, I see that this question may be inappropriate and even disrespectful depending on the situation.

Being the child of immigrants, I never really felt like I belonged. As cliché as it sounds, that is how I really felt. I know many people are forced to endure much harder problems, but constantly feeling out of place was hard on me. On my soccer teams, I was constantly surrounded by whiteness and often found myself wishing for blonde hair, blue eyes, and, most of all, freckles. I absolutely hated my dark arm and leg hair. At one point, when I was around 10, a girl on my swim team asked why I did not shave my legs. Despite being one of the slowest people on the team, she argued that shaving apparently “made her go faster.” I came home that day and contemplated my body hair. A few weeks later, I used wax strips to viciously yank off the hair on my body.

I remember one time when I was asked the ultimate immigrant question point blank. On Eid, many Muslim families meet and spend the day together. Around a year ago, my family went to a beach with some of our close family friends and had a barbecue. I went to sit on the shore with a close friend of mine and my sister. My sister and I were dressed in our hijabs, or the traditional Muslim headwear, while my friend was not covered. A group of three or four kids sat next to us, talking in a different language. In Arabic, I asked my sister and friend if they knew what language they were speaking. We continued our conversation (in Arabic) until we were interrupted by the eldest girl in the group, who was around 10 years old. “Excuse me, are you from Islam?” she asked. Simultaneously, we all said, “Yes.” “Oh, I really like people from there.” We smiled and thanked her. The experience did not offend me in any way at all; the children were simply curious. We ended up asking them what language they were speaking and the turned out to be Cape Verdean. We spoke for a few minutes more about our shared African culture.

My most recent experience of feeling out of place occurred when I switched schools. I went from a private, religious school to a public high school. I entered as a sophomore and immediately signed up for soccer. When I arrived to the first day of tryouts, I found myself as the only hijabi girl. Although I was unsurprised, I felt like I had to prove myself nonetheless. If I was a bad player, I would not just be someone who could not play, I would be the *hijabi* girl who could not play. The same idea applied to my school life; I did not and do not want to ask questions in class to avoid feeling stupid or dumb.

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Switching schools was an extreme culture shock. At my old school, it was a requirement for all girls to cover in the traditional Islamic head scarf. Here, I found myself one of five Muslims and the only girl who covered in a school of 1,100 people. I enjoy watching people's mouths drop whenever they hear me speak Arabic to my family. I have gotten used to mispronouncing my name to make it easier for other people to say. I wish they would put more of an effort into properly pronouncing my name, but more than that, I wish I did not purposely mispronounce it to make it easier for other people to pronounce.

The highlight of my week is going to my local youth group called ARKAnum. I enjoy spending my Saturdays at the mosque with my closest friends. I feel like I am reconnecting with my Islamic identity. Something as small as hearing my name properly pronounced means so much. I am a huge advocate for diversity, but I also love being surrounded by people who dress like me, talk like me, and act like me. Going to a new school with people who are not in any way like me is definitely a new experience and I love being exposed to different cultures and ethnic backgrounds. However, I do miss praying with a group rather than hiding in my school locker room as I pray, seeing more hijabis in my day-to-day life, and making jokes in Arabic.

Throughout my fourteen years of life, I have learned a lot about this world and this country. I am able to look back at my experiences and laugh about them with other people who have experienced similar circumstances. My love and pride for my family and my people has only grown. I love my family, my languages, my cultures, and my life, but most of all, I love being able to hold on to both sides of my identity and be one person with more than one culture.