Michael Abraham

GED 7815

Exploratory Paper

12/16/2013

Guiding Question: How has racialization affected the development of identity amongst Somali youth in the Twin Cities?

Much of the research on the development of identity amongst Somali youth in Minnesota is accompanied by a discourse on how to frame the conversation of identity development itself. Since this is an exploratory paper, as oppose to a capstone or thesis paper, I will opt not to devise a specific framework of identity development within which to set parameters for this paper. The goal of this paper is to uncover something of the real world experiences of Somali youth and their own inner dilemmas in facing them as they develop identity in their adolescent years in the Twin Cities.

Intellectualizations of identity development itself may be touched upon as pieces of discovery made by this exploration. However, I am not seeking to apply experiences of Somali youth as affirming evidence of identity development theories. It appears that such work is prevalent in academic analysis of this topic, but it is beyond the scope of this paper as well as my own expertise.

Dr. Martha Bigelow, associate professor at the University of Minnesota in the department of Curriculum and Instruction, has done seminal work and research on this paper's topic. This includes aggregated scholarship on identity development

and the experiences of Somali youth in the Western World, first hand case studies and focus groups with Somali youth in the Twin Cities, as well as research that was part and parcel with activism on behalf of the Twin Cities Somali community itself. Appropriately so, this paper relies heavily on her source work and scholarly study.

Dr. Bigelow, as well as other scholars she cites, states that identity is "fluid" and "'constantly transforming across time and space and related to the desire for affiliation, recognition, and security' [Norton Pierce, 1997]" (Bigelow, 2010). This idea leads us towards the acknowledgment that speaking about identity development in overly simplistic terms can be erroneous, damaging, and flat-out incorrect. Yet as a novice to the academic field, simplistic characterizations may be relied upon in this paper, as my aim for it is to build a foundation for understanding, and empathizing with, the experiences of a group people. That being stated, I would still submit that a simplistic understanding of the experiences of Somali youth as articulated in this paper would still be enough to complicate the understanding of the topic to those with a mere pedestrian footing on it.

Amongst the more simplistic characterizations of identity development and awareness are those that would be called binary. Take for example the idea of "cultural clash." As Bigelow points out "this is often an unhelpful metaphor in understanding cultural adaptation because it reinforces false dichotomies between cultural groups," such as "…'East and West, and First World and Third World, among others. This oppositional framework is problematic for at least two reasons.

First, the emphasis on traditional cultural values reifies the notion of culture, positioning it as something that is fixed or a given, rather than as a social process that finds meaning within social relationships and practices. Second, binary oppositions inscribe judgment and a pecking order (i.e., good/bad, ours/theirs) into cultural practices and values. [p. 5]'" (Bic Ngo as quoted by Bigelow, 2010).

This point is well taken and it makes the acknowledgement of identity's inherent fluidity essential. However, it is perhaps the case that the problematic nature of binary conceptualizations is apparent to academics because the simplistic nature of these conceptualizations makes them accessible for use by members of the lay public. Therefore their appearance becomes prevalent in the articulation of identity done by the research's subjects. This is an important point to understand if we are aiming to develop a base-level understanding of the experiences of Somali youth. Consider the following quotes from Somali elders that Bigelow provides:

> "When asked to name their greatest worry about Somali teens, respected community and religious leaders focused on identity. Below are two representative quotes:
>
>> *Abdul (Somali, Muslim, male):* I would say the greatest…challenge or concern [for Somali teens] is identity of who they are versus where they came from versus what they are in the United States. So they do struggle with that a lot. Religion is very important in the identity. I've seen some of those students who learn the Qur'an and who try to say their prayers and generally

they tend…to be more well behaved than a lot of teens.

> *Said (Somali, Muslim, male):* They become torn between these two cultures. There's the point. The new culture is driving them forcefully. And the other culture is driving them on the other part. Basically they are in the middle between two different worlds and that's the dilemma. That's the struggle. Should I be a Somali, and African, and a Muslim…or more Americanized and do what any American teenager does?"

These quotes explicitly acknowledge the metaphorical in-between cultural spaces youth occupy and the complicated decisions youth face" (Bigelow 94, 2010).

As Bigelow states, these are "representative" quotes, and can therefore be taken to show the general perception of Somali elders. Further, they show us the "in-between" spaces where Somali youth find themselves, which means there is an internal struggle for Somali youth in developing identity. So what are their experiences? The academic work tends to categorize identity development of Somali youth into the categories of race, religion, gender, language, and generational conflict. Due to restraints of time and scope the expatiation of this paper will be limited to race and racialization, with some mentioning of racialization's intertwining with religion. However, it is my intent to pursue research in all aspects of the development of identity amongst Somali youth in the Twin Cities throughout my pursuit of a Masters in English as a Second Language

at Hamline University.

