

**God Keeps His Promise: A Narrative Study of the Psychosocial and Spiritual Development
of Memorizers of the Qur'an from an Islamic Hermeneutical Framework**

Syed Hamza Rasool Quadri

A Dissertation Submitted to the Faculty of
The Chicago School of Professional Psychology
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of Doctor of Psychology

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June 28, 2021

Unpublished Work

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Acknowledgments

I begin in the name of Allah, the Most Giving, the Most Merciful. I thank my parents for their love, steadfastness, hard work, support, and dedication to their children and for instilling a sincere appreciation for education. I stand in awe of the Qur'an that inspired the phenomenon of study in this dissertation and the friends I made along the way who inspired me with their stories to inquire further into others like them. I would like to thank Dr. Jaleel, my reader, for his mentorship as I began my doctoral studies and showing me how to be unapologetically Muslim. I would also like to thank Dr. Barbre, my chair, who carried me towards the finish line and who has always provided me with the vision to see the accomplishments I was not yet able to. I want to thank every supervisor during my clinical training for their expertise, patience, knowledge, and mercy. I want to thank all those who supported me throughout my doctoral studies as friends, coworkers and spiritual wayfarers in pursuit of God. I begin this dissertation with the first chapter of the Qur'an, Surah Fatiha (The Opening).

“In the name of God, the Lord of Mercy, the Giver of Mercy! Praise Belongs to God, Lord of the Worlds, The Lord of Mercy, the Giver of Mercy, Master of the Day of Judgement. It is You we worship; it is You we ask for help. Guide us to the straight path: the path of those You have blessed, those who incur no anger and who have not gone astray.” (Qur'an 1:1-7)

Abstract

The dissertation explored the lived experiences and stories of Huffaz, memorizers of the Qur'an, in order to understand psychological, spiritual, and social variables that undergird their identity formation and views of their role as a Hafiz. The research conducted was qualitative and exploratory, considering the limited information on the topic in the United States. Participants responded to semi-structured interviews and co-constructed with the researcher aspects of their history and identification with the phenomenon of having memorized the Qur'an. Participants provide a retrospective of their experiences in Qur'an memorization and how their embeddedness in their relationships with self, other, and God defined their role as a Hafiz. The findings suggested that important variables in this process were (a) intellectual and spiritual curiosity, (b) pedagogy and relationship to teachers, (c) relationships with parents, (d) relationship to the Muslim community, (e) relationship with God, and (f) expectations.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The foundation of the Islamic creed and praxis rests upon a book of revelatory narratives and metaphysical propositions; the Qur'an (Tarsin, 2015). One can walk into virtually any country on the planet and find the exact same Arabic Qur'an being recited or memorized, regardless of the local languages spoken or ethnic and demographic distribution. It is the Qur'an that Muslims go back to, day after day, as the source of a unifying metaphysical worldview, of purpose and direction, and ultimately guidance to understand ourselves and our creator, God. "This is the Scripture in which there is no doubt, containing guidance for those who are mindful of God, who believe in the unseen, keep up the prayer, and give out of what We have provided for them" (Qur'an 2:2-3)

The Arabic of the Qur'an is based upon a trilateral root system where three letter root words become the foundation upon which a plethora of words exist along different morphological structures. This system contains an extensive cosmology wherein Muslims study and develop their relationship with God through a deep understanding of the structure and linguistic rules of the Arabic language. According to the Islamic tradition, one night during one of his many meditative escapes from civilization in the city of Mecca, the Prophet Muhammad was visited by the Archangel Gabriel and told to, "Recite! In the name of your Lord" (Qur'an 96:1). The Arabic word for "recite" is "*Iqra*." The word "*Iqra*" shares the same three root letters "*qāf*", "*rā*," "*alif*" as the word "*Qur'an*." Hence, the Qur'an is that which is recited or read. As an intensive form of the word, it has an additional meaning of that which is most recited. Considering the number of Muslims currently in the world and assuming that even just a fraction of that number recites the Qur'an during the five daily prayers, it is not too difficult to prove the veracity of that proposition in the 21st century.

The Qur'an is understood to be the speech or "kalām" of God. When one replaces the Arabic equivalent of the letter "kāf" with the letter "qāf," a deeper sound, the word "kalām" becomes the word "qalam," which means the pen. Scholars describe the essence of the human being as "*hayawān al-bayān*", or the "rational animal," similar to the classical Greek scholars such as Plato and Aristotle (Al-Karam, 2018). Articulation then or "*bayān*," the dialectical medium of language using symbols to convey meaning and which is unique to human beings, becomes the gateway through which God communicates with us and through which humans develop a relationship and an understanding of God. Orality, speech, communication, and dialectics are the medium that define the essential nature of the human being, that categorically differentiates them from all other creatures in the cosmos. God taught Adam the names, "*al-asma*," of all things and as such the essence of things in the world is known through language. This essential nature is what humans are capable of accessing through language, abstraction, and symbolism; to make one in regard to the universal elements of experience from the particulars of accidents as operationalized in Islamic theology (Khan, 2020).

This philological context hopefully provides the reader with a thorough introduction to the importance and divinely prescribed appreciation for language, speech, recitation, writing, and ultimately, knowledge. If language, recitation, and speech are so highly considered within the Islamic tradition, what then of those individuals who bear the burden for maintaining and transmitting the speech of God within the Muslim community; the book from which the meaning of reality is derived? This brings us to the fundamental thrust of the research presented in this dissertation; asking and pondering upon the experiences of such individuals and attempting to understand the psychological, social, and spiritual variables within their stories.

Despite most Muslims routinely memorizing small passages from the Qur'an for the purposes of their five daily prayers (Tarsin, 2015), it became both a highly recommended, but also logistically important need to, require of a small group of its adherents to memorize the entirety of the Qur'an. After the passing of the Prophet Muhammad, the caliph and companion Abu Bakr, under the recommendation of another well-known companion of the Prophet, 'Umar, delegated the collection of written transcripts and began what would eventually become the genesis of vast efforts to create memorizers at a larger scale (Alkhateeb, 2014). Similar to other religious traditions, Islam is studied and seen as primarily an oral tradition as opposed to a textual or visual one, although all three of these epistemic frames are subsumed within contemporary Islamic education (Gent, 2011). The intimate person-to-person transmission of the Qur'an in its oral, and fundamentally Arabic, essence is related directly to how it is experienced by most Muslims on a regular basis through varying degrees of memorization and recital during the five daily prayers. "We have sent it down as an Arabic Qur'an so that you [people] may understand" (Qur'an 11:2). This momentous task of memorizing the entirety of the Qur'an occurs in every country in the world where Muslims have formed any kind of community and occurs within the same guidelines formed within the Arab peninsula some 1400 years ago (Gent, 2011). Although the majority of this transmission of the oral Qur'an exists within an exclusively scholarly class of the Ulama, it is highly promoted that most practitioners of the religion also engage in this spiritually rewarding task of memorizing God's words.

Scholars, students, and practitioners all exist on a spectrum of links. The spiritual guide and the spiritual aspirant form the archetype upon which all Islamic education takes place (Ware, 2014). In his book *The Walking Qur'an*, the historian Rudolph Ware articulates this body of scholarship by discussing the literal importance of the physical body, and by extension the whole

person, and the corporeal nature of Hifz in West African Muslim communities. Firstly, he describes Qur'an schooling as the embodiment of the Qur'an's teachings as manifested in the development of moral character, otherwise known as Sufism. Secondly, he describes the Qur'an as what brings the body of Muslims as a community together. He discusses the importance of the schooling and education as a communal responsibility in those, as well as other communities, and how the quality of these institutions and its students as the measure of their social and spiritual fitness. In his book, he also discusses the importance of discipline, shaping, and training to become "appropriate vessels for God's Word" (Ware, 2014, p. 7). This sense of discipline subsumes the corporeal nature of learning which is not just the deep internalization and recitation of texts, but also the behavioral imitation and serving of teachers in which corporal discipline may often be emphasized. To be a Hafiz then is to not just know the Qur'an but to truly embody it in one's actions and character, and the standard of comportment becomes higher than what might be expected of others (Ware, 2014). As such, the researcher, being Muslim and having grown up within a Muslim country, is curious to further study the Qur'an and its relationship to those who quite literally, take it to heart.

This study is a narrative exploration of the psychosocial and spiritual development of memorizers of the Qur'an, otherwise known as Huffaz. Since the individuals being studied are young adults who have participated in *Tahfīz* (the process of Qur'an memorization) earlier in their youth, a narrative approach allows for a sense of temporality and co-construction with the researcher of the meanings of their experiences. These narratives vividly represent their relationship to their education of the Qur'an and the phenomenon of Tahfiz in America as opposed to other western countries or Muslim majority countries. The individuals of interest are those who were born and raised in the United States of America. This dissertation examines the

unique phenomenon of young American Muslims memorizing the Qur'an and the psychological, social, and spiritual variables involved in such a process and its achievement that impact their development into adulthood while matriculating in the United States.

This dissertation explores a number of variables, including the phenomenological dynamics of the psychosocial and spiritual responsibility involved in Hifz education and how these individuals have experienced adjustment into adult life within their modern cultural sphere of functioning as Huffaz. The study explores the potential challenges and pitfalls that such an experience may have had on participants as well as the gaining of potential spiritually uplifting motifs that propel them to develop more intimacy with God and their sense of faith and their community of adherents. The study will employ the Arabic forms of the singular and plural of the term "Hafiz," transliterated into the English language for ease of comprehension. The singular form is Hafiz (male) or Hafiza (female) and the plural form is Huffaz. To do "Hifz" is to be in the process of memorizing the Qur'an. The process of memorization is known as "Tahfiz." The direct translation of the word can be understood as keeper, maintainer, protector, guardian, and memorizer.

The title of this dissertation is an allusion to the Islamic theological framework undergirding this researcher's perspective. God states in the Qur'an, "We have sent down the Qur'an Ourself, and We Ourselves will guard it" (Qur'an 15:9). Elsewhere He states,

If there were ever to be a Qur'an with which mountains could be moved, the earth shattered, or the dead made to speak [it would have been this one], but everything is truly in God's hands. God never fails to keep His promise. (Qur'an 13:31)

In the first of the two passages mentioned above, the word Hafiz is used and can be translated as maintaining, protecting, or keeping, as in the common phrase, "my brother's keeper." In this

verse of the Qur'an, God Himself promises to maintain the integrity of His divine speech. His promise is both the Qur'an itself and responsibility to continue its existence in the hearts of humankind. One of the many names of God mentioned in Islamic literature is *al-Hafīz*.

According to the 18th century Moroccan scholar Ahmed ibn Ajiba, the name Hafiz is derived from the word *hifz*; to preserve, or to be the opposite of neglect or forgetfulness (Suraqah, 2014). Other names that provide similar, but varying, shades of this meaning include *al-Qadīr*, *al-Raqīb*, *al-Khāliq*, *al-Bāri*, and *al-Musawwir*.

The name *al-Qadīr* is derived from the word *qudra* which means to have power or the ability to measure things out. The word *qadar* is also used to mean the concept of destiny or fate, since God is the one who measures out the nature of existence and by necessity must have ultimate and all-encompassing power to do so. *Al-Raqīb* is translated as the overseer or the watcher. He observes with a constant and persistent gaze (Suraqah, 2014) and as such is aware of all moments or occasions of material existence and temporality. It is from this name that the word *muraqabah* is connected which when applied to the human being means self-vigilance or mindfulness of the self and its contents; a psychological capacity of metacognition (Awaad et al., 2021). *Al-Khāliq* means the one who creates out of nonexistence and sustains continued existence. *Al-Bāri* is the one who specifies the shape and appearance of a created thing and *al-Musawwir* is the one who gives every created thing its particular and special form that separates and specifies in comparison to another thing (Suraqah, 2014).

Similar parallels to understand these names can be found in the four causes delineated by Aristotle (Ross, 1995). Each of these causes as elucidated by Aristotle was an attempt to comprehend and articulate, using reason and sense experience, how a thing is made through the external forces that act upon it, the materials out of which it exists, the design that delineates the

shape of a thing from something else, and ultimately the reason for its existence (Ross, 1995). These are known as the efficient cause, the material cause, the formal cause, and the final cause. As can be seen, in the Islamic tradition and directly through the Qur'an, God describes Himself as an active designer and influencer on the world and in the life of a Muslim. He is both immanent in the world, "We created man, We know what his soul whispers to him: We are closer to him than his jugular vein" (Qur'an 50:16), as well as transcendent, "He created the heavens and earth for a true purpose, and He is far above whatever they join with Him!" (Qur'an 16:3). Given the precedent that a Muslim's responsibility in this created world is to manifest the attributes of God as an act of worship, to know himself and to ultimately know God (Suraqah, 2014), this dissertation seeks to ask how the Muslim community maintains, protects, and keeps, the members of its community that maintain, protect, and keep the Qur'an. If the content that these individuals carry is the source of all divine knowledge and wisdom, what is the outcome of the vessels who preserve it?

To understand the Hafiz it is important to develop a more extensive grasp of their lived experiences. Huffaz have been an integral part of Muslim society since the religion first became formalized and spread across what is today known as the Middle East and regions of North Africa (Ware, 2014). Indeed, the beginning of this process of vast numbers of memorizers and the development of the written text itself only became a priority for scholarship, as mentioned previously, after the Prophet Muhammad died, out of a fear of losing the Qur'an entirely. The goal of this research is to interview a small group of such Huffaz who have grown up within a primarily American cultural context and to explore the dynamics involved in the development of such individuals. As Rudolph Ware states in his book *The Walking Qur'an*, "Islamic studies has always been interested in bodies of knowledge, but the ones under consideration here are not

only texts, libraries and archives but also the physical forms of human beings” (Ware, 2014, p. 4). The study provides a platform for these “bodies of knowledge” (Ware, 2014, p. 4) to retroactively explore their experiences with the researcher and the resultant adjustment to adult life. This exploration aims to provide insight into variables that impact the psychosocial and spiritual development of Huffaz specifically and contrasted to existing literature regarding the psychosocial and spiritual experiences of young Muslims broadly within the United States.

Although Muslims make up approximately 1% of the total population in America, they have been represented in a disproportionately large and negative manner on news and social media in the last few decades (Pew Research Center, 2018). Due to this highly publicized negative view of Muslims in America, this faith community has lost the dignity of being treated as a nuanced group of people, instead becoming homogenized and painted with a broad brush, whose incredibly detailed and thorough theological worldview has been overly simplified into catchy sound bites on news programs. In *Islamophobia and Psychiatry*, Hatem Bazian writes that, “

In the imagination of civil society, Islam and Muslims are judged and approached as pre-constructed and never allowed to enter the discourse independently. Islam and Muslims become what is imagined and consumed in the confines of a closed-circuit internal reproduction system that always points back to the imagined. (Awaad et al., 2019, p. 28)

Unfortunately, due to the growth of politically motivated terrorist groups as well as the weaponization of Islam from all along the political spectrum of the media and government to promote both right- and left-wing agendas, Muslims have faced discrimination and demonization in the form of both organizations and individuals (Saleem, 2019). Too often Muslims are anathematized and demonized by politicians as alien to American identity or racialized into an

oppressed group with no agency of its own and requiring rescuing and to be brought in line with modern secular values.

This push and pull of identity politics leaves many young Muslims in the crossfire of internalizing confusing narratives of allegiances to religion, culture, family, and nation, and creates further distance from real scholarship and knowledge of the religion. Contemporary research has shown that Muslims experience many psychological stressors, similar and different, to many other marginalized groups (Ahmed & Amer, 2012). These can include, but are not limited to, trauma, mood disorders, acculturative stress, hate crimes, and discrimination of beliefs and attire. Research suggests that higher rates of perceived discrimination within the young adult population has led to higher symptom presentations of post-traumatic stress disorder (Lowe et al., 2019).

Besides the political rhetoric surrounding them in the western hemisphere, Muslims in America are a diverse set of people with many individual factors responsible for this diversity including differences in ethnic and racial background, generational and immigration status, gender, age, socioeconomics, educational attainment, geographical location, and religious legal opinion (Ahmed & Amer, 2012). To understand this phenomenon, this dissertation explores the lived experiences of a particular niche of these individuals, namely memorizers of the Qur'an. Narrative research allows for individuals to tell their own stories as well as limit external bias as much as possible (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Although this method attempts to provide more agency to the participants to tell their stories, it is understood that the researcher's intimate connection to the religion as a practitioner and believer in its creed should also be made aware to the reader.

Huffaz occupy a unique position in the Muslim community since they are often invisible in communal Muslim spaces much of the time. Some may come into the spotlight once a year during Ramadan when extra nightly prayers occur that include the recitation of the entire Qur'an over the course of the 29 or 30 days of Ramadan. The variability in the length of the month is due to the Islamic calendar corresponding with the lunar calendar. During this month, Huffaz may become active leaders within congregations in ways they do not throughout the year. A Hafiz's educational journey may also vary from the average Muslim youth. To understanding their psychosocial and spiritual adjustment as adults, it is important to recognize the nature of their educational experiences in Islamic seminaries and madrassas. What are the unique struggles they go through and what are the variables that work and do not work in these Hifz programs? Such variables of interest in this study include intention, pedagogy, interpersonal dynamics, theological preparation, social support, and identity development.

One would imagine that joining any intensive program of education would be a deliberate choice on the part of the potential student but considering that many such students begin memorization at a very young and impressionable age, the researcher is curious in regard to whether the agency of the Hafiz is taken into consideration by family members and organizers and exploring to what degree they identify with these family dynamics and expectations. Do these individuals learn to identify strongly with their families' desire to define the life of their children as is common with collectivistic cultures, or does an American context with its more philosophically liberal minded culture change the role of agency and freedom of choice in this phenomenon? These programs often exist in tight and intimate settings where students may or may not live with other students in a seminary for the duration of their program. Some students may build strong bonds that assist in developing a sense of community as they progress in their

memorization efforts or affect their worldview in other ways. These experiences may also take students away from time spent in healthy developmentally appropriate social experiences as well, potentially leading to a sense of social alienation. Many such programs are also exclusively focused on Qur'an memorization, with further theological studies being a part of other programs that exist side by side with them. There may be assumptions made about the degree to which a holistic Islamic education is received during a child's time in a Hifz program. How does the Hafiz view the relationship between their parent's expectations regarding what a matriculated Hafiz should be like and the individual's own expectations based on their experiences and education received?

Exploration of these variables will help to better understand why such individuals participate in these programs, what meaning it provides for them and their families as Muslims, what kind of relationship is developed with the Qur'an as opposed to those who do not memorize it, whether they receive adequate emotional, material, academic, and spiritual assistance through this process, what their interactions with other students and their teachers look like, and what this process means for them and their relationship with God. The following information will provide a summary of the variables that are hypothesized to be important aspects of this experience, before the potential discovery of additional variables and themes through the analysis of the interviews.

For the sake of this study, the area of *intention* is operationalized as the reasons given by the participants as to why they choose to attend such programs. Tahfiz programs tend to be intensive in nature; requiring of an individual, often a child, to leave traditional schooling for up to two years to engage in a daily immersive memorization process. It is assumed that before undertaking this academic venture, individuals and their parents communicate and come to a

mutually satisfying conclusion before beginning such a program. Some students may on the other hand be expected to obey their families desire for them to participate in these programs whether it be parents or extended family members. The status of a Hafiz brings with it great prestige and blessings and can often be a way of increasing one's closeness to God as well as a status symbol for parents who are active within the Muslim community (Gent, 2011).

Participants in these programs usually tend to be young children between the ages of 7-12 and overwhelmingly male (Gent, 2011). Often these children are forced into these programs by parents due to sociocultural and religious pressure although there are many young children in Islamic Sunday schools that join of their own will. The researcher would like to evaluate the relationship between the family's worldview, culture, and expectations related to Hifz and the child's own process of identifying with these things. What may differ in regard to one's experience of Hifz if one feels it is one's choice to do so or a path delineated for them?

Pedagogy is operationalized as the nature of the interpersonal relationships and moments between instructors and students from the perspective of the students themselves. Every memorization program has its own unique characteristics, but generally there are standardized curricula that are used in such programs. Darussalam is a masjid located in the suburbs of Chicago and according to their syllabus and methodology advertised on their website, a Tahfiz program consists of a full week of classes from Monday through Friday from the morning till late afternoon. Before memorizing a new portion of the Qur'an, students recite a portion under the supervision of their instructor in order to ensure that recitation is occurring with the proper rules of pronunciation, otherwise known as Tajweed. The following day, the students then recite what they memorized in order to consolidate and ensure that no mistakes occur. Regardless of

where they are in the process of memorizing the thirty Juz, or sections, of the Qur'an, each lesson begins with recitation of whatever previous section had been memorized.

In Muslim majority countries where there is wider acceptance and embeddedness of these programs within the broader cultural milieu, programs may require students to reside in housing attached to a local mosque, but in many American mosques, participants may attend regularly but be residing at home. Considering that many Huffaz may also attend public education alongside their Hifz training, the degree and type of socialization may be a mediating factor towards identity development regarding their Islamic and American identities. An aspect of the training, *Interpersonal dynamics* is defined as the quality of relationships that participants have with other participants in the program and the culture found within peer groups and the institution in general. Depending on the size, location, and nature of the program itself, students may have ample or limited opportunities and support to build and maintain relationships to peers and an environment that supports prosocial behaviors. *Theological preparation* is defined as the supplemental education that students may or may not receive outside of memorization of the Qur'an regarding the history of the religion, its creedal structure, and the nature of God and spirituality within the tradition. Many programs are limited to simply having students memorize the Qur'an, but some may facilitate this education with broader religious and spiritual teaching that provides greater contextual, historical, and spiritual comprehension of the material being memorized. This direction can potentially impact the individual's relationship with the Qur'an, the religion, and the process of becoming a Hafiz.

In addition, *social support* is defined as the presence or lack of supportive parental and familial interpersonal relationships and resources in the immediate and extended family. Due to intergenerational differences in culture, assimilation, language, and identity, some individuals

may come up against differences of understanding of the nature of the process of memorization with parents who unduly or disproportionately place pressures on an individual in regard to becoming a Hafiz. This will be further explored in the process of analysis. *Identity development* is defined as the challenges, reflections, and process of viewing self and other that the students experienced as they participated in and graduated from a Hifz program. The researcher will be exploring what aspects of becoming a Hafiz are prominent in individual's reflections on their journeys through these programs and the impact it has on their faith, cultural and contextual relationships with others as well as their own self. We can anticipate that there will be other factors that are observed to be common themes and variables that will be explored and commented upon.

Through the literature review and gathering of narratives, this dissertation explores and analyzes how Huffaz navigate life within a modern diverse America. The topic of interest is a platform for exploring and discussing the intersection of many aspects of development currently impacting Muslim youth in general. Considering that many Muslim-Americans are associated with minority ethnic groups that have immigrated to the United States, it is important to highlight the rapidity with which generational gaps are being created due to technological and cultural shifts and with it, notions of traditional religious identity within the context of a broadly American secular zeitgeist. This has resulted in many questions about what it means to be Muslim in the context of an American-born identity that exists within a porous sense of multigenerational immigrant identity as well as the continuing spread of Islam in native-born citizens including African American, Caucasian, and Hispanic populations (Ahmed & Amer, 2012). With Islam no longer tied as heavily to cultural and ethnic identities as compared to first generation immigrant societies, questions must be asked that bring to light the nature of young

Muslim identity formation, particularly those burdened with the responsibility of maintaining and passing on the legacy of the Qur'an (Sahin, 2013). It is expected that these intersectional challenges will be more prominent and salient within this subgroup of Muslims and be a rich source of information from which to make broader assumptions of challenges young Muslims face today in America.

The discussion of participant's experiences in Qur'an memorization programs provides a space to analyze the role of religious identity in a secular world, the ongoing struggle of living in a diverse America with a constantly shifting landscape, the phenomena of modern-day meaning making, the presence or lack thereof of spirituality in the mundane, the role of parenting, and difficulties of maintaining traditional Islamic values in a time of modernism, scientism, and materialism (Khan, 2020). Exploring what the meaning of memorizing the Qur'an within the backdrop of these cultural variables will be central to this study. Finally, this study presents a basic primer in Islam and Islamic spirituality through a psychosocial narrative lens by exploring the phenomenon of Hifz through the sharing and reviewing of literature on the topic.

In light of the current psychosocial landscape, traditional Islamic education has found itself challenged by cultural dynamics within the United States that see Muslim youth experiencing alienation, a loss of meaning, and falling prey to the same risky behaviors, such as substance use, that other youth are engaged in (Soubani, 2019). Further research as well as anecdotal experiences of the researcher have found that many young Muslims find difficulty in reconciling their perceptions of an Islamic lifestyle alongside peers who do not share similar values and in fact espouse values that directly clash with more conservative religious views (Sahin, 2013). This may result in individuals experiencing existential dilemmas, cultural

alienation, and symptoms of anxiety and depression that result in difficulties in personal, social, academic, and professional domains (Green, 2019).

In order to better understand these dynamics, this dissertation will attempt to challenge normative views of Huffaz in the community as well as idealized and romanticized perspectives surrounding issues within the Muslim community by highlighting the narratives of the individuals who may be able to shed light on areas of life within Muslim institutional systems. In addition, this study hypothesizes that some young Muslims may be pushed into Qur'an memorization programs at a very young age and as young adults, experience feelings of internal conflict with the pressures of living up to the expectations of religious institutions and family members and of standards of comportment and ethics that may be perceived to be in conflict with broader culture and its subsequent norms. More so, these individuals may find themselves occupying lives that lack a sense of volition and may be the cause of alienation from themselves and the religious community as a whole. Statistics show that risky behaviors such as pre-marital sex, drug use and alcohol use, as well as interpersonal difficulties in marriage are more prominent in Muslim youth than most people believe (Ahmed et al., 2014).

The dissertation will examine how well this subgroup of Muslims adjusts to the communities in which they live and the psychological, social, and spiritual impact of Qur'an memorization on their views of self and other. Since memorizing the Qur'an is viewed as both an honor and a responsibility, it begs the question; what does that kind of responsibility do to young people who did not necessarily choose this path for themselves, or if they did, have not been provided with the adequate emotional support, theological education, and supportive social structure that would prevent difficulties in navigating life as the most recent link in a chain of memorizers going back all the way to the early period of Islam? On a personal note, as a Muslim,

and as a researcher in social science, it is important to ask difficult questions that seek to provide insight into the current state of the community and ongoing trends that tell us about the development of future generations as well as diagnose and conceptualize the psychological, social, and spiritual needs of the Muslim community in America. In other words, how close to or distant, is the American Muslim community, from the divine ideals espoused by its religious leaders and scholars and how is the community supporting its most vulnerable populations during a period in American history that is defining of how diversity is discussed and manifested.

Spiritual and religious leadership provides us with the constant remembrance of the virtues and ideals that provide us with direction; with personal and communal goals to reach and tangible resources to follow a spiritual life that closely mirrors the Prophet Muhammad's teachings. The social sciences, such as psychology, can help to make sense of how far or close we are in reaching those ideals by providing us with a framework to understand the lived experiences of individuals. In Sahih Bukhari, one of the celebrated canons of transmissions and sayings of the Prophet Muhammad, it is said that, "The parable of the believers in their affection, mercy, and compassion for each other is that of a body. When any limb aches, the whole body reacts with sleepiness and fever" (Elias, 2021, para. 1). The tradition of Islamic sciences has shown an interdisciplinary pedigree that highlights the importance of using many ways of knowing the created world in order to best act upon a Qur'anic worldview.

It is for this reason that more contemporary research is needed to establish the best way to support the spiritual needs of the society. Within the body of the Ummah (Muslim community) religious obligations are divided into personal and communal. Each member of the community is required to know enough knowledge of the practice of their religion that is sufficient to properly act upon it. This is known as the *fard ayn* (Tarsin, 2015). This includes the basics of creed and

practice such as crucial beliefs regarding the nature of God and existence as well as the details of practice upon the pillars such as prayer, fasting, and the development of moral character. On the other hand, knowledge and skills that are needed broadly within the community for it to thrive are known as *fard kifaya* (Tarsin, 2015). Such knowledge and skills include socially important occupations such as those in medicine and health, trade, architecture and construction, sanitation, and any field that allows for society to thrive and develop. Indeed, the importance of recognizing the needs of the community is summed up in a quote from a well-known Muslim from the generation known as the Tabi'un or those that came right after the Prophet Muhammad and his immediate companions. "Whoever seeks knowledge for himself ends up with little knowledge, but whoever seeks knowledge for others should know that the needs of humanity are vast" (Tarsin, 2015, p. 19).

One can argue that many of the early scholars of Islam were what, in today's words, would be known as polymaths. They were seekers of knowledge in the divine sciences of theology and revelation, but also in the natural and human sciences of physics, medicine, astronomy, language, history and mathematics. They did not distinguish the physical and the metaphysical in the way modern academia divides knowledge into finite fields and as such they were constantly seeking to understand the world around them as both an intellectual and spiritual exercise (Chittick, 2007). It is a Qur'anic injunction to seek knowledge in order to better develop a relationship with God through His creation and comprehend the rhythms and hidden structure of natural law, all the while extrapolating divine wisdoms from the Qur'an and the Sunnah (sayings and actions of the Prophet Muhammad) to develop a holistic understanding of moral and natural law, with both interwoven between the microcosm, humankind, and the macrocosm, the larger universe (Honerkamp, 2015).

The memorization of the Qur'an is considered a virtuous act mentioned by many scholars of Islam. Imam al-Ghazali was a 12th century Islamic scholar who is known as Hujjat al-Islam, or the Proof of Islam, for his extensive discourses and spiritual writings on establishing an understanding of Islam that merges the inward sciences of Tasawwuf, known in the West as Sufism, the outward jurisprudential sciences known as Fiqh, or the understanding of Shariah, and the creedal arguments in the science of metaphysics, known as Kalam. He, along with other scholars, have written on the importance of seeking knowledge. In the first chapter of his magnum opus, *The Revival of the Religious Sciences*, he says, "Many subtle meanings of the secrets of the Qur'an arise within the hearts of those who have committed themselves to remembrance and contemplation, meanings that the commentaries are devoid of and the worthy commentators have never encountered" (Honerkamp, 2015, p. 67). According to al-Ghazali, memorization is not simply an exercise in cognitive excellence, but a pathway towards uncovering spiritual secrets and knowledge of God.

On the other hand, memorization of the Qur'an without knowledge of what it entails is described as a negative action. Al-Ghazali cites another scholar Abū Tālib al-Makki who in his book *Qūt al-Qulūb* reports that,

We Companions of the Messenger of God were brought to the faith before the Qur'an. After you, there will come a people to whom the Qur'an will be given before the faith. They will articulate its letters properly, but fall short of its injunctions; they will say, "We have recited the Qur'an, who recites better than we do? We have acquired knowledge, who is more knowledgeable than we are? That is the extent of their share of the Qur'an." (Honerkamp, 2015, p. 43).

Although the participants in this study do not make the kinds of claims al-Ghazali mentions nor is moral judgment placed upon their shoulders, this dissertation seeks to explore the narratives of some individuals who are part of the fabric of the broader Muslim American community despite their hiddenness.

William Chittick, a contemporary scholar of Islamic history and metaphysics, presents the challenge between transmitted knowledge and intellectual knowledge. In his book *Science of the Cosmos, Science of the Soul* he outlines that the goal of all true knowledge is the attainment of *Tawhid*, an affirmation in the heart of the existence and the oneness of God. This oneness entails recognizing all of the cosmos as contingent upon God. In order to do so, the role of the Muslim is to ascertain for oneself through intellectual knowledge and the use of reason, '*Aql*, the veracity of one's beliefs.

Memorization of the Qur'an falls into the realm of transmitted knowledge, and has an integral role in maintain and conserving, but until and unless it is met with intellectual knowledge, the transmission is similar to knowing that one plus one equals two, but not understanding the truth of this mathematical proposition in one's own heart (Chittick, 2007). Memorization of the Qur'an can be placed under this categorization by Chittick and as such compared to the internal phenomenon of engaging with the meanings of what is memorized. Each participant in this dissertation is asked to share their thoughts regarding the nature of memorization contrasted with comprehension and the relationship between their desire for each and the outcome of the process of Hifz as adjacent to any intellectual depth either received or sought out for themselves.

In essence then it is vital that this study explores the reemerging interest in recent years of how Muslims are reviving the Islamic tradition by integrating what is colloquially known as

science with religion in order to develop faith and spirituality by serious contemplation and introspection into the current state of the community and identification of its needs. Due to the complex relationship between modern nation state politics, religious and secular identity, psychosocial pressure on immigrants and their progeny, and a post-colonial global framework, a recent phenomenon has emerged in the West, amongst Muslims in academia, of affirming and reviving the intellectual tradition within Islam that merges both science and faith in a way that seeks to create similar levels of knowledge production and societal benefit that defined the rich Islamic tradition throughout history (Alkhateeb, 2014). In the time before 9/11, Muslims were not nearly under the same level of scrutiny that they are currently under. Due to continued and increasing rates of immigration, increasing alienation from nationalistic and cultural baggage, a growing desire for creating a deliberately American Islamic ethos, and the extensive reach of ever immersive forms of social media, much scholarship has now been established in the United States that is serving the needs of young Muslim's who are attempting to navigate troubling times in the midst of identity development of both their worldly and spiritual selves.

Abdullah Rothman is one of many contemporary clinicians who are attempting to develop an understanding of psychology that is native to the assumptions of an Islamic worldview. According to him, Islamic psychology is an indigenous approach to understanding human development informed by the teachings of the Qur'an and the Prophetic tradition (Al-Karam, 2018). Such a need for an indigenous understanding of psychology from an Islamic perspective is based on criticisms of Western secularly oriented theoretical developments over the last century with psychoanalysis, and more recently cognitive and behavioral paradigms becoming the overarching lens through which human development is seen. Despite more Eastern spiritual traditions being incorporated into the development of holistic or transpersonal therapies,

Rothman states that his approach is based on a very different paradigm where God and the Qur'an determine what the goal of good therapy and personality development is (Al-Karam, 2018).

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This dissertation explores the lives of young adult Muslims who have grown up within the United States through retrospective analysis of their life stories. As such it is important to discuss the broader context within the stories in this dissertation are presented and the various aspects of psychological, social, and political dynamics that may have contributed to these narratives. These variables range from debates regarding the perceived conflict of Muslim identity in America, the racialization of the Muslim, mistrust and stigma around health professionals, limitations around research within the Muslim American Community and the West in general, multiple perspectives of the Muslim American experience, and the history and nature of the Hifz process and the nature and relationship of the Qur'an with Muslims.

The review of the literature below is an opportunity to understand current trends in the dynamics between Muslims and the United States and an elucidation of why it has been difficult to conduct research within the Muslim population. Studies with Muslims has been limited, but a small but steady group of researchers and institutions has in recent years formed to specialize in exploring Muslim dynamics. Such organizations include the *Journal of Muslim Mental Health* and *Yaqeen Institute for Islamic Research*. Whereas the former is more established as a thoroughly peer-reviewed journal, the latter is less so and focuses more on Islamic scholars based in the tradition, writing articles to deal with common myths about Muslims and Islam while also providing novel narratives about Islamic psychology, support for those struggling with their faith, and perceived controversies in the western study of the legal tradition and other topics.

When exploring Huffaz it becomes clear that Muslim immigrants specifically are a population of interest that have been in the spotlight in contemporary discussions but have been

stereotyped and stigmatized due to the distorted representation they receive within the popular media. Majority of the research focuses more on immigrant Muslims, particularly due to their visibility and close association to Muslim identity in the US. This dissertation showcases and highlights narratives that are missing in the broader pool of research currently taking in place in the Muslim American community. The intention with presenting this material is to showcase the current trends in research with this population and to outline the cultural contexts within which this further research is being conducted. The following is the review of literature that summarizes some of the current areas of information available on the American Muslim community.

Contemporary analysis of past literature has found some overarching themes in research within the Muslim community (Haque et al., 2016). The first theme is that spiritual and religious lifestyles have shown to be therapeutic and sources of healing and psychosocial harmony. The second theme is the need for increased competency amongst clinicians of various backgrounds regarding knowledge of spiritual and religious practices, backgrounds, and contexts. The third theme is the integration of spiritual and religious concepts into mainstream western models of clinical psychology such as cognitive-behavioral therapy, psychoanalysis, and humanistic modalities. Literature has been produced in an attempt to “Islamicize” contemporary modalities of treatment and evaluate its efficacy through process-outcome research (Awaad et al., 2021). The fourth and final theme in the review of literature was data that supported the use of religious and spiritual interventions and conceptualizations as efficacious and effective for psychosocial clinical presenting concerns (Haque et al., 2016).

Stigmas within the Muslim community have been detrimental in the process of adequately providing mental health services as well as gathering valuable research. The

temptation when discussing minority groups is to homogenize a large group of people where a significant amount of diversity exists. Muslims are one of the most underserved and underrepresented populations within the United States and that is evident in the lack of research and representation within the academic world of mental health as well as across other disciplines (Ahmed & Amer, 2012). Research shows that spirituality plays a large part in the lives of Muslim clients, and therapists who are more informed and willing to include spirituality in their conceptualization and treatment of clients often have better outcomes (Ahmed & Amer, 2012; Haque et al., 2016).

One aspect associated with stigma is often shame. Whereas colloquially the terms shame and guilt are used interchangeably, literature exists that attempts to differentiate these qualitatively. Many cultures are often considered shame-based or guilt-based with shame usually associated with collectivistic societies and guilt in more individualistic ones. According to Schaefer, shame is more associated with symptoms of psychopathology and guilt is more associated with adaptation in interpersonal functioning, leading to empathy and restorative action. In other literature shame is described as complex ideas about the self, thinking of how others think of the self, often in global terms. It leads to behaviors of hiding or disappearing and is often a painful experience (Barrett et al., 2016; Schaefer, 2000). Guilt is then described as a self-evaluation that is less global, more focused on particular actions, and less likely to lead to avoidance or hiding behaviors, contrasting with more corrective behaviors. The more accessible the opportunities for corrective action, the less severe the feeling, and the less likely that guilt will transform into shame.

Studies comparing different cultures assumed to be more individualistic or collectivistic, in this case Ireland and the UAE, highlighted distinctions between presentations of shame and

guilt. Guilt was positively correlated with individualistic thinking, but shame was not correlated with either scores on collectivism or individualism. Young Arab women appear to experience higher levels of guilt and shame characterized by negative self-evaluation in comparison to their Irish counterparts who displayed higher levels of guilt proneness (Grey et al., 2018). Other studies explored somewhat different but similar definitions of guilt and shame. One such study across five countries, namely the United States, India, China, Iran, and Spain, found that individuals culturally socialized to be more interpersonally oriented (i.e., horizontal collectivism) are more motivated to engage in reparative action following transgressions, whereas those culturally socialized to be more attuned to power, status, and competition (i.e., vertical individualism) are more likely to withdraw from threatening interpersonal situations, and that these relationships are stronger than corresponding relationships with guilt- and shame-related evaluations (Young et al., 2021)

At the root of both shame and guilt is the idea of self-consciousness, reinforced internally or through the eyes of another (Barrett et al., 2016). In an Islamic spiritual literature *Taqwa*, or God-consciousness, is a term that is often also translated as shame, or fear, but self-consciousness can be understood as the root of the phenomenon; an awareness of oneself in relation to God. This self-consciousness is associated in Islam as a primary attribute of the believer who is spiritually aligned with the overall ethic of an Islamic lifestyle, merging morality into the everyday interpersonal realm as well as internally in the world of relationality with God and the spiritual heart. Thus the negative affective experiences of guilt and shame are meant to turn the Muslim inwards to recognize their position relative to God.

Amer and Bagasra (2013), note the difficulties and limitations involved in finding research data within the Muslim community for multiple reasons. Many pockets of Muslims

around major cities in the US experience a sense of fear and a negative view of authorities due to historical efforts consisting of monitoring and surveillance and so may have a deep mistrust of those seemingly trying to pry into the private lives of citizens who feel vulnerable and scapegoated (O'Connor & Jahan, 2014). Other limitations included the assumptions of homogeneity within the Muslim community, ignoring the great diversity of race, ethnicity, and religious orientation (e.g., Sunni, Shia, Ismaili, Bohri) and extrapolating generalizations where there may be none. Despite this, attempts have been made recently to develop measurement tools that are expected to create more accuracy and reflect a more realistic scale of variability within the Muslim population. Such scales include the Muslim Subjectivity Interview Schedule (MSIS) which will be discussed further below. Recruitment of participants is difficult for reasons mentioned above such as mistrust for those handling sensitive and private information and a perception of increased surveillance of the Muslim community. Small sample sizes provide a lack of power to statistical analyses. It becomes even more important to gather recent research due to the growing number of Muslims and specifically Muslim youth in North America as well as the media coverage that Muslims receive (Amer & Bagasra, 2013).

Ciftci (2013) provides a framework of intersectional identity and stigma as well as key presentations of symptoms of mental health dysfunction within Muslim populations. She discusses the factors that moderate stigma such as discrimination and the legitimization of self-stigma. That is, due to the extreme prevalence of negative stereotypes of targeted groups, those populations may perceive those stereotypes as true and so begin perpetuating the schemas of identity that are provided for them in the form of the metanarrative of news and social media. She highlights differences in how individuals from minority groups view mental health more negatively.

Her article breaks down the different aspects of what makes up stigma. She operationalizes prejudice as negative affective attitudes towards specific groups, and stereotypes as attitudes towards individuals based on their assignment to those groups or categories. Discrimination is described as the outward expression of stigma and occurs when action is taken according to beliefs based on prejudice and insufficient understanding of a different group. Such instances of discrimination would come in the form of avoiding interactions with Muslims, unfair treatment of Muslims in the work force, treating women who wear the hijab as oppressed and choosing not to sit next to someone on public transport who “looks” like a Muslim. She discusses the moderating factors of stigma, which includes concealability, course, disruptiveness, aesthetic qualities, origin, and peril (Ciftci, 2013). Understanding stigma is an important aspect of recognizing the history of discrimination and power dynamics within the United States and the secondary impact on the collection of research within the Muslim community. An increase in mental health research of a qualitative nature with researchers who identify as Muslims may help to increase trust in the process of gathering psychological data.

Another major development in the relationship of Muslims to the United States was the USA Patriot Act of 2001, the beginning of a large-scale discriminatory practice within the United States, specifically towards Muslim immigrants from Arab and South Asian countries. 9/11 became a convenient veil under which to enact unconstitutional laws that overwhelmingly targeted Muslim Americans (Ahmed & Senzai, 2004). Individuals would be detained indefinitely, mosques and religious institutions became highly monitored and spied upon or even searched or wiretapped and individuals arrested without probable cause. Individuals who were classified as enemy combatants were put through military tribunals instead of civilian courts, and non-citizens could be deported for their associations to foreign individuals or groups who raised

any amount of suspicion. Many Muslims were detained for undefined spans of time for which Guantanamo Bay Prison became a symbol for these unjust use of the law in the name of national security. The Patriot Act reintroduced a highly pre-emptive form of policing that unfairly targeted a particular religious group and racialized them into the narrative of “us” and “them” in order to justify systematic state-authorized terrorism. In the name of addressing justifiably heinous acts of religious extremism, many innocent Muslims were painted with a broad brush and collapsed into a single demonized group.

On the 27th of January 2017, then President Donald Trump signed an executive order known as US. Executive Order 13769, titled “Protecting the Nation from Foreign Terrorist Entry into the United States.” This action suspended entry into the U.S. from the countries Iraq, Syria, Sudan, Iran, Somalia, Libya, and Yemen. The process of entering the United States from such countries is a difficult one that is compounded with interrogations stemming from unfair targeting and have resulted in stressful and traumatic separations for families due to inability to be with family. Muslims are reported to have higher rates of PTSD than the general population (Ahmed, 2009). Adding these acculturative stress factors to a family household consisting of first- and second-generation individuals can create a difficult environment. Many immigrants come from extended family settings where the community plays a significant role in facilitating social support and child rearing. Research conducted at the University of California in Berkeley showed that out of 110 participants one-fifth reported having experienced direct interaction with government surveillance. These individuals reported higher levels of anxiety towards the possibility of future surveillance as well as avoidant behaviors towards perceived threats of future profiling. This was also associated with a desire to limit discussion of their own identity as

well as avoidance of certain settings and places for fear of being reported to or harassed by authorities.