Bigelow states, “It is uncommon to hear Somalis draw a clear separation between what they understand as Somali culture and the tenets of Islam, or Islamic religious practices.” It is also regularly pointed out in research that Somalia is not a racialized society and Somalis generally come to the United States without race being are part of their identity make-up. Despite this, it seems that race takes the most prominent place in academic analysis of Somali identity development.

This is because Somali youth experience a variety of “racialization” experiences in America. “Racialization is a socially constructed process where race becomes the predominant way of defining oneself or being defined by others” (Bigelow 28, 2008). Given what has already been stated about the predominance of Islam in Somali identity and culture, it may be safe to say that the racialization of Somalis has mostly been a way of being defined primarily by “others.” This is not a phenomenon unique to the experience of Somali immigrants by any means, but their experience does come with its own idiosyncrasies. Research suggests that Somali youth experience being racialized by the police, elders in their own community, educators, peers, and possibly internally within themselves; it’s enough of a list to suggest that the society as a whole is racializing them or at least pressuring them to be racialized. Indeed, even the tendency of academics to focus on the racialization of Somalis when researching them as a group of people may be an indicator of the broader society’s overarching tendency to racialize them.

Though this paper is not about Somali youth's relation to police it will be quickly noted that a number of focus groups by Bigelow have revealed that it is common place for Somali youth, especially in urban areas, to have negative experiences with police that are also racialized experiences. Somali youth in these focus groups would frequently cite confrontations with police in response to the question of "have you every been mistaken for someone you are not?" Interestingly, when recounting these incidents the Somali youth would frequently say that they were mistaken for being African-American, but would also state that the discrimination from police was happening on account of their being Muslim as well. Bigelow states that these are cases where racism and Islamophobia were "intertwined." This could very well suggest that extra burdens are placed on Somali youth relative to other Muslims who have a lighter complexion.

Incidents that involve police brutality or mistreatment have a profound impact on youth and the community at large; they do not just effect the individual involved but take a prominent place in the awareness of his or her peers and their interpretations of the society. It will impact their personal sense of security, psychology, and perception of how the society views them in powerful ways. It has been pointed out that immigrants to American are often shocked to find a society where "race and racism structure identities, experience and opportunities" (Lee, 2005).

So the interrelationship between Somalis and African Americans needs to

be expounded upon a bit. Ahmed Ismail Yusuf is the author of the book *Somalis In Minnesota*, a book that is part of the Minnesota Historical Society's *People of Minnesota* series. He explains the cultural collisions between Somali youth and African-Americans through the perspective of a Somali elder, writer, and historian in the Twin Cities:

> "With Somalis arrival in Minnesota cultural collisions soon surfaced in schools. In the 1990s, tensions began to rise in inner-city public schools, particularly Roosevelt High in South Minneapolis, which at the time accommodated the largest number of Somali students. Conflict arose as African-American students and Somali students, often in competition for the same limited resources, began fighting each other. These schoolyard challenges reflected what was happening in the adult communities, where families living in economically disadvantaged neighborhoods vied for inexpensive and subsidized housing, welfare and medical benefits, and other meager resources. Cultural collisions clouded cordial commonalities, and lack of a common language closed off communication channels that would have helped alleviate the pressure. Saeed Fahia, executive director of Confederation of Somali Community in Minnesota, one of the leaders who had a mediating role, said, "We met on several occasions [with African America leaders], and concluded that the core of the conflict was mostly based on cultural and language miscommunications.
>
> Children naturally feel the stress and pressure affecting their parents; Somali students, struggling to fit into their adopted homeland and trying to learn a new language, resorted to physical

> confrontation when under verbal siege. Their opponents were most often African-American students. That these two populations were packed into an economically deprived part of the inner-city, riding the same bus lines, attending the same schools- all exacerbated the cultural misunderstandings." (Yusuf, 2012).

He goes on to note that Minneapolis was not alone in this phenomenon. He also cites the formation of some Somali gangs, including one that is officially recognized by the Minnesota Department of Criminal Justice, as occurring as a result of these conflicts with African-Americans.

Yusuf's exposition here shows a binary struggle between Somali youth and African-American youth, as well as adults. I believe this, as well as a note about Somali's confrontations with police, provide a useful backdrop with which to analyze the racialization experiences of Somalis in schools.

Understanding the experiences of Somalis in schools should necessitate giving reverence to their own articulations about their experiences. Bigelow's focus group research is very helpful in this regard. An adolescent Somali female in one of her focus groups spoke about her own racialization experience with one of her teachers:

> "I'm not gonna lie—um, our school, some teachers are racists, even the teachers say that some teachers are racist. They're racist, like they, they don't help you. I have this class, and then,

> she was the, she was, I think she was a racist people I ever met in my life. The comments she makes about Muslims. I didn't like that. I used to hate that class and then, and then, it was required, so I had to take it, and I couldn't like—'Oh, man' and I couldn't wait that class. They won't help you with nothing. They, they be like, 'Oh,' you, if you miss a class or something, and you be like, 'Can I make it up? Can I make up the work?' They be like, 'No.'" (Bigelow, 2007).