Muslim converts face unique challenges as a part of their transition. Dating, a commonly accepted method of finding a spouse, is not seen as compatible with Islamic values. Many Muslims tend to meet their potential partners through the local communities they are a part of, friends and family connections, as well as Mosque-related activities and suggestions via elders of their religious congregation. Many converts, due to a lack of immersion in these social settings and networks, may struggle to find a suitable partner for marriage. On the other side of things, converts may be approached much more easily for marriage purposes due to the assumption that they are more sexually experienced, “exotic,” and “fun,” while not being bound by cultural expectations. Non-White converts, particularly Black Muslims, in particular face discrimination due to skin color and racial identity and may be denied approval for proposals from elders in the community (Ahmed & Amer, 2012).

Further research was conducted in England regarding how the whiteness of converts affects their experiences after conversion. It was theorized that some converts, regardless of their new religious identity, would continue to experience privilege. Others would experience difficulties particularly because of their whiteness (Moosavi, 2015). Conversion of faith is an extremely affectively charged phase of life during which an individual may be prone to feelings of both hopefulness as well as isolation. They may experience a sense of estrangement from their previous communities, whether that be religious, ethnic or otherwise (Al-Banawi, 1994). In Britain, a study was conducted to better understand the reasons and themes surrounding conversion to Islam. 67% of participants noted that their reasons for conversion centered around

intellectual, and interpersonal reasons while 14% of participants indicated the spiritual and mystical elements of Islam to be of attraction to them (Köse& Loewenthal,2000).

Within the emerging adult Muslim population in North America, the relationship between substance use, mental health, and spirituality has become an area of interest in research as well. A study sampling from a national population found discrimination to predict higher levels of depressive symptoms while not predicting higher levels of substance use. Higher levels of spirituality did however predict lower levels of depressive symptoms and substance use. In the United States, some limited research conducted in 2010 showed that 46.6% of Muslim college students reported having used alcohol during the year. In a study conducted in 2012 among Arab American emerging adults, participants viewed episodes of excessive drinking to be normative for their age group while engaging in avoidance behaviors to ensure that their families were not privy to their use of alcohol (Ahmed et al., 2014).

In a 2018 Naseeha, a Muslim mental health organization located in Canada, conducted a survey to evaluate drug use and self-harm behaviors within the Muslim community between the ages of 16 and 25 (Khan, 2019). Out of a sample of 216 participants it was found that half of young Muslims had consumed some sort of drug. The most commonly used drugs were alcohol and marijuana with 60% having first used in high school and 30% in college. Eighty-five percent of the participants rated religion as an important part of their life while 40% stated that they knew someone who they thought had a drug problem while 6% indicated feeling they themselves had such an issue. Eighty percent of these participants stated feeling down or depressed weekly while 60% stated feeling the urge to self-harm, with 46% having acted on this urge and 17% frequently engaging in self harming behaviors (Khan, 2019). The primary reasons given for the self-harming behaviors were a desire to punish themselves, feel relief, and feelings of shame or

guilt. A documentary by the news organization, Vice, also highlights a considerable use of opioids within the Muslim community and the long road to recovery in Dearborn, Michigan (Vice, n.d.).

The relationship between parent and child is considered a spiritual pillar of the individual and the community. In many verses of the Qur'an this importance is stressed and even placed right after belief in God; emphasizing dealing with them with fairness and love. "Worship God; join nothing with Him. Be good to your parents, to relatives" (Qur'an 4:36). Other verses emphasize the importance of obedience yet recognizing the possibility of blind obedience that takes them away from God or promotes behaviors that are not pleasing to God.

We have commanded people to be good to their parents, but do not obey them if they strive to make you serve, beside Me, anything of which you have no knowledge: you will all return to Me, and I shall inform you of what you have done. (Quran 29:8)

Within this religious paradigm, the moral and the psychological have an intimate relationship, and often manifest in the collectivistic cultures where Islam has thrived for generations, particularly in the South Asian and Arab communities that make up a large portion of the Muslim-American population alongside the Black Muslim-American community made up of indigenous as well as immigrant populations (Pew Research Center, 2011).

A study from the CUNY Graduate Center discusses this moral component of parenting that exists within the Muslim-American community consisting of second-generation parents. They found that parents used moral markers more often or equally to ones including socioeconomic success. Children not being able to maintain certain family values was seen as a disappointment, emphasizing high moral character, integrity, and social responsibility. During observations of this study, the researchers observed parents as often displaying emphatically

their Muslim identity around both Muslim as well as non-Muslim peers (Karam, 2020). The study also went on to discuss these parents' children's identity formation and the complexity of Muslim-American children growing up in a kind of cultural and ethnically heterogenous surroundings that often differed from their parent's early lives, whether the parents themselves were American born or immigrants. These parents were either highly sensitive to this sort of cultural mixing, holding fast to certain cultural understandings of the religion and wary of becoming too "American" or desired shedding what they considered as "cultural baggage" that had tainted interpretations of the religion or simply were neutral to the possibility that their children would lose their ethnic or racial identity as long as they maintained their Muslim beliefs (Karam, 2020). The author noted a tension in some parent's desire for this "universalistic" Islam decoupled from culture as also creating a cultural vacuum that brought their children nearer to the broader mainstream American culture.

While the home symbolizes the first education regarding identity and faith, the broader social and educational context is also important to consider. Writers such as Abdullah Sahin in his book *New Directions in Islamic Education* explores the need to further research and discuss the presence and development of "hybrid, hyphenated identities" and the role that Islamic education plays in the lives of British Muslim youth as well as asking "in what direction faith was channeling these young people" and the "construction of their religious subjectivities" (Sahin, 2013, p. 5). He developed a religiosity scale called the Muslim Subjectivity Interview Schedule (MSIS) that attempts to standardize and measure attitudes towards Islam. Using a model couched in the theoretical insights of Erik Erikson and James Marcia, initial use of this scale in the UK found that young Muslim men reflected a foreclosed sense of identity while young Muslim women fell under an exploratory phase of identity when it comes to faith and

religiosity. These findings also highlighted a desire by many young Muslims for a “pure Islam” that was unadulterated by the culture of their parents’ country of origin, noticing differences in the way Islam was taught at home and in the mosques in the community (Sahin, 2013).

Sahin also discusses the tensions between a fear of loss of values and identity and being subsumed by the broader mainstream British liberal and secular values as well as an increasing universalist and literalist approach to the religion in many parts of the community that valued preachers who seemed to deny the need for a culturally infused religious understanding, instead promoting a “pure” Islam. In his book he argues that the Islamic education system as it stands in many Western countries is a “rigidified, static, and top-down learning experience” that does not take in to account the rapidly shifting landscape in which young Muslims now find themselves (Sahin, 2013, p. 16). He goes on to stress the importance of pedagogy and defining a mature Muslim religiosity that has its underpinnings in the Islamic theological tradition and foundational sources and defines this maturity as,

One’s religious identity primarily hinges on how individual and collective identities re-enact, handle, interpret, and express a received faith tradition and its culturally embedded emotional and behavioral patterns. This process requires hermeneutic competence to facilitate engagement with the theological content (the cognitive domain) as well as the mental and emotional maturity to recognize the inevitable presence of intersubjectivity in the emergence of one’s sense of self. The capacity for self-contextualization, or putting one’s identity in its immediate personal and cultural context, strongly indicates the need for one to be open and tolerant to the diversity within her faith community, and within wider religious and cultural contexts. (Sahin, 2013, p. 13)

The Hafiz is a particularly unique subgroup of individuals within the Muslim community that take on the responsibility of memorizing the Qur'an. The maintenance of the Qur'an in the collective memories of Muslims is a responsibility placed on the community, and as such, requires developing enough memorizers to sustain the successful transmission of the Qur'an without having to rely on texts. One of the unique attributes of Islam is the prevalence of young people who have memorized the entire Qur'an and the chain of narrators that can be identified through the verification of authenticity of the permission to teach the Qur'an that goes back for centuries. This chain of transmission, or stamp of approval, known as the *sanad* is an essential aspect of Islamic education and proliferation of knowledge. Not only are these Huffaz expected to be knowledgeable about traditional Islamic knowledge, but they inhabit roles as the maintainers of the Qur'an through a chain of memorizers that goes all the way back to the time of the Prophet Muhammad approximately 1500 years ago. They are usually not a visible part of the Muslim community since they are not limited to the scholarly or academic class and can be found spread around the community through all forms of career, age, gender, educational level, and class.

The teaching of the Qur'an to young Muslims is a highly valued aspect of parental obligations and is an expected part of family life beyond primary and secondary schooling. A typical phenomenon seen in many practicing Muslim homes is a Qur'an teacher who provides children with basic literacy in classical Arabic and proficiency in reading and reciting the Qur'an with proper *Tajweed* (pronunciation). Florence Ollivry quotes a famous Spanish geographer, historian, and traveler, when he discusses this trend for early childhood Qur'anic education being a staple in households all the way back to the 12th and 13th centuries (Ollivry, 2014). The emphasis was on oral literacy more so than written ability with the understanding that having the

Qur'an in the spiritual heart was a protection for the high probability of infant and childhood mortality. This emphasis on an oral tradition solidified the relationship between the elders and the youth within the community and could be generalized in both major aspects of culture, education, and profession; the strong respect for a chain of transmission of both knowledge as well as craftsmanship through the master and apprentice relationship (Ollivry, 2014).

A study conducted in London, United Kingdom explored the experiences of young Muslim boys who were a part of a Hifz program offered in a north-east London mosque. Their curiosity lay in the invisibility of these boys in that outside of the external trappings usually associated with Muslims, beards for men and head coverings for women, these Huffaz have no other outward symbolic representation that defines them in any way (Gent, 2016). They can be found in many different settings from the most rural suburbs in traditional Islamic seminaries as well as urban areas and cities, embedded into diverse metropolitan sprawls. Their hiddenness is a curious facet of their identity since they hold no external trappings associated with religiosity beyond what they choose for themselves, and more specifically, it is considered bad *Adab* (comportment) to boast or even publicly identify as a Hafiz. *Adab* plays a large role in Muslim communal life and the concept is almost always introduced to children at a young age across many cultures. These Huffaz are also labeled as “Olympians” as a comparative notion to the outstanding achievement that is holding the entirety of the Qur'an in memory and actively practicing and maintaining it for their entire lifetime; a feat that is outside of the normal bounds of individual achievement (Gent, 2016).

The fact that such a large quantity of people exists who are engaged in memorizing the Qur'an and the uniqueness of this phenomenon warrant further inquiry into this population (Keblawi, 2013). This process is one that requires the investment of a lot of effort and time and

can induce significant, lifelong changes in the personalities and lives of memorizers and those teaching them. Understanding the verbatim learning of the Qur'an might contribute to the collective scientific understanding of the psychological impact of how people memorize texts in general, and how such a large amount of information is stored in the brain and retrieved when necessary (Keblawi, 2013). Memorization is still a key skill in society regardless of the substantial advances in technology and data storage and so exploring this process can extract key insights to be used in other educational processes. The degree of success and commitment in these programs is most likely impacted by many different factors such as attitude, mood, self-esteem, self-confidence, social status, social support and preexisting temperamental and personality factors (Keblawi, 2013).

Malaysia, one of the largest Muslim majority countries in the world, is home to approximately 13,000 Huffaz and 138 Tahfiz programs (Abdulrahman et al., 2016). In a study designed to explore variables that influence the process of memorization, researchers designed a holistic open-ended interview process to approach Huffaz in Malaysia. They explored the possibility of the effect of different aspects of learning, personality and environmental factors such as faith and self-discipline, food and etiquette, memory control processes and pedagogical strategies. Memory control processes were described to be different strategies used by an individual that govern the flow of information into the memory system. Two types of memory control processes were delineated: maintenance rehearsal and elaborative rehearsal. Whereas rehearsal is purely the repetitive practice of the Qur'anic text without engaging in the meaning via exegesis, elaborative rehearsal combines both repetition of the text as well as knowing its meaning. Unexpectedly, the researchers found that the participants stated the pure rehearsal process was more helpful in long-term memorization than learning through meaning association

(Abdulrahman et al., 2016). The qualitative portion of this research found that self-efficacy, self-discipline, and goal-setting behaviors positively correlated with memorizing ability.

Apart from the fundamental belief in a unitary God, being a Muslim requires dogmatic belief in the existence of angels, divine revelation in the form of historical texts, divinely appointed prophets and messengers, a judgment day, resurrection after death, and predestination (Tarsin, 2015). Defining faith is a difficult thing to do, but the articles of faith can be understood in terms of the objects of faith themselves. Hence, the focus of this dissertation will be on the contents of the Hafiz, the Qur'an, the revelatory book from which Muslims receive spiritual guidance and divine law to govern human society, and the vessels that carry the Qur'an, the Huffaz. The Qur'an exists in the Arabic language as is seen as the literal word of God and as a result the Qur'an can be seen as the only object in existence that is a direct connection to God exclusive from a personal and phenomenological "gnosis" of God (Diba, 1992). Considering that the main focus of this dissertation is psychosocial and spiritual adjustment, the research will explore the nature of the individual's relationship to the Qur'an and Hifz. Once a Hafiz has memorized the Qur'an, this memorization requires regular upkeep and practice, and so regular reading and recitation of the text becomes a part of the lived experiences of such individuals in a way that goes beyond the typical amount and type of relationship regular Muslims have with the Qur'an.

The words in the Qur'an are an integral part of Muslim spiritual and cultural life and permeate all aspects of experience in rituals around birth and death, the five daily prayers, supplications, and contemplative spiritual practices. Different passages from the Qur'an are read for many of these moments to provide blessings for those partaking in them as well protection from spiritual and worldly ailments. The Qur'an exists essentially in the form of speech but

exists practically in the form of a book in almost every Muslim household (Diba, 1992). Certain chapters of the Qur'an are memorized by most Muslims to be recited during special occasions, times of the day, out of fear, out of protection, and in order to remember God. Despite numerous translations into many different languages, the Qur'an is essentially Arabic and hence, is spoken in its original Arabic form in any country where a Muslim community exists.

In addition, Zari Diba explores the psychological function of the Qur'an in the context of psychodynamic theories and discusses that the Qur'an serves certain self-object functions as well as the function of a holding environment in D. W. Winnicott's words; protecting worshippers from external impingement and providing a sense of consistency and continuity to their reality. It provides an idealizable set of shared communal values, a holistic unifying framework for existence that provides meaning to life as well as bringing together disparate cultural and ethnic groups under the monolith of a united community of believers (Diba, 1992). As such, the Qur'an holds both individual and communal value in maintaining the primary principle of the religion, Tawhid or Oneness of God. It provides a sense of wholeness and unification of individual experience through the range of events, positive and negative for the individual, as well as uniting the community on a regular basis in the Mosque for the five daily prayers and especially during the Islamic month of Ramadan, when the complete recitation of the Qur'an becomes a spiritually recommended act that many Muslims attempt to perform both individually as well as through nightly group prayers after the breaking of the fast together. Whether it's recited as an individual or in community, the words of the Qur'an bring people together in worship and gratitude.

Diba (1992) further states that the power of the revelation lies not only in the literal meaning of the Qur'an but also the linguistic structure and experience of the sounds.

Psychologically, the possession of scripture in memory represents a transition from the preverbal to a verbal stage of development and the associated acquisition of communal values and with it certain self-object functions. Scripture, like the movement from preverbal affective attunement of a healthy maternal environment, ushers in a higher form of organization and development of self-experience. She cites another author when describing the nature of the Arabic language itself and the important metaphysical dimension embedded within it. The Arabic language is based upon a triliteral root structure where a root word which is unintelligible and unspeakable on its own is variegated with the addition of vowels, prefixes, and suffixes, its morphological structure.

The root word on its own is “dead” and is given life by the addition of these other elements that then create a rich lexicon of words that share seeds of meaning through their triliteral roots. In this manner, many words in the Arabic language share both an outer and inner meaning (Diba, 1992). This is important to understand due to the deep historical tradition that has excavated spiritual meanings from the Qur'an through this extensive mastery of the Arabic language, yet we find many such individuals who have the entire Qur'an memorized, yet not even a basic understanding of Arabic as more than its outward form. The relationship with the language of such Huffaz both within the United States and even Muslim majority countries can often be limited to memorization without any further extensive communal ties through continued scholarship or connection to spiritual teachings.

Since the beginning of the Islamic tradition, the Qur'an has existed essentially in spoken form, transmitted from the Archangel Gabriel to the Prophet Muhammad and onwards to his companions (Tarsin, 2015). The word Hifz comes from the root word “HFZ” which means to keep, or preserve (Diba, 1992). Hence it is a widely understood concept in Muslim communities that the Qur'an exists primarily as an oral tradition maintained by people and not books, much

like many of the other Islamic sciences that are taught in Islamic seminaries. This knowledge exists within a carefully guarded chain of transmission called a Sanad. Hence, those who maintain the Qur'an in memory do so alongside the memorization of this chain of narrators much like those who memorize the Hadith (sayings of the Prophet Muhammad) (Diba, 1992). The Arabic word *Hadith* literally means something that comes into existence, or something that has been said. In the Islamic context, it is the operationalized term for the recorded speech of the Prophet Muhammad. Apart from the science of Tafsir or exegesis, Hadith criticism and memorization of Hadith also occurs and has produced canons of what are now considered unanimously as the recorded sayings of the Prophet Muhammad.

The term "Qur'an" means the oft recited thing and so by definition it is a spoken entity (Tarsin, 2015). It is recited in a measured melodic manner and the sounds themselves carry rich therapeutic and spiritual impact (Ghiasi & Keramat, 2018). The content of the Qur'an matters just as much as the way in which it is recited and both Tafsir (exegesis) as well as Tajweed (rules of recitation) are separate sciences of the Qur'an that are taught in both elementary Islamic education and advanced. For a vast majority of Muslims though, the relationship with the Qur'an exists side by side with both the original Arabic as well as a translation in their native tongue (Tarsin, 2015). In various places within the Qur'an, God speaks to believers asking, "Will they not contemplate the Qur'an?" (47:24). Contemplation has a special place in the Islamic tradition, and to do so upon God's creation is one of the highest forms of worship.

Contemplation, as a complex cognitive and experiential activity, is then expected to lead to long term behavioral change that is in line with an Islamic worldview, to see the world as a place of worship and a deliberate architecture that points to God (Badri, 2007). If enough individuals in a community then become one with the truth of what reality is, psychological and

social stability and contentment becomes a natural result. Psychospiritual distress then becomes a result of being out of sync at multiple levels or hierarchies of reality and relationality. One's relationship with the natural environment as a caretaker becomes now seen as just one of many levels of spiritual wayfaring alongside one's commitment to acts of ritual worship, maintaining outward cleanliness and order of one's appearance and home, ethics in business, compassion and justice in interpersonal relationships, and maintenance of physical health. “

Seek the life to come by means of what God has granted you, but do not neglect your rightful share in this world. Do good to others as God has done good to you. Do not seek to spread corruption in the land, for God does not love those who do this. (Qur'an 28:77)

Within the Qur'an are many verses encouraging this activity, using different methods to appeal to individuals of varying temperaments (Badri, 2007). Some verses have a reprimanding nature to them such as,

Have they not seen what is before them and behind them, of the sky and the earth? If We wished, We could cause the earth to swallow them up, or cause a piece of the sky to fall upon them. In this there is a sign for every devotee that turns to God in repentance.
(Qur'an 34:9)

Other verses offer encouragement and discuss the relationship between gratitude, the fine-tuned design and beauty of the cosmos, and praise of God such as,

Behold! In the creation of the heavens and the earth, and the alternation of night and day, there indeed are signs for men of understanding – men who celebrate the praise of God, standing, sitting, and lying down on their side, and contemplate the wonders of the creation in the heavens and the earth. O Lord, You have not created this for naught!

Glory be to You! Give us salvation from the torment of fire in the hereafter. (Qur'an 3:190–191) (Badri, 2007)

Certain verses in the Qur'an also invoke in the reader an urge to contemplate the aesthetic sense of the cosmos and the beauty of creation.

Do you not see that God has sent down rain from the sky, whereby We have brought our produce of various colors. And in the mountains are tracts white and red, of various shades of colors, and black intense in hue. And similarly among men and crawling creatures and cattle who all have various colors. Those who truly fear God among His servants are those who have knowledge. For God is Exalted in Might, and is Oft-Forgiving. (Qur'an 35: 27–28)

Most importantly though there are many verses which stress the individual's relationship with his own self and others and the need for contemplation of human nature (Badri, 2007). "We shall show them Our signs in every region of the earth and in themselves, until it becomes clear to them that this is the Truth. Is it not enough that your Lord witnesses everything?" (Qur'an 41:53).

The literature mentioned above is provided in order to contextualize the space in which further research is sought to be done. It helps to understand the research that has been done with Muslims in the past few years and reasons for being careful in doing research particularly with the Muslim population. Muslims are just as vulnerable to poor mental health as any other group and face their own unique set of problems (Iqbal, 2016). When discussing diversity and multiculturalism, it is important to be able to distinguish between genuine traits of a community that can be generalizable as well as the unique differences that exist within a seemingly homogenous group. Muslims are no different in that regard. In order to improve multicultural

psychology from a qualitative perspective, many of these differences must be included and explored in order to better understand the nuances of identity within the United States, particularly the unique intersection of European-Americans and Islam.

The review of literature included a broad look at the limited research that currently exists regarding the specific phenomenon of study in this dissertation, memorizers of the Qur'an, as well as statistics of risky behaviors, and discourse around the identity development of young Muslim's both in the United States and the west broadly. As can be seen, Muslims, among other minority groups in the country, experience difficulty and tension in the process of individuating, and face challenges that are both unique to them as well as shared with other faith groups around religious identity formation and ostracizing, as well as discrimination in the form of social and political actions and beliefs. The lack of literature on Hifz in America is both limiting and an opportunity. Discussions continue to take place regarding the different ways in which culture and religious values complement each other as well as interact with the unique identity development of young Muslims, in particular Huffaz, who may be emblematic of some of the pedagogical concerns to be explored in this dissertation. The literature will be discussed further in concert with the results to follow.

Chapter 3: Methodology

The purpose of the study is to shed light on a niche group of individuals who, through a rigorous and draining course of study, attempt to adjust to their regular lives, occupations, and relationships meanwhile balancing a deep respect and ongoing relationship with the Qur'an. Through lived experiences and a review of literature this researcher has found that Huffaz have a unique set of experiences that differentiate them from other Muslims. Often there exists varying expectations and understandings of the role that a Hafiz plays in the Muslim community. As the complexion of the Muslim demographic continues to change in the constantly shifting sands of American culture, technological change, and political thought and action, this dissertation seeks to bring to the fore the stories of those who have experienced these rigorous academic responsibilities in their youth in order to show how these experiences have affected their view of themselves, others, and their religious identities. As such, this dissertation asks participants what are the unique struggles they go through and what are the variables that work and do not work in these Hifz programs? These individual's relationship to the Qur'an, their social and educational supports, the degree of theological preparation they have received, their intention for joining such programs, and their identity development in the context of growing up within the United States will all be themes to be examined in this dissertation.

The intentions behind this dissertation are to explore, from a retrospective point of view, the personal narratives of Muslims who have studied in a Madrassah or a Qur'an memorization (*Tahfiz*) program. This study uses a narrative methodology with the goal of listening to and presenting oral histories of adults on their personal experiences of growing up in these institutions, the nature of their learning, relationships with other students and teachers, relationships with their family members and the broader Muslim community, relationships with

people outside of the Muslim community, whether they perceived that they received adequate theological, social, and emotional preparation for becoming Huffaz, and their emotional adjustment and relationship with the religion of Islam and the Qur'an. This study is qualitative in nature and based primarily on information gained from interviews with participants who matriculated from a Qur'an memorization program in their youth.

Qualitative science is a methodological stance of research that allows for analysis of human behavior and certain phenomena in depth and from the perspectives of those who are directly involved (Glesne, 2006). This depth requires an exhaustive exploration of a small sample size that would not be practical if researching with a larger group. (Glesne, 2006). This research will use a qualitative narrative method of inquiry to garner a diverse set of stories that explore various outcomes of a Hifz program. A narrative research study is one in which a particular phenomenon is explored as well as the broader context in which it occurs. It is the accounting of a series of events in the participant's lives that have particular meaning to them and, with the researcher, is co-constructed into a chronological exposition and thematic breakdown in order to understand the individual's relationship to the phenomenon being studied. This research is qualitative and collaborative in that the story emerges from the dialogue of the participant and the researcher with the intention of highlighting a usually unrecognized population. As is rooted in the Islamic tradition, this research will be an oral history of the participants, young Muslims who hold a unique role in society as memorizers of the Qur'an and allows for personal reflections of events and their causes and effects. As such, it embraces the subjective perspectives of both the researcher and the participant in collaboratively telling these stories.

According to Alasdair MacIntyre the human being is a “story-telling animal” (Zargar, 2018, para. 6). Actions and beliefs become meaningful and intelligible only in the context of narrative. Narrative assists, from a lens of both healthy functioning and recovery from trauma, in facilitating change. It can provide an aspirational account of possibility or a rousing and inspiring story of hope, albeit with certain creative and often fictional embellishments. When discussed in the context of trauma and recovery, narrative can assist by providing catharsis, linguistic representation, exposure and repetition with the aim of habituating to a new reality, and identifying purpose and value (Kaminer, 2006). Narrative allows for the interwoven complexity of individual moments, contexts, and experiences with others and the world at large. It is also an empathy building tool when it comes to understanding how and why others come to the conclusions and actions they deemed best for them in any given situation. In many ways it becomes an ethical meaning making tool to reason with the intersubjective component of the human experience and a way to judge and compare different perspectives (Zargar, 2018).

The research uses the framework of a theological hermeneutic that places an emphasis on Islamic legal and spiritual understandings to scaffold the experiences of these participants. This hermeneutic includes the recognition of the theological assumptions of the researcher and the participants as being within those of mainstream Sunni Islam. Such overarching metaphysical presuppositions and first principles of thought include the existence of a monotheistic God, the divine nature of the Qur'an and its uniqueness and incorruptibility, the existence of an afterlife, and the recognition of broad moral objectives stipulated by the legal traditions of Islam. This hermeneutic promotes an attempt to understand the challenges as well as the factors that affect the spiritual and religious growth and practice of young Muslims in the United States, focusing on this unique subset of young Muslims who may face more than the usual critical focus from

members of their community and complete invisibility beyond it. This hermeneutic also presupposes that my intention in this research is for any meaningful data to be a means towards spiritual and institutional growth in the Muslim community, being a member of it myself. I wish to see this information reflected upon and used as feedback for the Muslim community in order to establish whether a change in how we see Hifz education in America is necessary at this time.

Story and narrative are everywhere in Islam. The Qur'an includes not only statements that directly tell the reader to reflect on the aesthetic nature of the world, but also holds within in multiple stories of prophets such as Muhammad, Moses, Jesus, and Joseph to name a few (Abdelhaleem, 2011). What is curious is that the Qur'an's overall structure does not include the kind of linear or chronological structure of narrative such as the Old and New Testaments. It intersperses parts of stories throughout the book that at an apparent level seem to go against linearity (Qur'an, 2:1-286) meanwhile also having whole sections of chapters focused solely on one story at a time such as Surah Yusuf (Qur'an, 12:1-111) which gives a more linear exploration of the life of Prophet Joseph. The Qur'an makes reference to the past in the form of earlier nations and prophets, the present in the form of the simultaneously static and dynamic forms of nature and the cosmos, and the future in the form of the Day of Judgment and life in the hereafter (Abdelhaleem, 2011). Since they are presented in no obvious order, the feeling that is communicated is the eternal nature of the core message and guidance to all of humanity, not limited to space or time. The entire corpus of Hadith and Sunnah, the oral traditions of the Prophet Muhammad, include within them not just sections of the Prophet's life, but also stories from previous peoples as tales of caution and inspirational journeying (Abdelhaleem, 2011).

In Islam, the foundational epistemology rests on three distinct sources of knowledge: sensory or empirical evidence (*hawass salimah*), reason (*'aql*), and truthful reports or transmitted

testimony (*khabar sadiq*) (Awaad et al., 2021). The sources of how we gather information about the world have always been a rich and often challenging philosophical discussion amongst the field of psychology, since much of the criticism of the field rests on the apparent conflict between the subjective states people experience and the apparently objective nature of observations and empirical data used to make inferences. Quantitative and qualitative research are both rich and meaningful data gathering tools with each limited in some way. Whereas quantitative data allows for abstractions of phenomenon from a large population and generalizations to be made, qualitative data in the form of stories allows for a rich method of understanding the subtleties and depth of experiences, and a humanizing of the data in a manner that abstractions and numbers cannot provide in the same way.

Phenomenology from an Islamic perspective can be glimpsed at by the writings of scholars such as al-Ghazali when discussing the importance of reflection and the relationship between the mind and the outside world. He outlines an ontological framework for the role of subjectivity in the human experience as he speaks of human cognition through the metaphor of mirrors. He describes the “seat of knowledge” (Skellie, 2010, p. 35) as the spiritual heart which functions as a mirror which “reflects the forms of changing appearances” (Skellie, 2010, p. 35). He recognizes the objective nature of the object outside of the human experience and the representational nature of the *form* or *image* in the mirror of the heart.

Even as the mirror is one thing, the forms of individuals another, and the representation of their image in the mirror another, being thus three things in all, so here, too, there are three things: the heart, the specific natures of things, and the representation and presence of these in the heart. (Skellie, 2010, p. 35)

Polishing the mirror of the heart then becomes the purpose of spiritual development and the attainment of higher and higher states and stations of self-knowledge and knowledge of God.

The above cited words of Al-Ghazali are meant to indicate a few things. Islamic scholarship thoroughly asserts the cosmos as objective fact, as a creation contingent on the fiat of God and existent regardless of a human subject to experience it. This is contrary to philosophical positions taken by schools such as nominalism and other enlightenment-era and postmodernism ideas which tend to assert radical skepticism around truth as something external to the human mind and truly substantial or existent (Khan, 2020). Within this objective reality is the phenomenon of human subjectivity that we grapple with. Al-Ghazali speaks to an ontological assumption that knowledge of the world within the metacognitive human is representational and so must be dealt with as such, but in and of itself with the use of rational and revelatory proofs, is not limited in its ability as a tool to understand the world, and by extension each other.

Storytelling from an Islamic perspective has also historically held a place in Sufi prose and poetry. Cyrus Ali Zargar discusses in his book *The Polished Mirror* that Sufis, masters of the science of moral psychology, virtue ethics, and character development, “engaged in narrative exercises often motivated by the need to communicate theory and practice in a way more inclusively ‘human’” (Zargar, 2017, p. 42). Writers of poetry and prose such as Fariduddin Attar, Rumi, and Hafiz, made good use of narrative and storytelling to convey the rich tapestry of emotional and intellectual states and stations achievable by those on the pursuit of the knowledge and love of God. He further states the primacy of storytelling as a pedagogical tool of conveying important moral lessons and articulating “normative standards of virtue” (Zargar, 2017, p. 44). Normatively, the stories in the Qur'an are meant to be both aspirational and inspirational and in contemporary clinical settings Qur'anic stories have also been used to scaffold therapeutic

technique. Rabia Malik asserts the importance of providing important religious contexts and meaning systems to clients while working from a theoretical orientation that emphasizes a family systems model of intervention (Al-Karam, 2018).

This dissertation is an attempt to provide stories, narratives, and reflections in order to better understand the state of participants who represent a section of the young Muslim community in America. It is a recognition of the value that self-knowledge through the use of a dialectical medium, the interview, has in understanding a common phenomenon and by extension a particular community. Whereas it lacks in statistical weight in order to make broad claims about the phenomenon of interest, the stories presented allow for the *experience* of the phenomenon to be felt, heard, and represented to the audience through the lens of the researcher.

Collecting stories from Huffaz provides access into a unique subset of young Muslims who are navigating the complex waters of religious identity development within a broader secular framework of the United States and will inform clinicians, the broader Muslim community and potential future research. For this dissertation, the following research questions will be explored:

- What was the experience of memorizing the Qur'an in a Madrassah/Islamic school like?
- How does this experience impact their adjustment as adults in the context of growing up in the United States?
- How does this experience impact their relationship with the Qur'an and God?

The inclusion criteria for this study are participants who are between the ages of 18 and 30 and have completed at least a high school education. They were willing to discuss their life experiences in Hifz programs and later effects of those experiences. This age range was selected

due to specific interest in current cultural effects as well as generational challenges specific to first generation Muslims whose experiences are limited to life growing up within the United States with limited exposure to their nations of origin. There was a higher likelihood of recruiting first generation Muslims by limiting the age range from 18 to 30 years of age. I aim to identify the influence of participation in these programs on these individuals and how their life narrative evolved over time.

Participants were recruited through multiple efforts, including posting flyers in Muslim student groups at local universities within Chicago and posting flyers in Madrassahs/Islamic schools in and around the city. Although originally some participants had been found through snowballing from the first few participants who reached out, many dropped out due to a lack of response once the interviews came time to be scheduled. First name pseudonyms were assigned for each participant to protect the identity of individuals. The researcher was wary of the general and pervasive mistrust and misunderstanding of psychology and mental health within the Muslim population. The researcher provided psychoeducation from both a clinical as well as an Islamic spiritual approach to simultaneously demystify and settle worries around the intentions and expected impact of this study, but each participant was forthcoming and was able to feel comfortable, praising the study for shedding light on a topic they had felt had never been shown any academic, let alone personal, interest

Data was collected in the form of recording responses to open-ended and semi-structured interviews, observation on the part of the researcher and writing of memos during the interview process. Written consent from the participants was attained by the interviewer to participate in the study. An interview protocol was delineated that attempted to standardize, to a degree, the interviews between each participant, without limiting the ability of the participant to freely

associate their experiences and be spontaneous in their responses. Interviews took place over Zoom and occurred while each participant was at home in the safety and confidentiality of their rooms. Whereas originally the interviews were meant to occur in person, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, interviews had to be conducted over video conferencing. Audio files of the interviews were then processed, and computer software was used to transcribe the interviews and be placed into qualitative data processing programming for analysis of descriptive and content-based themes.

The methodology chosen for this study is due in large parts to the lack of rich qualitative data on Muslims and the intention of the researcher to challenge certain norms and stereotypes both outside of and within the Muslim community. The researcher has found a deep discomfort in many Muslims of older age and first-generation status who still stigmatize the idea of mental illness and sometimes trivialize its occurrence, even within their own family. There is a much stronger need to publish personal narratives that allow for unfiltered and critical access to young Muslims who are at the crossroads of major political and ideological shifts in society. This is in order to provide firsthand experiences of the impact of the challenges mentioned previously to broader audiences for educational purposes aimed towards parents and institutions with the intention of raising young Muslims.

Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this research is to understand the following questions: (a) What was the experience of memorizing the Qur'an in a Madrassah/Islamic school like?; (b) How does this experience impact their adjustment as adults in the context of growing up in the United States?; and (c) How does this experience impact their relationship with the Qur'an and God? Through using interviews as the primary data gathering process, I analyzed the narratives and reflections of Muslims who grew up in the United States and completed the memorization of the entire Qur'an at one point in their lives. In a co-constructive process, the experiences of these respondents have been shared as stories, memories, and reflections from various periods of their learning process as well a retrospective analysis of their experiences. The analysis provides insight into many unique aspects of the experience of these four Hifz students as well as some common themes spread through the stories. Each participant is introduced below and then themes that tied together as well as presented as unique to each participant were examined.

Participant #1: Layla

I was born and raised in the Chicago suburbs and was raised in a very robust Islamic community Alhamdulillah. I went to an Islamic private school for my whole life and grew up in a family that was really active in the Muslim community. My parents came from Syria. They grew up in Damascus, and then they came here, and they had us, and I've been pretty well connected to my heritage and my culture and my language and everything like that. Alhamdulillah my parents kind of instilled that in us. I have two younger brothers. I'm the oldest child and I'm the only girl. All my life, I've kind of been like surrounded by Islam and by Muslims. I'm starting medical school in like a month. I completed my undergrad, like after I left private school, which was like very much a

bubble. I was pretty active there in the MSA and then pursued a master's degree. I then studied for a year at a seminary, and I just wrapped that up this year.

Layla presented as someone who has found a sense of harmony and contentment in her own story. There was a rich sense of confidence and depth in her descriptions both in the length of detail as well as the profundity of her experiences. She articulated herself clearly and conveyed both passion about her religious beliefs and actions.

Participant #2: Imran

Imran is a 22-year-old man who was born in Chicago in what he described to be a “tight knit family” as well as being a “very religious orthodox Sunni family.” His mother wears the niqab, and all his younger sisters wear the hijab. All the women in his extended family also wear the hijab. His family is active within their local community with his mother teaching part time in a local madrassah program in a Sunday school format, on top of being a homemaker. She and her siblings were born in Chicago and so Imran identifies as a second-generation American Muslim. His father though, immigrated from India, where he received his medical degree, moving to Chicago to complete his residency. He now practices as a psychiatrist. He described his father as “kind of an inspiration” in regard to growing up around medical vocabulary and concepts and medical school becoming somewhat of a goal he wanted to eventually pursue for himself.

My interaction with Imran had a relaxed and enthusiastic energy that permeated throughout the interview. His story was filled with moments that summarize well the intensity that a Hifz student may experience, and how the coming together of systems may inform the beliefs one holds. “My dad had an obsession; he didn't do it and he wanted his only son to become a Hafiz.” As a child whenever he did not want to read Qur'an or pray, his parents would tell him that they would send him to a Madrassah, as a punishment. Eventually when he did

begin Hifz at the age of 10, the first time he entered the madrassah he began to cry from the “preconceived notions” he held and the associations of the madrassah as a place of punishment, which in essence, became the very real experience he was to have.

He described his Hifz experience as one of great difficulty taking 2 years to memorize half of the Qur'an. “My heart just wasn't in it.” His motivation to finish was to simply be able to go back to public school, since he left the mainstream education system to do his Hifz full time. He then memorized the second half of the Qur'an in 6 months, citing a strong motivation to “get the fuck out of here.” He began his journey aged 10, in the 5th grade, and completed it by 12. He completed his Hifz at a standalone Qur'an institute located on Devon Street, a location populated mostly by south Asian, Levantine, and African immigrants of great diversity. The street itself is lined with small mosques, restaurants, and stores that culminate in a rich experience of the Muslim diaspora in Chicago.

My interview with Imran was much less linear in regard to his story. Unlike other participants, his responses were to the point and punctuated with anecdotes from different times in his life, often going into tangents that provided great depth but were somewhat scattered in nature. He often required me to pull us both back to the original question asked and keep us on track.

Participant #3: Nabil

I was born in Chicago. Both of my parents migrated. My dad came about five or four years before I was born. And my mom came just about a year or a little under a year before I was born, and I'm the first child of the family. So, like they're just getting settled in Chicago, and I was born so I had the immigrant family dynamic growing up, I went to a private Islamic school for elementary, middle school and high school. Pretty much K

through 12 year. They migrated from Egypt. So, I have two younger sisters. Both of them in high school but one actually just graduated. Growing up has been a lot of, I guess, if I were to pick one phrase to really define it, it's managing two cultures. Because like living in the United States, even though I was at an Islamic school and like that Islamic school still held a lot of the traditions and values that like they came with from overseas, but obviously like there was a lot of American influence from not just my friends, but the things that we would do after school, for instance, like the places that we go to hang out. And then, in contrast with my lifestyle at home with what my parents value and what their traditions are and all that. I've been in the middle of both of these cultures and trying to balance them both alongside with my identity as a Muslim, which is sometimes at odds with both given my other American and Egyptian identities. I mean, yeah, a lot of my life was just figuring out all of that. Obviously, I don't want to go against my family and anything that's part of the values that they instilled in me, but at the same time there's stuff that just can't be done in the society that we're in. That that's pretty much how I would describe it that really like became more prominent.

Nabil studied at a prestigious private university in Chicago and lived at the dorms all 4 years, visiting home on the weekends and during breaks and vacations. He described how the college atmosphere was a shock for him after having grown up within the Islamic school environment. He discusses his experiences below.

One of my first, like culture shocks was like the night that we moved in. There was someone hosting a party in the room with like alcohol and all of that stuff. So that immediate like shocked me and like how that was very different from anything that I experienced. Initially it was something that like really like set me back, but then they

clicked in my mind like this is what the United States like really is, removed from like the influence of not just like the culture.

I spent a lot of time with the MSA, which Alhamdulillah I'm very happy to have been actively involved in, but then immediately outside of the MSA is this like pure American lifestyle that I had to deal with and all that. And yeah, it's just trying to figure out how do I navigate all of them. How do I stick true to who I am? How do I not compromise on any of the values that I grew up with in any aspect, whether it's from my parents or whether it's from what I learned from my friends are from my religion and all of that?

And then like very quickly I joined the MSA and the MSA taught me how to manage that shock in a sense and how to like live my life as a proper Muslim and while avoiding all of that stuff that is not of a Muslim to do but then also like interacting with like the American culture in a way that's appropriate for us. And over the years, it was just me getting to know that balance and like sticking true to who I am.

Participant #4: Siraj

Siraj is of South Asian descent and was born and raised in New York and moved to Chicago at the age of 14. His story is unique in that he experienced a significant cultural shift in his Hifz experience and was able to provide a perspective of someone who has been able to see different styles of Hifz teachers and their teaching methods. Similar to many other South Asian children, Siraj experienced a lot of pressure and shame from family members regarding who he was meant to be. His story is a melancholic representation of someone trying to make the best of a difficult situation and someone attempting to reconcile the faith he was given with the faith he is now trying to find for himself. His presentation during the information gathering process was filled with a sober recognition of the ways in which culture and family expectations can interpret

religious principles as opposed to religion informing the manner in which family and culture can be imbued with a sense of compassion, justice, vision, and meaningful connection to a broader community.

Siraj's story highlights the unique challenges of children who are constantly reminded of the burden their parents carry of immigration and sacrifice. Often in conversation he presented the gradual loss of the image of his family as a source of care; instead having to become a financial caregiver and sacrificial lamb of sorts to allow his siblings to be taken care of as well as to make amends for the apparent financial transgressions of his father that made life more difficult than it had to be. The way he presented the duality of each parent's style of caregiving symbolized the tension of his understanding of religion and God. The paternalistic Islam that presented ritual practice as inflexible and unforgiving as compared to the maternal image of flexibility that also seemed to disconnect the *dunya*, the material world, from the *akhirah*, the life after death. Similarly, in his retelling of the duality of his experiences with Hifz in New York and Chicago, a similar dynamic showed up in which a gentle, loving, and understanding Islam made way for a harsh, punitive, and rigid Islam in the form of the different teaching styles he was presented with.

Themes

Theme 1: Intellectual and Spiritual Curiosity

In his book *Self Creation*, Frank Summers talks extensively about the idea of conceptualizing the self in the context of how the past and future are perceived. In it he cites Christopher Bollas, who states, "The articulation of the self is the fulfillment of one's destiny. When important potential components of the self remain unrealized, the path of life is not one's destiny, but fate, an imposition from without" (Summers, 2005, p. 31). Theological differences

regarding the concept of destiny aside, Bollas' words frame how I understood the differences in language and self-expression regarding these Hifz student's relationship to their learning.

Whereas all four participants believed in the nature of reality as pre-defined by God, each also emphasized in the expression of their experiences different aspects of Bollas' frame of reference.

For Layla and Nabil, the decision to begin Hifz was based more in the camp of destiny, being called to something greater that was harmonious with their imagined sense of a future as well as their values, given to them by family and formed by them through reflection and introspection and specifically experiencing an internal sense of spiritual and intellectual curiosity about God, the Qur'an, and Islam. Imran and Siraj on the other hand presented their stories more as victims of fate, having to experience Hifz as the vision of others imposed upon them, essentially numbing their desire to pursue spiritual or intellectual insights regarding the religion. One of the crucial aspects of my curiosity with the topic of research was simply asking why. Why does one become a Hafiz? Since Hifz in many countries is a common sociological reality with the deeply rooted religious importance of wanting to spread the blessings of the Qur'an as well as maintain it within the consciousness and memory of Muslims, how does this change in America? The idea of agency in my participant's narratives was split evenly between a deep internal calling of responsibility and religious curiosity as compared to being told to do so as a desire to fulfill a filial wish or fantasy.