It is interesting that the girl refers to the teacher as being racist in regards to the comments that the teacher makes about Muslims. There are theories about how American society racializes whole groups of members of religious minorities that are expounded upon by Bigelow and Lee, but I will refrain from elucidating that discussion. I would take the girl's remarks here to mean that she had an experience with a teacher who mistreated and refused to help the Somali students in her classes based exclusively upon who they were. This is clear cut discrimination, that the girl describes herself as hating the class, and that the teacher would apparently not afford her equal opportunity to make up classwork, shows how detrimental such treatment can be to these students' lives, emotional and psychological state, and academic careers.

In the same focus group a female high school student explains how a teacher pits the Somali students against the African American students:

> "There was a teacher there—and we used to be in her class, and there was a whole bunch of Somali people, there—it was true

> that the Somalian kids is more trouble makers than the African Americans, but like, when she'd get mad, she'd like, 'This is not Somalia. You guys cannot act this way,' and everybody would look at her and she would be like, 'Well,' and we used to go up to her and be like, 'Well, you can't say that kind of stuff,' and she'd be like, 'Well, you guys act right, and I won't make fun of you guys,' and then when she'd leave the class, she'll ask one of the African Americans, 'Can you watch these Somalians? Make sure they don't do anything wrong?' She'd say stuff like that." (Bigelow, 2007)

One wonders what this teacher's definition of "acting right" would be? There's plenty of research to affirm that for students to learn that certain groups are more privileged, trusted, or respected that others is harmful. Bigelow states, citing van Direl, "Research about the role of religion in Somali adolescents' lives is showing how Islamophobia, as a new racism, is easily formed when discrimination based on ethnicity or race intersects with 'an irrational fear, distrust or rejection of the Muslim religion and those who are (perceived as) Muslim'" (van Driel, 2004a, p. x)" (Bigelow, 2008). These two accounts from her focus groups seem to demonstrate that phenomenon to a fair degree.

Being compared to African-Americans is also a way that Somali youth may be racialized by elders in their community. Especially when Somali youth choose to adopt cultural cues that are associated with general stereotypes of African-American culture. This is illustrated in the following exchange between Martha

Bigelow and a Somali elder:

> *"Ali (Somali, Muslim, male)*: Yes I know a lot of students, even high school students, who work and send their money back to their relatives. So a lot of them are just doing very nicely. They know what they can take from American culture and what not. That part is the positive part. A lot of Somali students also they just take the other side. Like you know, from African American youth. Always listen to music, wear loose pants, sometimes even like making their hair like woman. In Somali culture, men's hair is always like this [referring to his own hair]. Short. But when you make, what do you call this?
>
> *Martha:* Braids?
>
> *Ali:* Braids. That's totally not in our culture. Not focusing more about their education. Not coming to mosques . . . more important are music and sports.

It may be that the Somali youth Ali is referring to have taken on some of these cultural cues as the result of peer pressure in school or external societal pressure in general that has already racialized them. Perhaps many Somali youth feel a tension and binary struggle between racializing emanated from society's stereotypes of African-Americans, which African-American adolescence may frequently embody in the duration of their own search for identity in the school system (Daniel-Tatum), and the cultural desires of elders in the Somali community. As Bigelow points out, this quote shows "how easily the way youth look determines an

assumed identity, which, in turn, is accompanied by assumed behaviors that are not aligned with what it means to be ethnically Somali" (Bigelow, 2010).

Somali youth in the Twin Cities are likely to experience discrimination in a number of settings. Schools have frequently been one of those, at times to the extent of involving lawsuit. This happens at the expense of these youths emotional well-being, stability, and livelihood. Learning how to provide support and a welcoming atmosphere in schools for these youths as they struggle to make sense of their developing identity should be a priority for emerging educators.

Bibliography

1. Bigelow, M. (2008). Somali Adolescents' Negotiation of Religious and Racial Bias In and Out of School. *Theory Into Practice*, *47*(1), 27-34. doi:10.1080/00405840701764706
2. Bigelow, M (2010). The Co-Construction of Racialized Identity Among Somali Youth. *Language Learning*, *60*93-118. doi:10.1111/j.1467-9922.2010.00583.x
3. Bigelow, M. (2010). Engaged Scholarship in the Somali Communities of Minnesota. *Language Learning*, *60*1-23. doi:10.1111/j.1467-9922.2010.00580.x
4. Lee, S. (2005). Up against whiteness: Race, school and immigrant youth. New York: Teachers College Press.
5. Yusuf, A. (2012). *Somalis in Minnesota*. Minnesota Historical Society.
6. Daniel Tatum, B. (2003). *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria: And Other Conversations About Race*. Basic Books.