As young Muslims growing up in an Islamic school system, Layla and Nabil were exposed to the Qur'an as a natural context within which more mainstream academics were taught. Many Islamic schools have embedded in them courses that focus on learning the basics of Qur'anic recitation and memorization. "At Islamic school obviously you memorize some Qur'an and everything like every year you have like a surah (chapter) that you memorize and what not."

We will explore Layla's story first. Her story with the Qur'an began with an urge for more. A desire that came from some time reflecting on whatever she had learnt in school so far.

Throughout her story, there was a consistent emphasis on a sense of being called towards something beyond her immediate circumstance; a vision of what could be.

I remember once in a while like throughout my middle school and like very early high school years, I would like kind of reflect on why I am not in a memorization program. I didn't know whether or not to be satisfied with like how much I was memorizing in school, because if you actually retain everything you memorize from Islamic school, you'll probably come up with maybe like 3 ajza (chapters) of Qur'an memorized which is one tenth and I do feel like we can do more. But that's like a different conversation altogether. Well, I would wonder to myself, once in a while, where should I continue. Is there more that I can be doing in terms of Qur'an? There's all these different programs around me and everything like that, but it kind of felt very out of reach.

These questions seemed to have ignited a latent desire based on a naturally child-like ideal based on perceptions and observations of scholars around her as well as ideas of children with some natural gifts or God-given talent that soared beyond the tendencies and capacities of a normal Muslim child. Her fantasies were filled with the image of a Hafiz as a superhero of sorts, a "brainchild kind of thing" where a 10-year-old memorizes the Qur'an within a year; a spiritual-genetic predisposition that only some are blessed with. Either a child has a pre-existing capacity or grows up to become a grand scholar who "you know, obviously they have the Qur'an memorized." Later in the interview she references that as an adult she eventually learned that not every advanced scholar of the religion has the Qur'an memorized and that slow integration and loss of that ideal merged with a more realistic image of the Hafiz, although no less responsible to

hold a certain amount of basic knowledge of the religion. She grew up without anyone in particular modeling a fully human and fully realized Hafiz who she could identify with.

You know, so you kind of think or feel that it's out of reach because of that. Either that it's too late or that like I'm not that kind of person because there's this image that person is an amazing person that obviously has a lot of time and was able to accomplish this like daunting huge task and like, I'm not that kind of person, like I didn't see myself as that kind of person. But that was just not a goal that I had in mind. But then when I was in 10th grade. I learned about a very local high-level program where you memorize.

Around this time, at age 16, she discovered a program that had been up and running for the past year and was at the time a boys only program. What seemed to attract her was the sense of structure and vision it provided. Many times teenagers are criticized for their lack of foresight and future-oriented realism in lieu of the more playful fantasizing and occupation with enjoying their youth, but Layla seemed to enjoy a more serious and grounded approach to decision making at the time.

And it had been ongoing for a year, and it was just a boy's class at that time they had opened the girls' class. It was just, guys. And I knew people that were my age that were doing it and they were happy, and they were getting through it and everything and I was amazed at that, firstly because it was young people memorizing the Qur'an and, secondly, because there was like a timestamp on it, which made it easy to envision yourself, to see yourself in the future, having accomplished that goal. So, I kind of said to myself, let's say I start in a program like that and I'm 16 years old and I enter it. When I'm 21, when I'm a junior in college, I would have completed the Qur'an. You're able to envision

yourself having accomplished the goal and the steps that it takes to get there are very measurable and realistic.

So far before her journey with the Qur'an had even begun, there was a sense of vision and futurity to her thought process and an excitement to move beyond the opportunities she had been given to learn more. Not only was this a healthy sense of future ideals to strive for and an inner confidence she discovered with her germinating relationship with God and Islam, but an opening that resonated with a deep calling out to God internally. An invitation or an answer to a powerful request for intimacy.

You kind of realize the capability that you have in yourself so I was like, wow, I want them to open the girls' class so that I can join. It's like you feel special in the eyes of Allah to have done something like that and seeing the newfound possibility of it really motivated me to want to try to do it. And this thought, kind of like sat in my mind for maybe like a month. And literally within a month that same program opened a girls' program, and it was crazy, because I hadn't even spoken to anybody at the program. I had the intention. I suddenly had the intention to ask them to open the girls' program and to gather people and whatever, and they opened it. Just after I had thought about it. It's very clear like when you put an intention for something, Allah gives you the means. So, I was amazed. I told all my friends, and I was like, all right, let's do this. Like, this is really exciting. In five years, we will all be Huffaz.

This spiritual motif correlated with the simple fact that the program she intended to begin was geographically highly accessible and part of the Muslim community she had grown up with. It was "literally across the street" from the school she attended as a child and where she graduated from before moving on to college. Layla had been involved in her community from a

young age, attending summer camps and family programs and felt both safe and welcome, while continuously feeling driven to see beyond what her immediate surroundings could offer her. She had later mentioned how she felt that as she began recognizing the limitations of the ethnocentricity within her local community, she became more invested in seeking further studies that were located in surroundings that were ethnically much more diverse. She was able to look beyond and identify the resources that could allow her to continue her theological education and fulfill her spiritual and intellectual curiosity.

She began the Hifz program the summer before her junior year alongside a handful of friends. It was three days a week with the expectation that students will do their memorization in class and focus on review at home. She preferred this as compared to other programs that structure their programs differently.

I think that a Qur'an program needs to emphasize review from the get-go, because a lot of people do the 'memorize the Qur'an in one year kind of route, but there's no review because you're spending all your time memorizing and then I feel like you get lazy. You take in the information so fast that it leaves just as quickly.

The month of Ramadan, the ninth month of the Islamic calendar, is seen in the religion as the month in which the Qur'an was revealed and is prescribed as a time of fasting and turning inward; an opportunity to focus and double down on worship and spiritual rectification. A month of abstaining from food, water, sexual intercourse from dawn to dusk, and attempting to develop one's moral and spiritual sensitivities is difficult as it is. Yet, this month provides a time for Muslims to reflect, worship, and learn about the religion in a disciplined manner with a stronger sense of community. The Ramadan after graduating high school and before beginning university life is seen by Layla as "like a cusp in a Muslim teenager's life because a lot of times that's when

people that aren't as practicing, start practicing, and it's very exploratory." In 2015, two years since she first began her Hifz and with 12 out of the 30 parts of the Qur'an memorized, she describes that Ramadan as particularly transformative for her. In this transitional stage, she began "separating from a lot of friends" that she considered to be negative influences; keeping her from growing in a direction she felt was more congruous with a sense of spiritual maturity. In lieu of these individuals, she began to feel a sense of sisterhood with friends from the local masjid who helped her realize that a religiously fulfilled purpose was more synonymous with her internal sense of direction.

I kind of started to realize I had these Islamically ambitious goals such as memorizing Qur'an for example, that I was able to manifest more and be proud of more and be excited about more when I'm surrounded by people that had similar goals and those are the kind of things that they prioritize. And with that said, during that Ramadan I ended up resolved to actually leave a couple of bad habits. Like in high school, especially with those like more toxic friends there was a lot of backbiting and gossip.

This newfound rigor and determination "changed the entire course of memorization." Whereas previously she felt it was still an "extracurricular activity" and that she "didn't have as much ownership" yet. Her sense of urgency increased and this appetite for learning continued to grow. She aimed to finish memorizing the Qur'an within a year. It was not a sense of wanting to "finish to be over with it", but rather a hunger to "keep doing this." "Committing myself more and more to it increased I think my sense of like self-worth because you're committing yourself to lofty goals and you find yourself progressing through them."

She describes this time of her life with a great sense of awe and excitement and emphasizes to me this grave sense of "existential crisis that feels like a tightening of the chest."

She ponders out loud the ridiculousness of a meaningless life, that it must be “so crazy if this life was all that there was.” Her reflections seemed to point to a similar ontological angst that many individuals throughout history, and myself included, have felt before being hit with the dawning of a transcendent sense of self. This transitional time between high school and college allowed for Layla to reflect, question, and ponder upon the religious principles of Islam that she had grown up with. In her words, that Ramadan before beginning her college life was a moment of engaging with her mortality in a manner that was very immediate. The month of Ramadan seemed to not only build upon the momentum gained from her memorization but allowed for Layla to begin to develop a higher sense of sincerity and intentionality in her memorization that drew from a renewed sense of purpose that “fortifies your ability to keep going.”

This momentum and turning inward convinced Layla that the only way to satiate this urgency was to begin a more personal relationship with her memorizing. As she continued to participate in her class, from that Ramadan onwards she decided to make her own schedule and commit to a faster pace for herself, commenting about how many others tend to deviate into their own pace after a while, often slowing down as time goes on. She went from “three days a week going to class” to “waking up in the morning and beginning with Qur'an every day.” Despite still being part of the class structure, she slowly began to spend more time with the Qur'an on her own. She identified a different sense of being blessed with that “intrinsic motivation” that feels much more personal and unique as opposed to the blessings one receives when part of a community.

I think, for me, part of it was like, I think the root of all of it was like my intrinsic motivation to be honest. I think that changes the whole game because I'm pretty sure that like I wouldn't have had as positive of an experience if I was forced to do it to be very

honest about it, you know. There's a huge part in like when you have goals and when you identify certain potentials in yourself. A lot of times your self-esteem and sense of self-worth comes with you envisioning yourself already having done and accomplished what those things are and then you feed off of the self-esteem that you get having those positions when it's like guess what, you're not in those positions yet. You know what I mean, like there's so much work that needs to be done.

As will be mentioned in the theme of expectations, Layla was highly cognizant of the spiritual disease of arrogance and the effect of high praise and expectations from others. It was during the process of further personal exploration, pursuit of Islamic knowledge, and beginning to feel the brunt of these expectations that she decided to join a Tariqa (Sufi order). Sufism in the public consciousness is often relegated to some separate entity that is unrelated to Islam, but from the traditional Sunni Islamic understanding Sufism is considered an important aspect of the religion. It can be defined as the science of moral psychology and developing sincerity in regard to one's relationship to God.

That's when I decided to join a Tariqa and that was kind of when I was like, all right, it's not funny anymore. I'm not this college student who was propped up with potential and feeling special and whatever. It's that I need to actually work on myself, and it has to be difficult before I come out as a finished product. Doing things with the right intentions and doing things, knowing that it's not me, but Allah.

Layla showed great sensitivity to these subtle matters of the heart, expressing an awareness and realization of the importance of achieving stability and contentment through life's ups and downs.

Nabil grew up within the same school system as Layla. They both attended an Islamic school system that had been around for many years within a majority Arab suburb of southwest Chicago. Within a mile lived a large community of Muslims, a large mosque, the Islamic school, and a building which was the site of a national organization that holds Islamic conferences and further educational opportunities. Within the school system was a structured portion of learning and memorizing the Qur'an for young children that focused mostly on the last few sections of the Qur'an which included short Surahs (chapters) that most Muslims learn to be able to recite during the five daily prayers. Whereas Layla got her start learning Qur'an in school, Nabil's mother would walk him across the street to this organization. Here he received his foundational knowledge regarding learning the proper method of recitation beyond the basics, and from the 1st till the 6th grade was able to complete the memorization of 8 out of the 30 sections of the Qur'an. His participation in this program was not of his own choice, but his mother was herself a Hafiz, and having grown up in a home with Islamic knowledge highly valued, this was as normal for him as attending an after-school sports program. It was here that Nabil met, "just by coincidence," the sheikh who would eventually become his primary Hifz teacher. Until this time, the Islamic school Nabil and Layla attended had not developed a cohesive Hifz educational program for the entire Qur'an. The focus was primarily on learning the smaller chapters embedded within the broader schooling syllabus. Nabil in fact became the center point of the eventual genesis of a more structured Hifz program that his Islamic school would then develop, of which Layla would then benefit from.

Initially when I first started Hifz, *khatam* (completion) of the Qur'an wasn't like a long-term goal. It was just furthering what I knew and like memorizing more and all of that. And then within a year I completed up to 15 Ajza (sections). It was starting to be the

summer after seventh grade, and my Shaikh at that time was telling me like within a year, we could finish the Qur'an if you want to stick to a dedicated program. And like, obviously I told him yeah, sure, that would be great. And my parents were totally on board. I managed to complete it within nine and a half to 10 months.

Nabil's impetus for beginning the Qur'an, as compared to Layla, was much more practical in nature. His description was much more straightforward, but no less God centered and still driven by his own will to take agency of his Hifz. The opportunities presented to him earlier were communal and still within the social expectations of many other children around him, but the choice was ultimately his to take regarding jumping into this experience that would be much more accelerated as well as intense in nature. He "consented to the full program to completely finish it" within the next year. When he was approached by the Sheikh with the promise of finishing the journey he had first begun over the last few years at a gradual pace, his "parents didn't push me one way or another." He had made up his mind before even telling them about this opportunity. Eventually he took the plunge and began to "push myself to keep going" to the point that "my mom would (eventually) tell me to take a break."

Obviously like I didn't tell my sheikh yes at the time, like I was always seeking their permission, but like in my heart, like I knew that this was what I wanted to do and I feel that that is really, really important for a person's, I'm going to call it, spiritual journey with the Qur'an. If it's done to them against their will, not only will they not benefit from it, they won't appreciate it. They're going to have a very negative impression of what Islam is overall throughout their lives.

Nabil and Layla seemed to be wary and sensitive to the nature of choice and agency regarding the "spiritual journey" of Hifz. Their language expressed a deep sense of contentment

and direction that aligns well with the idea of “being moved by God” to be on their spiritual journey. This sensitivity conveyed a knowledge and appreciation of the value of this agency and a particular recognition of what other Huffaz who have been deprived of this feeling may go through. They each expressed in their own way a recognition of the tragedy of stripping this intimacy with God in the journey of the Hafiz, and for that matter, any young Muslim. It’s important to note that just as Layla and Nabil, to varying degrees, took the initiative of becoming Huffaz on to themselves, they began the official process in a structured manner at ages that are later than the average Hafiz in most places.

Layla began at 16, much later than the average and Nabil at 11, somewhat closer to the average but still older than most. Layla in particular was the only female participant and the oldest at the time of beginning her Hifz compared to the other three participants. Her reflections on this matter struck me as powerful in that they conveyed both curiosity and a desire to see into the eyes of others, a recognition of her own gratitude for having been given the opportunities that positively supported her choices, both as a Muslim, and a woman in her family and community. Her commentary on the matter expressed to me a simultaneous childlike sense of wonder as well as a mature emotional intelligence and empathic depth.

I don’t know, if someone memorizes the Qur’an when they were like 10 or 12, I wonder what it feels like to grow up already having memorized it. For me, I’m like, how do you just grow up and that’s just part of your life. What did you feel like, what did you experience? For me I can list different emotions as I have, you know. I clearly gave you a lot of ups and downs and a colorful story and everything. And I kind of wonder if people that memorize it so young lose that. There’s also like that gratitude aspect, like I’m grateful for what Allah gave me the potential to do as well as that conscious choice that I

made to start versus folks that memorize when they were little, and it's always part of their life and perhaps inshAllah (God willing) their parents made it part of the way that they behave and their character and everything as well. But it's like, did you have fun doing it because for me like it's fun (She smiles widely). It was fun and it was an interesting part for my youth. But for others, maybe not as much. So, like I know someone that memorized Qur'an at like 10 and I wonder what they're going to grow up to be like.

Alongside this spiritual certainty and contentment came a recognition for the apparent deprivation they felt from memorizing the Qur'an without diving deeper into its mysteries and wisdoms. Whereas for many other children simply memorizing might be the furthest their relationship goes with formal learning, Layla and Nabil were inspired by their Hifz to undergo even more extensive theological and spiritual learning. Whereas this deprivation was felt equally by all four participants, multiple factors seemed to both compel and allow Layla and Nabil to further their studies in the religious sciences, meanwhile obstacles were laid in the path of Siraj and Imran that potentially made Hifz into a barrier towards building intimacy with God as opposed to a platform to attain it spiritually, emotionally and intellectually.

Siraj compared his experience of becoming a Hafiz with learning the symbols of a language but lacking the comprehension of said symbols and so feeling completely unable to speak or understand it. "It makes no sense to me." He was hopeful that this experience and knowledge would increase his faith and lead to better chances of salvation, but he also felt weighed down by the gravity of the charge he did not choose to have.

It's a huge responsibility, because if I forget, if I mess anything up, I'm going to be held responsible for this, I'm going to go to hell for this. I feel like it's not something you

should give to a 12-year-old kid because parents don't tell you that if you forget you're going to Hell. If I did it again I would do it as a 15- or 16-year-old with better Iman. If someone truly wants to become a Hafiz they will do whatever they can. I know people who are 25 or 26 and they became a Hafiz right now. You can become a Hafiz or anything you want to be if you love and know what you're doing. It seems pointless to me. Why would you memorize the Qur'an without knowing it? I want to know, understand, and practice what I am reading.

Siraj's reflections consisted of feeling a lack of a critical approach to his own faith growing up, feeling a naïve sense of attachment to an "Islam that is good," and later having experiences and meeting people that "question all of that." "Looking back now I definitely see all of the being used as a trophy son and the social utility of that. The first thing people will say when they meet me is that I am a Hafiz." Despite expressing gratitude for now being a Hafiz, he laments over the fact that he feels farther away from his faith than he would like to be, feeling certain that this experience pushed him away from a potential kind of Muslim he could have been had he been given the opportunity to define his own path. "It kind of made me look at Islam in a bad way unfortunately because of cultural aspects." Siraj often used language that expressed the childlike wonder he holds of an ideal Islam focused on honing moral upstanding citizens and would often describe how he saw that moral fabric torn apart by witnessing behaviors in others that gave evidence for the contrary.

As a Hafiz you should be a good Muslim. The experience as a whole, it will benefit me in the long run inshAllah, but at the same time I don't feel like it's something I would ever do again unless I had a realization of my own will. A lot of parents will tell their kids, "Oh they will realize in the future" but a lot of these kids, including me, their Qur'an is

not solid and when I look at it, it's just the Arabic, when I want to read the translation. To me that's very superficial, I don't believe in that.

Imran stated having begun Hifz as a fulfillment of his father's missed opportunity. He described his experiences as hard, taking two years to finish the first 14 sections out of the total 30, a slower than usual pace. His motivation to finish became, at this point, to simply return back to the world of public school that he left and to "get the fuck out of there." He shared with Siraj the feeling of being imposed upon with this great burden that he did not ask for. He also vehemently agreed with being taught that the punishment of forgetting the Qur'an after becoming a Hafiz was an eternity in Hell.

Exactly, exactly! That is very, very stressful. That's why I want to go back and touch up on it, refresh myself, and it might take me a couple of months. I would always remember this, like, that's an idea that is drilled into everybody's head, that you memorize it. But you (others, parents, teachers) forced me to memorize it and now I am stuck with this responsibility and if I forget then I am done you know? I remember in Madrassah they used to outline the punishments in the afterlife that you get if you forget it and I'm like man I didn't ask for that punishment though you know!

Theme 2: Teaching Styles and Relationships to Teachers

The four participants were split two and two between Arab (Syrian and Egyptian) and South Asian. Layla and Nabil grew up both personally and academically around a homogenous community of other Arabs, meanwhile Siraj and Imran grew up in a majority South Asian context with each having broader experiences of ethnic diversity within the context of their particular public school and then Islamic school experiences in New York and Chicago. Whereas Imran's Hifz teachers were all South Asian, Siraj was the one Hafiz who got to experience both

an Arab teacher when he first began his Hifz in New York and then South Asian teachers in Chicago. Layla had one teacher for the majority of her Hifz experiences who was an Arab woman. The style of teaching that each participant experienced existed on a spectrum of pedagogy and style, and directly related to ethnicity. Whereas the Arab teacher's left an overall positive impression on Layla, Nabil, and Siraj, both Imran and Siraj experienced corporal punishment at the hands of their South Asian teachers with Imran particularly having plenty of graphic anecdotes to share.

Layla began in a small class with other female Hifz students. Her description of the typical Hifz classroom is amusing and rich.

Picture a room where there's like 10 students. You know how like cicadas are in a tree? That is how a room with like 10 people sounds who are memorizing but all at the same time. So, at first you think like is this distracting? No, it's not. It's like all white noise. It's actually very amusing. Everyone is sitting in a corner doing their own thing and then like individually each student is sitting with the teacher either reading off what they're about to memorize or doing like the recitation after they've memorized it or she's explaining the ayat to the student.

Whereas there are multiple students in the room, it is not like a typical classroom where the lone teacher lectures to a group of students. She describes how the teacher would take turns to visit each student individually as everyone is practicing and focus in for ten to fifteen minutes at a time. This was when she was able to "develop a personal relationship with her." She described her teacher as soft spoken, loving, and someone who can be easily moved to tears "like this" as she snaps her fingers to emphasize the point. "Her softness and emotion would rub off on you." There was a sense of majesty in the Qur'an that this teacher was able to provide to the

students that moved Layla, yet ironically her sense of being “very forgiving” was seen as something other students who lacked in motivation could take advantage of; sometimes showing up late for class and eventually slowing down in their personal Hifz process. Meanwhile Layla receded more and more into her own sense of structure, feeling unmoved and unbothered by what others around her were doing.

Her teacher had three daughters who were part of the Hifz program as well. Layla felt that the role of motherhood played an important role in allowing her teacher to empathize and learn how to communicate with her students. “You can easily have a conversation with her as a friend, even though she was an immigrant and she’s our mom’s age.” Sometimes for an hour or two hours of class the students would sit all together with the teacher and enjoy random conversations, feeling seen, heard, and validated in their experiences. “She knows how to address young women. She understands our struggles.” Interestingly though, she then goes on to describe how this compassion and empathy began to feel stifling at one point. She felt she needed more discipline and “felt like she was going way too easy on us.” With a smile and a knowing playfulness, she insisted she needed someone to “make me feel bad” about not doing enough as a source of motivation.

Layla grew up in a predominantly Arab Muslim community and commented on the racial and ethnic segregation that exists within the Muslim community in Chicago. Her experiences of actualization took her to a place of introspection that required finding spaces that were not so divided across ethnic lines that “have more diversity and that are attached to different parts of their Islamic tradition.” She mentions meeting others like her, who grow up to find themselves desiring more diverse spaces that allow for rich cultural and intellectual exchange that represents well the global Muslim community and tradition of Islam. “They realize the same thing, that I’m

not getting enough, and then they make their own quiet journey out and venture into places like Darulqasim, places like Ta'leef, those kinds of circles.” Darulqasim is an Islamic seminary that exists within the suburbs of Chicago and Ta'leef is an Islamic community center that is considered a “third space” of sorts that provides not only education about Islam but has programs that provide community bonding for many young Muslims of different backgrounds as an alternative to the traditional mosque space. Layla felt that many often stay within their own ethnic and racial boundaries because “attaching yourself to one mode of thinking in one part of your community, it feels good. It’s like this is me and this is what I represent.” When discussing the demographics of her Hifz program she described it as holding mostly students from her local community or of Arab descent and also mentioned the financial costs associated with it.

For what it’s worth, my program was definitely pretty expensive. I mean, if you want to get into specifics like my programs \$200 a month which is like, actually a lot like I’ve talked to people about it and they’re like, oh my god. Like, I can’t afford that. The financial aid and whatever is like always available. It’s kind of like if you can’t afford that they’re not. They’re 100% not going to let you like not going to tell you that you can joint. It is more on like the comfortable end and most people in my classes are like financially comfortable middle class, upper middle class. It’s also largely Levantine and Egyptian specifically Jordan, Syria, Palestine, Lebanon, and Iraq. And then Egyptians, because at least in my community. I feel like for the most part, without I was like North when it comes to North Africans Egyptians mix the most loving teen autos like they have the most similar culture. So, there are barely any South Asians in my program. So yeah, that’s kind of like the dynamic of mine, my program.

Nabil's experience of Hifz was unique in that after the initial five years of structured study with multiple teachers at MAS, when he officially began the process of finishing his Hifz with the sheikh, it was just the two of them. A majority of his time in class was him hearing the sheikh recite verses followed by him reciting it to himself "over and over again until I eventually got them," within earshot of the sheikh. In the meantime, the sheikh would be working on clerical duties or "taking a phone call" now and then. He made a point to say that it was not nearly as dry or boring as this description might make it out to be, reminding me multiple times that what he enjoyed was receiving explanations on the meanings spiritual value behind the words he was memorizing, "but I mean like it did, it did stick to like a student teacher relationship."

When I asked him about how he felt about his Hifz experience being more of an individual one as compared to many others who attended more structured programs that had existed for many years and had many students, he found it difficult to answer. Since he was the first in his local community of the southwest suburbs of Chicago to do Hifz in this manner, and he was not part of a broader Hifz community, his frame of reference was limited to his own experiences. Whereas he may not have been able to identify with others, in his own words, "I can't compare because I've never had that shared experience, but I definitely feel that it helped me spiritually grow." The individual experience seemed to reinforce in his mind that his intentions were in the right place. Without a need to compare with or relate to others, his motivation was sound and ultimately for himself.

My mom memorized the Qur'an, but she did it completely on her own. She wasn't with a program, SubhanAllah. But I mean like in that sense I didn't really have either like a role model or like a peer support system when it comes to like Hifz programs. I really didn't

have any of that. And like I do agree with you on like the ethnic divide when it comes like emphasis on Hifz. I don't know why that's the case but that's definitely something that I realized.

So far Layla and Nabil's experiences indicated a much more compassionate stance of teaching style and was noteworthy for being dramatically opposed to the narratives of Siraj and Imran, which happened to mirror the many negative stereotypes that Qur'an teachers and madrassahs have held. Layla's teacher, who was Arab, was empathetic, soft, gentle, and created an environment that not only facilitated a lack of shame or stress but promoted vulnerability and a loving stance towards the messages in the Qur'an and most importantly, God. Nabil's teacher, also Arab, was very straightforward and practical, with not much emphasis on emotional connection, but not overtly shaming or punitive in any way. Nabil's Hafiz mother and further studies at his school had buoyed him with other sources of positive experiences.

Imran grew up in a south Asian home with a strict adherence to the religion. His paternal grandfather was someone well known in the broader Muslim community and part of boards that organized many of the mosques around the greater Chicagoland area. He had grown up around mostly south Asian Muslims who adhered to the subgroup known as the Tablighi Jamat. This group is well within the Sunni orthodoxy, but with an emphasis on more missionary work and spending time in the mosque. He attended a Qur'an program that was located in the Devon area of Chicago; a location populated heavily by mostly South Asian, but also African, and Arab immigrants. When asked to describe his relationship to his South Asian teachers, he stated he was "full of respect" and that he wasn't aware of any Huffaz who "harbor any ill feelings towards their teachers."

Whereas his own evaluation of his relationship with his teachers was one of enthusiastic love and respect, Imran's description of his experiences during Hifz were dramatically opposed to what I could reasonably conclude in a similar manner. Imran's story was filled with explicit memories of violence towards him and other students and a social atmosphere he described as "pretty messed up." He described corporal punishment as "standard" and "normalized." In telling his story, he shared how he refused to show signs of being affected by this and expressing any kind of negative emotion to his parents. In presenting this story to me, I got the impression that he found it important to strike a balance between expressing in somewhat of a humorous and flippant fashion that these incidents and experiences were unnecessary and indeed violent, but also that he was minimally affected in any deep emotional way. His thought regarding the violence he experienced was that "I have to deal with that on my own". "Looking back on it now I'm like 'Wow that was bad.'. Getting beat with charis (sticks)." In order to not get beat, he would steal the charis and hide them in his kurta (pants) and put them under his bed at home.

At one point one of the teachers noticed this and responded with amusement saying something along the lines of, "I don't know what you kids think stealing these sticks is going do, I can go to Home Depot and get them all for free." As is evident in this particular anecdote, there was a pervasive sense of fear in the general teaching style of these Hifz teachers. When I asked him for more specifics regarding his experiences he had much to share. One teacher would pick him up from the front of his shirt and throw him across the room. He witnessed other kids being kicked around the floor "like bowling balls." Recounting a time that the Hifz students had a reunion at the Madrassah, one child brought a broken stool that had been used to hit him and asked one of the teachers to sign it for him.

Sometimes people will look back and think it's funny but if you really think about it, it seems pretty messed up, I think. My parents didn't know this was happening until much later. You know there's like a code thing, you don't go running home telling your parents crying. And it wasn't like just a thappar (slap) you know, it was a beating.

Although he began to allude to it in this quote, the theme of secrecy and hiding this violence from parents will be discussed in the next section. He also went on to talk about how this physical abuse had a romanticized element to it. He talks about a teacher who cited a Hadith, a tradition of the Prophet (PBUH), that says "Wherever your teacher hits you, on the Day of Judgment you won't burn on that spot." This statement was meant to communicate that if you were deemed to be worthy of some divine punishment, the worldly pain you experienced at the hands of your teachers would be a protection in the afterlife. Whereas I knew this was a theologically and spiritually erroneous statement on behalf of his teacher, this sentiment seems to have run true for the students in Imran's observations. Showing off your bruises to others was a "cool" thing to do. Similar to the military or a fraternity in that way. "Every institution has its own code."

Siraj began his Hifz full time for a year in New York before moving to Chicago and then continuing part time for a year and a half in a structured capacity at the Islamic school he attended, finishing with a sheikh who taught at the school for the last two sections of the Qur'an for the final two months. "The switching kind of messed me up because they had slightly different ways of doing it." During the part time in Chicago the teacher made him revise everything he had learned up to that point because his memorization was seen to be weak. Whereas the experience itself in New York with the Arab teacher was positive, it seemed to not be up to the expectations of the South Asian teachers in Chicago.

The first teacher was Egyptian and he had a strict way with Tajweed (grammar) and its amazing because of him. It made me slow down my Qur'an. I feel like the Indian or Pakistani way of Hifz is very fast. He taught me to love the Qur'an and that it is something beautiful. It was a small group and he gave him the impression that he cared about the Qur'an and the Huffaz. When I came and did part time over here, it was different and fast-paced.

I then ask him about the differences in his experiences with the Egyptian teacher and the other south Asian teachers in Chicago. The Egyptian teacher "didn't hit me, he wasn't strict, he didn't raise his voice." He shared a time when he was listening to a Qur'an reciting competition on YouTube and his teacher found him attempting to copy the mannerisms, to which he became upset with Siraj, but, "didn't yell at me or hit me, he was just saying that this is not right; that you should not sing it although it is something you say beautifully." He described the Egyptian teacher "like being with an angel." Siraj could feel the "kindness and purity" in his heart. He described him as "big and muscular" for an older man, but soft-spoken. The juxtaposition seemed important to Siraj.

He just talked to me like a human being. I was 12 or 13 and he was like 50 and still he just talked to me like a normal human being. That person was a big part of my life with Islam in a good way. The Pakistani and Indian way, they just wanted to get rid of you faster. They cared about you, but they just wanted you to get on with it fast.

In contrast, the other primary South Asian teacher in Chicago was "loud, violent and very uptight." I ask him more about what he meant by violent. He laughs and says,

If you make a single mistake, they would hit you with a stick, putting a pencil between your fingers and pressing down, making you do squats. I'm grateful because I got to see

these two different experiences and see a lot of what others go through but also what a lot of others don't get to experience.

I reflect back to him that I notice he is smiling and laughing while describing all of this and I ask him what he makes of this.

Back then it was part of the Hifz culture. If anyone else saw this, they would probably call child support services. I don't think there should be some sort of discipline if the kids won't listen. A lot of these kids these days are pampered. Even I was pampered as a kid, and I deserve that. I've seen both sides and even now I don't know what's the best way to teach this stuff, it depends.

Siraj's distinct experiences provided more insight into some broad stylistic differences in approaching the Qur'an as an aspect of faith and pedagogy with Hifz. Whereas Siraj was able to experience a teacher that was able to imbue him with a love of Islam and the Qur'an and provide him with a supportive space and example of scholarship that embodied both discipline and gentleness, like Imran he seemed to also feel the need to rationalize the harsher discipline as simply an expectation of Hifz. It was much easier for him to be critical of this and he also felt the need for change in this regard, there was still a strong sense of kinship that deterred being overly critical of his teachers. This respect was shown consistently throughout each interview with every participant.

Theme 3: Relationships with Parents

Each of the four participants described unique experiences with their parents as both positive and negative factors mediating their experiences. For Layla, her parents played practically a limited role in prompting her to begin her Hifz, whereas Nabil's mother was proactive in getting him to join a structure program to start at a slower, but more intense than

average, pace. Imran and Siraj both began their Hifz not because they wanted to, but due to their parents expecting them to do so. Siraj's description of his experience was permeated by this feeling of manipulation and coercion; a strange kind of convincing that felt as if it was positive and affirming of his self-esteem, but retroactively felt much more sinister and dreamlike. He describes how beginning Hifz was "mostly due to the influence of my family." He tells of how he was never sure of how he felt as a child regarding many things, but particularly whether joining a Hifz program was something he wanted to do.

Growing up I didn't know myself as a kid if I wanted to do it. As a kid you're pushed to do something, pushed to memorize, you're kind of forced to believe you're happy doing this. You're doing a good thing; you're making everyone proud and happy initially.

Looking back on it now I don't think I was.

He describes how he was made to believe by his parents and extended family that becoming a Hafiz was the right thing to do but looking back "you're not really given time to think about it yourself." Aged 12 at the time, he recognizes that many children are usually pushed into Hifz at a young age due to their ability to memorize a lot of information in a short amount of time. Whereas the beginning of Hifz was "very exciting and nice," over time it "became more cumbersome" until eventually it became "something that I just wanted to get over with." Upon reflection back to this time, he was able to identify that Hifz was "something I was pushed in to, there was no inner will to do it."

Siraj had an older cousin who was seen in the family as someone who manifested all the expectations of the family's elders. He was a Hafiz on top of doing well in school. Siraj was constantly compared to this cousin and he stresses the queasy feeling that "I think there was manipulation as well, very subtle manipulation that I notice now, it's kind of difficult to

describe.” As he began to talk about this part of his life, his speech became much more pressured, and I sensed an urgency in his voice. In general, he presented as somewhat tangential in his story as compared to Layla or Nabil, and more internally stimulated by the experience of sharing his experiences. Multiple times during my interaction with him I had to reassure him that there was no rush and that he could slow down and pause if he felt the need to. Eventually he did slow down and his expression became more linear and coherent as well as more extended and with more depth.

Siraj was very focused on communicating the sense of manipulation he felt. He mentions being praised and made to think that he was smarter and more capable than he thought himself to be, and consistent suggestions to become a Hafiz by constantly mentioning his cousin or other people in the community. Parents tend to provide their children with a sense of vision, hope, and reminders of capacities they can develop with the intention of instilling said capacities. Siraj did not see these comments as positive, but instead as framed by a desire to manipulate or to cut off any sense of internal desire, reinforcing a limited vision of what he could be as opposed to allowing him to feel a positive sense of agency, self-esteem, and genuineness. I reflect back what he has shared about Hifz being a difficult process in and of itself and that process not being aided when children are forced into it by parents who do not seem to provide the necessary emotional support along the way. He then discusses how he feels that a lot of times, distorted cultural understandings of religion and personal gain play more of a role in parents forcing their children into Hifz than any actual religious motivations.

Maybe I didn't have the capability. They had faith in me I understand, but I understand now that it was for their own benefit to be able to say “Look at my son or look at my

grandson.” So, I kind of notice these small things now and it makes me feel horrible. I think others can relate but it makes us feel like objects in a sense.

Associated with this idea of agency in beginning Hifz and parental force was embedded this theme of social utility. Whereas Layla and Nabil both felt that Hifz was their choice ultimately and their identity to take pride in and ultimately benefit from, both Siraj and Imran experienced feeling used in some sense for the satisfaction and psychological and social benefit of their parents or extended family members. Their function became symbolic in regard to the idea of status, particularly as proof of the sacrifices they made in immigrating to the United States. Siraj felt the burden and guilt of their sacrifice and being the “trophy son or a trophy husband,” sympathizing with other Huffaz who felt similar, and the degrading effect it plays both as individuals, but also in terms of their relationship to their faith. This self-loathing was what moved him away from Islam for a long time as well, eventually becoming more harmonious with his sense of religion “when I could have gotten closer in my own way.” He recognized a missed opportunity of sorts that led to him recognizing God as an important part of his life later than he would have liked.

I think Hifz definitely played a role in expectations. What your family wants of you. I don't think it's fair personally, but I understand. There's this whole immigration stuff, they came all the way here. You have to do this and then become a doctor, you have to make money and stuff like that. I don't think it's fair to give that to a child that's 8 years old and who doesn't know what they are doing until later on. That whole thing made me realize that becoming a Hafiz doesn't go hand in hand with being a good person. They don't care about being a good person, they just care about being seen as a good person in

other people's eyes. And that really pisses me off. That makes me mad because I try to be a good person, a good human being you know.

Imran's father was described as having "had an obsession, he didn't do it (Hifz) and he wanted his only son to become a Hafiz." As a child whenever he did not want to read Qur'an or pray, his parents would tell him that they would send him to a Madrassah, as a punishment. The first time he entered the madrassah to begin the program he started crying due to all these preconceived notions.

"My parents aren't going to flip shit if I'm getting beat." He states that one day he got beat a bit more than usual. Usually, he did not cry when he was hit, and in order to tease him, one of the teachers tells him in Urdu, "Imran, today I am going to make you cry." He said this particular teacher would hit him "just for fun" sometimes. In this anecdote, the teacher proceeded to beat him enough to give him Imran a black eye. That day when he went home his mother noticed it and asked him gently to tell him what happened. Usually, Imran had been quite good at masking his experiences and emotions from his day in the Madrassah, but this day he found himself unable to keep his pain inside anymore. At that moment he broke down in tears and told them all the experiences he had at the Madrassah up until then. He describes in that moment he said things like "Baba doesn't care about me, you guys don't know what happens in the Madrassah, I don't want to say any of this." According to Imran, his father was not the type of person to press charges or call attention to the police in any way. Instead, he went to the teachers at the Madrassah and told them as paraphrased colorfully by Imran, "There's a limit to this, you're fucking with his head." He says his father contemplated switching him to another Madrassah but Imran decided to stick through it and finish what he began since he had come so far. He thought the change would be more disruptive than continuing.

I asked Imran he felt about the way his parents responded to finally recognizing the magnitude of abuse he had experienced. He seemed to empathize with where they came from, their ultra conservative religious understanding and framework, and he rationalized the physical and emotional violence as just a given of the process of Hifz. "It just comes with the territory." He seemed to empathize with what his father saw, that in places like Pakistan and India, they get hit even worse and is widely accepted as part of the Tahfiz culture. He does not blame his parents for doing any more than they did, not expecting them to take have taken him out of the Hifz program. He says they did as much as he expected them to do, even feeling embarrassed at the moment his father came to the Madrassah to speak to the Hifz teachers.

When I observed that Imran had apparently come to terms with the violence he experienced during Hifz and accepted this to have been his life, he goes on to say how he would often wake up in the middle of the night for the Tahajjud (late night) prayer and pray to God to help him get through this, wondering to himself how he is ever going to finish this program. He stated then that he got hit a handful of times at home, but it was not typical to experience any form of corporal punishment or abuse and wonders out loud that it was quite a weird experience to be abused like that at the hands of a complete stranger.

Looking back at his experiences, I asked him if he would consider this to be a traumatic experience for him and others like him.

I mean I don't have any flashbacks or PTSD or I'm not angry thinking "How dare they or how did this happen to me." But it is traumatic in terms of the types of decisions you do make. I'm not crippled, or I can't not make decisions or anything.

When asked if he had the choice, whether he would have wanted to have had this experience, he stated it's hard to say because "these experiences made me who I am today.

Although I do think academically, I would have been in a different place. Like I would say this was physical abuse, but it just doesn't register to me as such." It seemed like his experiences had been compartmentalized and separated away. His affect throughout the interview was calm and relaxed and minimally gave any allusions to having been affected, as if me having pity on him in any way would have been a negative experience for him.

Although he does not say think the effects were disproportionate enough to be called traumatic for himself, he does think it has played a negative role in his life. Imran had begun using and abusing drugs and alcohol at a very early age and shared how he witnessed this phenomenon be quite common among the broader Hifz community. He shared an analogy with me that he felt accurately described Hifz; the process is like the formation of a diamond. Either the rock transforms into a diamond or is crushed into tiny pieces. According to him Hifz is an experience that either leaves you with a lot of good or a lot of bad, but you can't be a neutral member of the Hafiz community.

Layla's parents did not play an "active role in pushing me in certain directions" but did actively support in the decision she did make for herself.

I think I'm unique and blessed, I think, to have that because a lot of folks, it won't even necessarily be coercion, but it's like all right we're putting you in Qur'an school now you're going to do this and I mean, sometimes people will like that sometimes people don't.

This active stance of supporting her freedom to choose was generalized to other aspects of her life as well such as her decision to start wearing the hijab or her decision to apply to medical school. She recognized that these major life decisions were things many other parents often choose for their children, and she continued to vocally express her gratitude for having the

support she did have and the discipline they helped her develop after she made up her mind to do something. “It was more like ok you do this you’re committed; you know. So for them it was like we’re going to let you register for this program, but you’re going stick to it.”

Layla also shared a connection she has with her father in that as she went through her journey of Hifz, her father became inspired to become a Hafiz himself through seeing her grow into her role and studies. In a sense, his act of taking up Hifz was both a direct and explicit praise of his daughter and a desire to connect with her and see her as a source of inspiration to get closer to God as well.

I mean, my parents have like pushed me through it and actually funny enough, maybe we can like get into this more later but like my dad became a Qur'an student after that because of me and it kind of became like a journey for both of us. This was actually after two years. So, when I had finished 12 ajza (chapters) my dad was like, Okay, my daughter is doing this, like, how am I not doing this. You know what I mean, like now I want to do it. And I guess it kind of like became inspiring for him. So, he began and he did it completely on his own, and he started from al-Baqarah. So, it was funny because he started from al-Baqarah (the first chapter of the Qur'an) and I started from Surah al-Nas (the final chapter of the Qur'an) and there was a point where we met right in the middle.

As she shared this she smiled, in a manner that hinted at pride and warmth at this shared connection and mutual recognition of this amazing process she was undergoing.

Theme 4: Relationship to the Muslim Community

For Imran, the common factor that bound him to the broader Hifz community was a sense of obligation that comes from just having spent a lot of time with others, similar in his words to “the military or a fraternity.” When I reflect back to him the idea that his childhood was filled

with a consistent exposure to violence, he agreed, adding that this was what got him into drug use. He cites an experience where at the age of 10, a fellow Hifz student took him to the lot behind the school, and told him to smoke a blunt, telling him the weed would dull the pain when he would get hit by the teachers. As soon as he took a hit the older student began to hit him. Even as Imran says he can still feel the pain, the other student keeps telling him that he won't feel it. "That's when my drug abuse began and it kind of went rampant from there." When I heard this story I felt a deep sense of sympathy towards Imran, and a feeling of anger as well. Whereas he was presenting this story almost as an anecdote of humor, I felt a sense of shame and embarrassment that something like this could happen in spaces meant for spiritual development.

Imran had been off of drugs for the better part of a year since the interview. When I ask him for his thoughts regarding how young he was when he first started using drugs, he responded by saying "That's fucked up."

Back then kids would talk a lot about drugs and the area in which I grew up and went to Hifz, there were local south Asian gangs and kids would learn gang signs. Drugs were romanticized as well, but I don't think a lot of kids did them.

In his exposure to Huffaz, he estimated at least 50-60% of the Hifz students he interacted with had used drugs or alcohol at some point in their life. He smoked weed continuously up until high school and quit 3-4 years ago. He suffers from some generalized form of anxiety and marijuana seemed to make him more anxious and paranoid. He then mentions how drinking alcohol was something that helped to cope with that anxiety and he still drinks. He then goes on to rattle off different drugs he has tried "I snorted coke at 14, LSD in high school along with Xanax, Percocet, Norco, Ketamine." Imran's perception of his drug use was that it was volitional and "fun" and not to "cope with the trauma" necessarily. Drug use was "almost always a social

thing.” The alcohol use began in sophomore year of high school. He was introduced by a White non-Muslim friend. His alcohol use became more frequent (daily) in university. The longest time he has gone without alcohol is 5 days on a trip to another city to visit family and the first thing he did when he came back was meet up with friends to go out and drink. He talked about finding research that says some minor alcohol use regularly helps some people study and he seemed to rationalize his daily use of alcohol through this research article.

When asked who in his social circle knew about his alcohol use, he said that all of his family and friends do. He discussed how it was difficult and his parents were “hurt” when they found out, and he wondered out loud that it was something most Huffaz he knew also did. He felt the broader Muslim community was aware of his and other children’s drug use but did not talk about it much. He cited how one child in the community had an overdose and it was talked about for a few weeks before receding into the background as if it had never happened. Considering his more outgoing presence and the financial stability and academic success he showed, he felt that other parents who’s children he was friends with and who also engaged in substance use, would often target him as a “bad influence.”

Imran felt he was being used as a scapegoat; the parents in the community not wanting to acknowledge that substance use was much more common than they actually thought. “Oh he doesn’t have to worry about anything, his dad is a doctor, his school is all paid for. He’s bored so he’s just going around messing these kids up.” He shared how these children would apologize to him for the way their parents treated him, knowing he essentially took the blame as the bad influence of sorts and easing their own punishments at home. These uncles and aunties in the community who he would meet in the Masjid or in the neighborhood would often greet him with smiling faces in a “cordial manner,” but he would hear from friends how they would talk down

to him at home. “They’re bored and don’t have anything better to do. Everyone does it (substance use) in their own circles, I’m just more open with it.”

Imran felt marijuana was like a “gateway drug” for him. After trying that he became more likely to drink and then as his social connections through marijuana and alcohol expanded to fraternities and non-Muslim friends, he would go to concerts and try things such as MDMA. He cited being in a relationship and after breaking up he started using Xanax and Klonopin to cope with the emotional pain of that and then using Adderall when studying. By then he had established a good relationship with a drug dealer and “one day I was bored” and “the drug dealer was like hey you should try this (Ketamine).” The company of friends made it easier to try it out. At the time of the interview, he said he was off other drugs but had been having Norco (a combination of Acetaminophen & Hydrocodone).

He mentioned there came a point where he had decided to stop doing drugs so regularly. The reason lay in a moment that occurred in his home that elicited a strong feeling of shame. He stated how one day one of his sisters came up to him and told him how everyone keeps telling her that her brother is a drug addict and an alcoholic. After hearing this he stated he was overcome with a intense feeling of guilt. He told me this moment forced him to realize his priorities and that “family is a very big priority, so I have to stop.” I ask him how he feels when moments like that occur; his younger sisters making comments such as that.

I feel jealous of them. Like I wish I could have that. That unnerving belief that they have.

I remember when I would have that too, but now sometimes I believe it’s stupid. I don’t know, its constantly changing. I’m a work in progress, just like everybody is.

When asked about his social life in the Madrassah, he described himself as socially awkward, and having minimal contact with others. He was mostly confined to teachers, kids in

Madrissah and other Madrissahs. He recalls attending parades that would occur on Devon for the independence days of Pakistan and India and going regularly to the mosque close to his home. A majority of his close friends now are individuals who either he did his Hifz with or are Huffaz from other programs around the city. When asked if he could describe if there was a general culture of Hifz students, he stated he wasn't sure if there was and that in his experience there was quite a diversity. He then goes on to cite what a friend told him, not necessarily agreeing with this statement. The statement being that Hifz students either end up doing really well or really bad, there's no middle, but as I grow older, I see that people find that middle ground as they grow into their adult responsibilities and "sober up."

Siraj's commentary on the Muslim community focused on the idea of hypocrisy and a disdain for the continued misuse of the title of Hafiz for social gain. I reflect back his thoughts that many people have this notion that a Hafiz or a doctor is some perfect moral human being. He laughs and says,

It's crazy, in the process of Hifz, and in the process of going into medicine, I'm seeing more bad things than good things in doctors and Huffaz. When I was doing full time (Hifz) a lot of these kids were not the best of Muslims from what I've seen. I wasn't good myself, but I saw a lot of people using drugs, drinking, pre-marital sex that people admitted to doing in the masjid while reading Qur'an like it was nothing and say that its cool. Alhamdulillah as a kid I was raised to think all of this wrong, but a few people I know, they just don't care because it's just a title or commodity for them.

I reflect back what he mentioned about witnessing other Hifz students disclosing their experiences with drugs, alcohol, sex. I asked him how he felt about hearing these things and what impact they might have had. "This is going to sound controversial, but it definitely gave me

context.” He reflected on the nature of judging others and the immediate gut reaction in the Muslim community towards finding out someone uses substances, “but sometimes you don’t know what they’re going through.” Even as he was highly critical of their behaviors, Siraj felt highly empathetic to their experiences and potentially seeing some of his own struggles in theirs, finding a desire to help and be of assistance. He mentioned a virtuous point of wanting to surround himself with people he was always told to “stay away from” as a child. “Some of these people I found out later on that their parents were getting divorced and they’re coping like this when they could have had a friend like me or a shaykh who could help them.” He cited a particular student who did Hifz with him who had been going through a lot of personal difficulties and who left Islam. “He stopped Hifz halfway because his parents were forcing him. I tried to get him to talk to you but he’s very busy and lives by himself.”

Once Nabil had completed his Hifz, he described feeling that he “could not relate with people” since his experience in the focused program of Hifz with his Sheikh was just the two of them. He recounted an incident regarding going some friends going to a theme park and as they were making their plan with him, some individuals assumed that since Nabil was now a Hafiz, that “the Hafiz doesn’t go to six flags, he’s not into that stuff anymore.” Nabil’s internal response to being told this was a sense of shock and dismay, that somehow this title and experience uniquely distanced him from peers and friends his own age. This social expectation of sorts of the Hafiz as a serious student above others seemed to dishearten him. Change soon came, and either from seeing Nabil as an inspiration and the first to complete a formal Hifz training with this startup program, two and a half years later, MAS began a full Hifz program open to the community and three close high school friends finished their Hifz within a year and a half of starting. What was previously a label and experience that disconnected him from his friends, now

became a point of connection. “Everyone else started being able to relate because it was not just me anymore.” In fact, by the time Nabil graduated from high school 10 of the 27 students in his class became Huffaz. In a hopeful and pleased way, he expressed a sense of ease that followed the difficulties of isolation. With more people becoming and by virtue of sharing spaces, knowing more Huffaz, “it’s much easier to relate with us in general because like they can see us more as like on their level, in a sense, yeah.”

Despite accruing a group of fellow Huffaz friends after he graduated high school, the group itself did not emphasize their religious identity to the degree that other seekers of knowledge might. “I don’t have this group of like Huffaz friends just like all of us come and sit down and recite the whole Qur’an together in one night or something like that. I don’t have that connection.” This connection was sought in other places on his own as a part of his desire to take his Islamic knowledge beyond just memorizing the Qur’an. As mentioned earlier, Nabil felt that doing Hifz on his own and building this personal and somber relationship with his teacher kept him focused and sincere in his actions, feeling deeply that this is a religious action and one that resonates with his sense of self and desire to live an Islamic life with agency. “I know that this was purely for me because, like, it’s only me there.”

Theme 5: Relationship with God

So far, the participant’s interpersonal factors have been discussed along the horizontal dimension of the social realm. The horizontal symbolizing the relationships one experiences across the lifespan from a human, as opposed to divine, perspective. The next theme that will be discussed is the participant’s vertical relationship to God throughout their life journeys. Each participant had their own unique manner of viewing and speaking of God and articulated the role He has played over the course of their lifespan. Imran had a particularly powerful range of

stories that will be articulated here. In other chapters, Imran's relationship to substances has been discussed, and the experiences that led up to him finding the motivation to step away from them were firmly intertwined in what can be considered a spiritual experience of providential timing.

One day he took a "huge concoction of drugs" while at school and "blacked out for 2 days and lost my car," waking up in a police station "with my dad beating my ass." He recalled his father asking him repeatedly where his car was and Imran blankly responding that he had no idea. Through some backtracking and investigating, he shortly found out that a girl had "ran off" with his car keys and thrown them in this large field close to the high school he had attended. He went searching for the keys and after some time had passed, became frustrated and concerned with the series of events that had taken place. In his hopelessness he called out to God, promising to throw out all the drugs he had on him if he were to find the keys. A bargain was struck.

According to him, "not even 10 seconds" later he found the keys a few feet away from him and decided never to touch drugs again. Although his attempt at staying away has seemed somewhat still in the works, he has considerably reduced his usage. This particular experience had shaken him, sharing how it helped him reframe other experiences in his life from an angle of God having protected him from himself. Till now he had multiple police stops for drunk driving but never got arrested or charged, ultimately because he had a family member who was a well-respected police officer who got him off as well as friends of his. He reflects on this as a memorable experience. "It only takes one bad moment," alluding to harming either himself or someone else in the process of something like driving while drunk.

When asked about his relationship to God he described it as,

I don't know, social? If my dad wants me to pray, I'll pray. Whatever my parents want me to do. I go to umrah every year with my family. You know you see the Kaabah and your first du'a is accepted.

He described how after he got into Loyola, he went to Umrah two years in a row and was desperate to apply and get into better schools. He was confident in his applications, and he ended up getting waitlisted in the places he wants to get into while his friends who he helped to apply, got in. "Dude, what the fuck is this." When I asked more about his response to not getting what he desired and what he felt he had earned after so much worship and building a good application, he said he was "fucking pissed." When asked who he felt he was angry towards he stated that he was angry at God.

That application was perfect, obviously not perfect enough. I felt that if I went for Umrah and did all this it was going to be a done deal! Kiss the black stone, pray five times a day, did nothing but dhikr. I did everything man. A big thing about Islam is controlling your Nafs (ego) right. That's what I did, and I didn't get much out of it so this is stupid. At that time that's what I thought, this is stupid, asking someone who is not even there. Why was I even crying and begging to this thing that is not even there, that's how I felt at the time. That's when I started drinking again, cause I started in high school and then in college it went up.

Imran held on to the belief that "we can never fully understand the will of God." In some sense, God was more of a transcendent and distant figure to Imran. The imperfection of human beings at the forefront of his understanding of himself in relation to God. Whereas his statements of God Himself as a source of support were minimal, he stated that religion, in general, is a "huge" support system for many others. In his answer towards my direct question about his own

relationship to God, he spoke in these generalized terms, somewhat distancing himself in the process. Although he recognized the long-term harm of his drug abuse and potentially using this as a substitute support system in life and the importance of religion to protect against that. “You need something else, something good.”

I reflected how his answer was geared more towards religion in its organized component and I was hoping to learn more about his personal relationship with God. He goes on to describe again the car keys, the three DUI's, arrested but not booked. “

I always say it's my mother's dua's but who is my mother praying to? It's God. Even if I don't have as much of a personal relationship God, it does seem like he's looked out for me. I'm closer to him now than I was 2 years ago but less than I was 10-15 years ago.

He begins to laugh and says,

I don't know what logic was running through my head but, as a kid I used to make that I could die early because if I die early, I'll have commit less sins and all that. Growing up in a religious family I had a strong faith in God, but after that not that much.

Siraj's experience of God seemed highly mediated by the conflicting images presented to him by the words and actions of his parents, particularly his father. He talked about the perspective he holds of the primacy of God as a merciful being as opposed to his father's perspective on the primacy of God as focused on justice, fear, and desiring of His servants to strict adherence towards the sacred law. “I see Islam as more of a balance between the two, I see the opposite with my dad. Everything is because of Satan or Allah.” He then goes on a tangent about the relationship between free will and destiny and questioning the notions he has been taught by his father regarding these things. He shares his observations around the fact that he has seen him and his father be devout in their worship and asking of God to better their financial

situation, but instead he has seen things go from bad to worse. He expresses his doubt when his father would displace blame on to unseen factors such as demons or Satan for this lack of worldly gain, instead asking questions about whether they as a family did not do enough to maintain themselves financially; that they in a fatalistic manner put trust in God but refused to act in the world in a manner that would get them closer to a place of financial comfort and stability.

Theme 6: Expectations

Hifz not only requires spending a considerable amount of time and effort, but as can be seen from previous themes, is influenced by a combination of perceptions of self as well as other regarding what the identity of the Hafiz represents. Expectations varied but were consistently present as a fundamental experience of being and becoming a Hafiz.

The theme of expectations was divided into two further subthemes. Expectations from others, and expectations from within. All four participants expressed the stature and importance of the person of the Hafiz and what it should represent within the Muslim community. What was intriguing was that others' expectations were divided between seeing the Hafiz him or herself as the standard of morality or projecting their own understandings of Islamic morality on to the him or her. As a woman, Layla's experience of expectations intersected not only with her being a Hafiz but also her gender. She expressed the uniqueness of the two coming together on top of the more visual nature of appearance according to Islamic ethics being a much more scrutinized aspect of her presentation.

There's this idea of when people are unsure about things, they gather information from people around them, right? And like the more people respect others or respect their credentials, the more they'll be like, comfortable gathering information from them even

unconsciously. What that means for me is that everything I do, down to like what I like on Instagram, it's a subtle endorsement of something. What that means for me is like, I have to pay attention to how I dress, how I wear my hijab in particular, the jokes I make, how I speak, whatever. I'm not necessarily judged in terms of like what is she going to do she's supposed to be so religious.

Layla's descriptions of expectations revolved not around having to live up to the standards others have placed upon her, but rather the pressure of being seen as the standard itself. Her behaviors and mannerisms, her dress, and her social media activity, all of her public persona is seen as inherently Islamic in some way. Whereas another Hafiz may experience the shame-based phenomenon of feeling the reminders of community members to be better, Layla's experience is described as more based on guilt; an internal sense of feeling pressure to conform and live up to a higher standard of behavior. "And there's a sense of added shame that it creates, definitely a positive sense of shame and sense of guilt telling me that I literally have this tool and I have undergone these spiritual experiences with the Qur'an." This phenomenon was something she observed in her interpersonal relationships with others, but also something explicitly brought up to her by others who look up to her as a model of Islamic character. She cites a discussion with some other girls who were pondering whether makeup was permissible and began discussing whether Layla wears makeup and attempting to come to a conclusion from their observations of her behavior. "

It's kind of like they're trying to assess what my moral compass is because they think that moral compass is working properly. I was not surprised of course, because I feel like that's like part of the role. If Layla is doing something, then it must be okay.

She compares and contrasts this phenomenon to that of the social media influencer to emphasize the importance of living up to the expectations of a Hafiz and that those expectations come with the territory. In her view, to expect otherwise comes across as naïve and to some degree, shirking the responsibility of the title. She mentions the phenomenon of hijabi influencers on social media applications such as Instagram who in the name of personal freedoms and disassociating from the responsibility of having a public platform, decry the negative critical feedback and response from the Muslim community or their followers. “So, it’s important to realize that as much as it makes things difficult on you and as much as it kind of sucks, it is what it is.”

Layla emphasizes the social phenomenon of the role model as a necessary communal factor; especially the one who does not reside behind podiums and on mosque boards. She and others in her sphere of influence see the Hafiz as not only a moral standard, but also a necessary medium of disseminating knowledge and information. Her descriptions of herself convey a consistent and personal sense of accountability and guilt that provides motivation and energy to live her life in a manner she feels is Islamically driven and harmonious. The guilt of influencing someone in a manner that is antithetical to Islam weighs heavily on her. “I’d rather not put someone in that position, just for the sake of my own right to do whatever I want. It pushes you to like, remember that there’s constant self-accountability in that regard.”

When it comes to expectations of others, Layla emphasized the social expectation placed upon the Hafiz as someone who not only knows the form of the Qur’an, but also its content. The Hafiz is seen as an educator of Islamic wisdom as well as a teacher of Qur’an. When we explored her thoughts around her thoughts on Qur’an programs and whether she had thoughts about ways of improving them, she mentioned the lack of exegetical (Tafsir) education. She

wondered out loud a similar question to what Siraj had said. What is the point of memorizing the Qur'an if one is not taught its meanings as well? "I feel like students of Qur'an should be more motivated to be students of knowledge because I mean I feel like it's strange to (just) memorize the Qur'an." The term "student of knowledge" is used in Islamic circles to refer to someone who participates in some formal or informal training and education to go deeper than what is considered basic knowledge of the religion. Layla and Nabil are examples of individuals who were not only provided supportive experiences, but adequate room to explore their own journeys with knowledge and the Qur'an and at an apparent level have strongly identified with the role and its subsequent responsibilities; expecting a lot from themselves and others who are Huffaz.

Huffaz are often seen as like this person should teach Halaqas because this is like cream of the crop of our community and go on to be a mentor for younger students, whatever. And most of the time as Huffaz you kind of just end up relying on your own spiritual maturity that you've like grown for yourself and your own like unique experiences as an individual and being able to like mentor people with that. And like, I mean, that's great but some people don't know their alif, ba, ta as in the basics of the Islamic sciences and whatever, but they're like memorizing the Qur'an. In terms of memorizing the Qur'an there's like the academic sense of it and then there's like the spiritual side as in this is an act of worship.

Layla reflects on her own experiences as someone who now participates in teaching others the Qur'an and being in positions where her students ask her questions related to the religion and feeling prepared with her own learning to provide adequate responses. "My Qur'an program didn't necessarily prepare me for this. It was just like, because I intentionally seek out Islamic knowledge." She also describes what she calls the "self-fulfilling prophecy" element of

becoming a Hafiz where any small show of potential as well as her own “extroverted” personality is seen by others as people automatically seeing “passionate individuals as folks that can accomplish a lot.” That visibility then led to her being told in a sense, similar to Siraj, that she was bound for great things, and that she would go on to occupy positions of leadership, but unlike Siraj, the praise seemed to be a response to her own drive and behavior as opposed to what Siraj described as manipulation.

In line with that strong internalized moral compass was a discomfort with the praise, feeling as if

I need to be this person that does it all and I'm going to be like a Super Woman and she's like, a scholar and she's a doctor and she's like all these things like these are the visions that people have about me.

She was wary of the negative effect this could have on her relationship to God and the sincerity of her actions, culminating in succumbing to the spiritual disease of 'Ujb (arrogance).

It's more like it's very subtle and obviously as you grow more and more spiritually mature you learn to catch these things and try to cut them at the nib. So, starting to identify things like that, looking back, it's kind of about meta-awareness.

This awareness included a recognition of challenges that come with public leadership and “propping people up too much,” something she feels happen too often within the Muslim community in contemporary times. Whereas she felt it was understandable and expressed a strong desire in the community for guidance, she felt that it also had a somewhat of a fetishized component to it regarding providing underrepresented members of the community increased visibility.

So, for example being a Muslim woman, it adds some spice to the potential that they see.

I feel like people should take it easy when it comes to the way that they like prop people up. Part of it is because people like elders usually identify that they need to work on some person because they need support so that they can become whatever we want them to be.

When it came to Layla's expectations of other Huffaz, she described often having an "automatic judgment in my brain, and to some degree it's warranted." She described meeting other Huffaz who's behaviors are surprising to her in that she "expected more" from them. Layla was highly conscious of Islamic prescriptions around modesty and etiquette between men and women and expects a lot from both herself and others. One of the examples of being disappointed in others was observing the "very casual" manner in which a male Huffaz would speak to women.

For me, it's like, how did you go through all of that memorizing of Qur'an, but you didn't change at least a little bit. It's not really a judgment of their heart, but it's more of a very basic expectation and I totally feel like it's warranted.

She felt that a Hifz program should inculcate these ethics in its students and found herself doubting the quality of other programs from where students who did not meet her own expectations of a Hafiz.

Considering Layla was the only woman being interviewed, I found it important to gather more about this aspect of her experience. Layla felt that women who become Huffaz are "stripped of personality" and made to feel more external pressure to live up to an image of a "good girl" who has maintained a sense of purity by staying away from men; the dutiful daughter who obediently goes to school and comes straight back home. She described not necessarily feeling this way growing up in her home, but definitely identifying this as an aspect of the

broader Muslim community and something she personally tries to struggle against and affect positive change in by expressing to her own students and other women and girls around her that a female Hafiz can be well rounded in pursuing their education, religious or otherwise, as well as engage meaningfully in things like fashion and beauty within an Islamic ethic, and most importantly, have a personality that is their own, instead of feeling pressured to conform to a societal standard that flattens the uniqueness of the individual.

I very intentionally do that kind of thing, because I think, ok let me show you that people that memorize Qur'an or study the Qur'an, particularly women, have personalities and they have diverse personalities, and they can enjoy normal things and be normal and make normal jokes and be interesting in a way that's righteous.

Each participant emphasized resonating with the general culture of not publicly mentioning being a Hafiz until mentioned by someone else out of humility. Nabil, much like Layla, felt and recognized the pressure of people looking up to him as a Hafiz, an exemplary Muslim. This pressure seems to have been highest at the beginning of his experiences as a Hafiz in the community since he internally resonated with those expectations from others and felt they were correct to have them. Over time this changed as he began to feel that these expectations became unrealistic and divorced from reality. He cites an example from his senior year of high school where his father began to expect that Nabil would have sermons ready on the fly just in case they were at a mosque and there was nobody to lead the Friday communal prayer, which requires a sermon to be considered a complete prayer. "I don't feel I'm up to that, but yeah it's like the expectation that people have on me." During his time at university, he was asked to lead knowledge circles half an hour before the start time and felt this was due to skewed

representations of the Hafiz in that “I can do anything because I have this special Muslim status but I really don’t.”

Similar to Layla, Nabil accepts and believes that expectations of Huffaz should exist, reminding me of the historical role that Huffaz have played not only in the preservation of the Qur'an but in the important role in the communal prayer, both as a leader, but also as someone who imbues the community with an appreciation for the beauty of the Qur'an through proper recitation during special events or gatherings outside of the usual communal prayers to mark a special occasion. When I pointed out that maybe people tend to conflate the role of the 'Alim (scholar), a master of multiple religious sciences, with that of the Hafiz, whose primary role is the preservation and spreading of the form of the Qur'an, he vehemently agreed.

Yes, exactly. That's actually a really good point. I feel that people conflate the two roles as equals. That being a Hafiz equals knowledge in all the Islamic sciences, which is not the case. I do not consider myself and 'alim in anything. I just recite Qur'an alhamdulillah.

Nabil's experiences mirrored Layla's in that he was seen as a moral standard for others as well. “The Hafiz went to eat McDonalds, therefore it's okay.” The Hafiz is given a saintly status in the eyes of others and even though he feels it is important to expect more from them, expectations need to be tempered. Nabil provided some important historical context in that traditional Islamic scholarship has always emphasized the role of seeking knowledge as a whole and not in parts. The contemporary scientific and analytic worldview often arbitrarily divides knowledge into different sciences in which to gain specializations in. With an increase in the amount of knowledge and information in these sciences, the more time an individual requires in just one field, removing the opportunity to become well rounded in the way the polymaths of

previous generations were. “If you look at, like, some of the scholars back then a lot of them were like, not just like scholars. They were also like doctors, philosophers and engineers they were literally like, just into everything.”

He mentioned this point to provide context to his reflections that people may incorrectly assume that specialization in one field represents deep knowledge of other fields as well. “Like if someone is like a full-time scholar and a doctor that’s like exceptional in our time period where that seemed to be the norm among like scholars back then.” Nabil talked a lot about his experiences in the MSA (Muslim Student Association) at his university and the role of the Hafiz as an Imam (leader) both in prayer as well as otherwise. He was often seen as a replacement to the chaplain when he was absent, but often pushed back against this image of being this “spiritual leader of the community.” Despite graduating, Nabil feels that he is still considered as a leader and given more respect and authority and even assumed to still be part of the MSA study board, simply because he still attends the communal prayers on campus frequently.

Chapter 5: Discussion

The focus of this dissertation is on the lived experiences of a handful of Muslims who have grown up in contemporary American culture and who, for divergent reasons, enrolled and completed a Qur'an memorization program. As we learned in the literature review as well as the stories of the participants, American culture and Muslim families continue to struggle to find meaningful ways of incorporating culture of origin as well as an informed perspectives and knowledge around religion in a manner that seeks to create healthy relationships between parents and children. Whereas Layla and Nabil's stories highlighted parent's seemingly appreciating providing their children with a rich appreciation of their cultures of origin, both underwent their own reflective journey that led them from their homogenous starting points, leading to exposure and exploration of the broader diverse American community in college, and ultimately leading to a place of contentment in their religious position as Huffaz and as Muslim in particular. As Rudolph Ware states, Muslims historically "adapt and adopt Islamic religious culture" and so it is important to explore to what degree the participants' experiences of Islam and Hifz were an attempt to adapt or adopt wholesale models of Islamic pedagogy from nations of origin where Islam has flourished for many generations.

This study used a qualitative method of narrative inquiry via oral history that focused on highlighting the phenomenon of Hifz in a manner that quantitative research does not often provide. The four participants in this study were all interviewed using semi-structured protocols to attempt to discover both shared as well as divergent aspects of Qur'an memorization and the complex factors that may go in to such an experience as was highlighted in the above chapters. Each participant was between the ages of 18-30 and had matriculated from a Qur'an

memorization program and was either a holder of or in the process of completing an undergraduate degree.

The information gathered in this research contributes to the minimal amount of qualitative and phenomenological research that exists about the Muslim American community. Layla, Siraj, Imran, and Nabil, all were highly forthcoming in their stories and equally expressed gratitude towards the researcher for providing a platform and expressing curiosity towards a part of their identity that nobody had given such focused attention to before. The researcher came into the research with hypothesized themes thought to be worth exploring. These included pedagogy, interpersonal factors such relationships to other Huffaz, the broader Muslim and non-Muslim community and parents, the role of agency and choice, and theological education outside of Hifz. Whereas the analysis and coding attempted to categorize the information into specific themes, each theme shared some factors with others. After analyzing and coding the data, these hypothesized themes were found to be important variables at play in the experiences of these participants. The themes that were found were those of intellectual and spiritual curiosity, teaching styles in Hifz programs, the participants relationships to their parents, relationships to their broader Muslim community, expectations of being a Hafiz, and their relationship to God.

Within the theme of agency was found a strong relationship to ideas of an inner calling and taking advantage of the opportunities for growth provided to the participants. Layla's experiences most acutely represented a Hafiz who's spiritual and intellectual hunger seemed highly internal and unaffected by pressure or coercion by external forces, to the point of even inspiring her father to become a Hafiz in the process. As Summers noted, "The articulation of the self is the fulfillment of one's destiny. When important potential components of the self remain unrealized, the path of life is not one's destiny, but fate, an imposition from without" (Summers,

2005, p. 31). This view resonates with Abdullah Sahin who emphasized the importance of, and need to develop, the attributes of power and narrative in a young Muslim's life. Subsumed within this is a deep spiritual relationship with Islam, the Qur'an, and God, that is mediated through parenting and positive relational experiences. Nabil began his Hifz due to the expectation of his mother, who herself was a Hafiz, and who modeled that identity for him. Whereas beginning memorization part time in school was a factor from without, when faced with the option to continue and complete a formal Hifz process was given, he also felt called to take on the responsibility, and along with Layla, continued beyond Hifz to seek out further theological and spiritual education. Each of them continues to gain experience and play important roles within their own community in teaching the religion and Qur'an to others. Each of them continues to gain experience and play important roles within their own community in teaching the religion and Qur'an to others.

Siraj and Imran on the other hand did not experience the same sense of agency in their Hifz. Instead, they began and completed under the expectation and pressure of their family despite not feeling comfortable with the idea of beginning or feeling that the choice to say no was removed from the equation. Imran's decision was made for him by his father, meanwhile Siraj's experience seems much more spectral and involved what he described as manipulation and hypocrisy to live up to standards his own family did not practice. This dynamic clearly reflect the tension between first- and second-generation Muslim Americans and the different ways in which the meaning attached to Hifz is created. It is understood that parental authority is to be respected and appreciated in the process of raising children with certain values, but as William Chittick states, there is a distinction between imitation or following authority and realization or verification. Through a complex process of influence, of which we may infer

certain cultural messages and use of discipline, and in Siraj's words "manipulation" through false and distant praise, Imran and Siraj enacted an expectation without the opportunity to deeply reflect and appreciate the spiritual depth of their Hifz.

As Chittick states,

In transmitted knowledge, the question of 'why' is pushed into the background. When someone asks the *uluma* (scholars) why one must accept such-and-such a dogma or why one must pray or fast, the basic answer is "because God said so" (Chittick, 2007, p. 2).

In similar terms, the purpose and reason provided for doing Hifz ranged from simply something to be unquestioningly done to please a parent, or as a complex mixture of manipulation that later in life was seen as a superficial valuing of the Hafiz as a source of self-esteem for the parents and extended family, with no spiritual significance at all. It is difficult to generalize this to the broader community of Huffaz, but it is indicative of part of the experience that may exist for many. Consistently throughout the research, expectations of the title "Hafiz" were consistent. Each of the four participants felt that they had to live up to a particular image of the Hafiz, either as the standard in the minds of the other, or seen inherently as the standard simply by virtue of whatever action they engaged in. The former was the experience of Siraj and Imran as well to some degree, but Layla and Nabil most consistently discussed feeling the pressure of being seen as knowledgeable and virtuous Muslims due to their public identity of a Hafiz. This differed from the public image of the Hafiz as invisible as was highlighted by Gent. The Hafiz he discusses is the everyday Muslim who holds on authoritative position in Islamic scholarship and exists amongst the masses. The participant's highlighted that despite not holding any overt position of authority or knowledge, they were still seen in a particular way that

implicitly created pressure to conform to such standards and expectations, both of comportment and a set of knowledge.

Layla and Nabil most felt the pressure of being seen as ideal Muslims, with both seeking further knowledge and occupying spaces of higher learning, and both currently in medical school and seminary studies. Imran whose trajectory seemed to take him into drug abuse and away from religion, felt unfairly held up to whatever standard others felt he should live up to, regardless of whether that standard matched up to Islamically defined ethics. Imran also experienced being seen in the community in a split manner, either as a righteous truth bearer to some, or the scapegoat outcast who had fallen far from the expectations of what a Hafiz should behave as. Siraj and Imran were also desiring to become medical doctors and pursuing education to achieve this goal.

Layla and Nabil who were of Arab descent, grew up in a homogenous Arab environment and schooling that was highly structured and financially more well off. In the case of Nabil, financial constraints due to his father's poor management of money, seemed to have made life outside of Hifz quite difficult, and in Nabil's words, forced him to join "cheaper" programs as a result as well. The quality of the program seemed to have differed along ethnic lines in that the experiences of the students under Arab teachers was positive, more spiritually inclined, and lacking the aggression, strict use of discipline and corporal punishment that the South Asian teachers used as pedagogical tools.

Imran, despite experiencing this corporal punishment the most, expressed mostly love and affection for his teachers and at different times during the interview seemed to either use humor to frame his experiences or dismissed them as simply existentially tied to Hifz anywhere and everywhere. What came across as a series of traumatic experiences from the perspective of

the researcher was not considered so by Imran immediately during questioning, but over the course of inquiry he did eventually express that the style of teaching he experienced most likely did have a negative impact on him, culminating in his apathy towards school and his abuse of substances as well as his distance from Islam and God as an intimate figure in his life. Whereas he expressed a hesitation at times to criticize the institution of Hifz outright, to judge his teachers harshly, or to mourn his parents apparent lack of empathy and compassion for his experiences, he did express that he felt this should not be normalized nor celebrated. He often commented on this perverse sense of romanticism having tolerated such abuse that other Huffaz seemed to carry with them as compared to group experiences such as the military or fraternities. His own descriptions did not represent this romantic image, but Imran's reflections held both a nonchalant acceptance of his fate as well as a recognition that such ways of teaching Hifz needed change. We saw that many of Imran's remarks on romanticism of this violence contrast with Rudolph Ware's discussions on the use of corporal punishment and the service oriented spiritual training observed in Islamic education of Hifz students in West Africa (Ware, 2014). Whereas he articulates that the overarching goals of this specialized training occurred in the backdrop of whole communities dedicated to Islam and where Islam was homogenously embedded in the surroundings of these Hifz students, the participants of this study experienced a very different environment. Imran and Siraj grew up either completely or partially in public schools and around more diverse milieus of Muslims and non-Muslims. Nabil and Imran on the other hand grew up in quite homogenous Muslim and Arab communities for a lot of their youth until college, where Nabil discussed the more acute nature of the "culture clash." These differences bring to mind the question of what role the environment plays in the facilitation of this intensive Hifz process and how the young Hafiz internalizes the importance of this role. Layla discussed how she was

treated with a lot of potential and her abilities and growing abilities in Hifz couched in supportive language, which she even explained as a “self-fulfilling prophecy” of sorts. The reality of punishment as a pedagogical tool brings up the question of whether it is a cultural borrowing for the sake of itself, or truly a well thought out tool that is achieving its purpose, as opposed to recognizing the unique subjective experiences of these students who may not feel the holding environment of a homogenous cultural, philosophical structure that perpetuates a personal narrative of religious meaning and purpose. All four participants either experienced or at least recognized the need for increased assessment at an early stage of Huffaz’ education to evaluate the need for more emotional support from family and teachers but were careful in not creating artificial barriers to becoming a Hafiz. In Layla’s words,

Without adding any bottlenecks to be being able to enter a Hifz program and everything, but rather adding support once they’re in the program, such that throughout or by the end of their program they are what you would consider someone who is ready to be a Hafiz. I think it’s about providing resources. And making sure that there’s like a basic level of potential to become spiritually well. Allah says in the Qur’an that the Qur’an is easy to memorize and that it’s His eternal speech. The Qur’an is the mold in which human beings were fashioned. I feel like every single person has potential to embrace the Qur’an but in some people that potential is more buried than others. Sure. For some people it actualizes and for some people it never does.

The researcher concludes from the research that Huffaz, despite the range of different experiences, feel a powerful impact of the responsibility that comes with the role. Each participant expressed their desire to have been given further opportunities in their programs to be given more learning to deepen their relationship to the Qur’an and to access the wisdoms or the

“spirit” of the Qur'an; expressing their agreement that the logic of memorizing without understanding seems empty and superfluous. Some differences did exist regarding whether the participants felt that every Huffaz should be expected to seek further knowledge, recognizing that aptitude should be taken into consideration as well as interest.

Nabil emphasized that in his own experiences, not every Hafiz may have the intellectual capacities necessary to dive into abstract theological concepts or complicated rulings of jurisprudence, whereas those inclined towards such things may simply lack the discipline and memory needed to rote learn the entire Qur'an. According to the participants experiences, Hifz programs seemed divided across ethnic and socioeconomic lines regarding pedagogy and the quality of the education. Since there is a lack of literature on this topic in particular, more evidence is required to examine whether there are cultural factors that determine these differences in pedagogy and attitudes towards Hifz. Alongside the programs, the idea of purpose and meaning in becoming a Hafiz was complex for each participant, but ultimately revolved around either finding themselves resonating with their destiny (Layla and Nabil) or feeling the negative effects of a fate they did not choose for themselves (Siraj and Imran).

Education of values begins in the home, and that is no different for religious morals and ethics and metaphysical assumptions about the nature of reality and the purpose for existing. Layla and Nabil seemed to have been provided the right opportunities to flourish in that the expectations they held for themselves and fundamental basic beliefs about identity, religious and cultural, were co-constructed over time through positive parental and family support and expectations. Whereas Layla enjoyed much more freedom to choose her own path, Nabil's story represents the coming together of strong expectations as well as the freedom of choice. Siraj consistently felt manipulated and given an identity that seemed to hold the hopes and

expectations of his entire family, whereas Imran's story represents the tragic influence of physical and emotional abuse and a fatalistic attitude around accepting such things as simply part and parcel of becoming a Hafiz. Even if he felt that he had a better future ahead of him, he did not seem hopeful about large systemic changes to Hifz programs to remove these violent pedagogical aspects to them. These concerns echo what Abdullah Sahin pointed regarding the subjectivities of these young Muslim's and the competing structures of family and organizations that in a non-critical fashion, expect their students to embody and identify this knowledge, without any personal process to reconcile the vast differences between this unique path and the world around them.

Imran and Siraj experienced a strong sense of disappointment and distance from God, experiencing turbulent phases of questioning their faith, the meaning of doing Hifz, and having to start from scratch in their adulthood to shed the image of who they were supposed to be that was thrust upon them, and attempting to restart the discovery who they want to be as Muslims. Despite the negative experiences each went through, both Siraj and Imran expressed to the interviewer through direct questions and seeking of resources about the religion, a renewed desire to want to learn more about God and to discover the love for the Qur'an and God that they felt was not able to be developed from the lack of support provided to them. In a fatalistic manner, they have come to terms with their past at least explicitly stating multiple times during the interview that "it is what it is," but their stories expressed an implicit sense of wishing things could have been different.

We see this theme in the deeper spiritual history of Islam and the example of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and the study of Sufism in regards to the development of a personal and subjective relationship to God and the true and authentic attainment of *Taqwa* (God-

consciousness) that combines both a rigid and regular adherence to the sacred law, but also a deep sense of reflection, introspection and appreciation of *Ihsan* (translated often as beauty, excellence, virtue) (Chittick & Murata, 1994). Whereas submission and adherence, often looked down upon in the West as a weaker compliant self with no freedom or agency, in Islam they are seen as crucial characteristics of the human relationship to God. As such, considering the primacy of the Prophet as the Qur'an manifested, the example consistently in the Qur'an and Islamic scholarship includes the importance of mercy, justice, kindness, beauty, forbearance, and patience as pedagogical tools. If the final purpose of Hifz is to protect and maintain the Qur'an, what sort of disharmony is created spiritually when the containers, the very real people involved in these processes, are not given the very real spiritual capacities to perform this Olympian task? In Siraj's words, it may become a dishonest, hypocritical, maneuver to serve a purpose that is insincere to the overarching goals of Islam and God. In a fatalistic manner, they have come to terms with their past at least explicitly stating multiple times during the interview that "it is what it is," but their stories expressed an implicit sense of wishing things could have been different.

An important factor that cuts through most of the themes is this distinction between guilt and shame. Guilt is often understood as a sense of lacking according to some internalized standard and is often an individual experience. Shame on the other hand is more interpersonally enforced and received from others, reminding one of lacking somehow from a societal or group expectation upon the individual. A common trope of Muslim communities is that they come under the collectivistic understanding of being shame-based cultures, but Islamic literature holds much more nuance in understanding internal states of awareness. As previously cited in other literature, shame and guilt make up a core aspect of emotions that center around self-consciousness, either at a global level or specific to actions. Masters of Islamic spirituality have

written many expositions around the different states and stations, similar to modern day taxonomies around states and traits, which articulate different spiritual subtleties of experiences and levels of consciousness in relation to God. Al-Qushayri's *Epistle on Sufism* is considered one of the most important of such works in normative Sunni Islam. In it he articulates different internal stations such as *tawba* (repentance), *taqwa* (fear of God), *khawf* (fear), *rida* (satisfaction), and *haya* (shame).

He cites the well-known spiritual master Ibn Ata'Allah who says, "The greatest knowledge is awe and shame. When they disappear from one's heart nothing good remains there" (Knysh, 2007, p. 226). It is worth noting that shame here is associated with the feeling of awe, such that the grandness of God is emphasized. In other places in the book, alongside awe, Ibn Ata'Allah emphasizes the quality of God as aware and watching. In other psychological literature, this distinction of guilt and shame becomes clinically relevant information. Behaviors that seek to cover up feelings of shame lead to distancing from the self, a hiding away and an inability to grow authentically, instead growing around these unprocessed feelings of distance from the expectations of others so forcefully imposed upon the self (Barrett et al., 2016; Schaefer, 2000). Is it possible that if enough distance from the self, due to shame, is built up, that this may result in a sense of distance from God? Imran's story seemed to resonate this idea in terms of my observations of his difficulties with providing reflections about his own relationship with God, often separating himself by one degree by discussing religion as a phenomenon instead of talking about his mother's relationship to God. Similarly, Siraj also discussed his relationship with God over time as shaky, distant, and confused about what this was all about. Imran and Siraj's experiences emphasized shame much more than Layla and Nabil whose narratives underscored more of a personal set of expectations upon themselves. This goes hand

in hand with the idea that those two were often upheld as much more aligned with others' expectations of how Huffaz should present, meanwhile Imran and Siraj constantly felt reminded by others, family and friends and eventually themselves, of their distance from the ideal of a Hafiz. A total and global lacking of sorts, as opposed to a more resilient sense of the growth-mindset that Nabil and Layla were able to achieve.

Within the literature review some data was presented around drug use within the young Muslim community despite the reality of stigma and the moral judgment associated with drug use. Imran discussed the long history he has had with substance use and the direct correlation to his time spent in Hifz. In his interview he both rejected and affirmed at different times the possibility that the negative effect of his relationship to his family and Hifz might have contributed to using substances as a way to cope. Whereas he had stopped using most other drugs by the time the interview was conducted, he was still actively consuming alcohol and felt this was something he was trying to change but had developed a dependency for. The literature discussed in the review explored how accessible and popular substance use had become, and some reasons given were specifically around feelings of shame and guilt as well as consistent feelings of depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation. Whereas substance use and intoxication is seen as sinful in Islam, it may be better suited to understand Imran's substance use not simply from the lens of morality, but one of empathy and context, seeing his behaviors as seeking comfort from a deeper sense of pain and struggle that he may not have had the ability to recognize or deal with in a healthier way. When shame closes the doors to the self and to a supportive environment, what safety exists to ask for help? Help-seeking behaviors making way for substance use begin to make much more sense in this light. The incredible expectations of being the model Muslim as a Hafiz may begin to further alienate such individuals from feeling

they are able to be flawed as well as make good, healthy, and reparative decisions. The concept of *Tawba* (repentance) is an incredibly important one in Islam and it assumes an intimate relationship with God, recognizing the flawed nature of human beings and an ability to constantly turn back to Him in any given situation. Is it possible that when important psychological variables such as hope, self-compassion, and environmental facilitation through positive and healthy relationships with teachers and parents is missing, that this important spiritual capacity of “turning back to God” develops obstacles to its growth?

Overall, the stories of the participants of this study were both refreshing and shocking in equal measure. As a participant in the Muslim community, some of the more extreme experiences of physical and emotional abuse were not new to me, but the opportunity to sit with these experiences allowed for them to be given proper context and placed meaningfully within a personal narrative with an opportunity to breathe. With the lack of literature on the Muslim community, this dissertation will hopefully add to the conversation regarding the state of Muslim youth in America and the challenges and virtues of cultural mixing, as well as open us to think more critically about the reasons and methods of using certain methods of pedagogy to develop the next generation of Muslim-Americans. The least surprising component of this research was the relative academic success that all the participants seemed to have been enjoying at the time of the interviews. Literature from countries such as Malaysia and Pakistan consistently show a positive correlation to high performance on cognitive and memory-based tasks and Hifz and as such, to see these participants flourishing and on their way to becoming medical doctors was unsurprising, even consolidating in many ways the stereotype and humorous commentary around medicine as the only appropriate choice of profession in the eyes of Muslim parents. The most surprising piece of insight was definitely the depth of appreciation expressed by all four

participants for their teachers. Despite positive or negative experiences, all four participants expressed deep respect and for Imran even love for his teachers. What makes something traumatic or not is often the combination of both the very real experiences as well as the myriad ways in which an experience is perceived and according to Imran, he did not feel his experiences of physical and emotional abuse to be traumatic in any obvious way and requires of me to reconcile my own understandings of who gets to define what trauma is or looks like. At the same time, further research on this topic would help to better understand this phenomenon and ways in which the aims of these possibly destructive pedagogical tools are being met.

Limitations

This dissertation, being qualitative in nature, was limited by a small sample of 4 participants. As a result, the information gleaned from this research is difficult to generalize to the wider phenomenon of Hifz in America. Whereas it may provide a snapshot of individual experiences and provide some themes for future research, the participants all resided for a majority of their life in the city of Chicago. Each participant was also the oldest child in their family, which was coincidental and may have contributed in many ways to how they viewed themselves and concepts such as responsibility and family dynamics. Future research would do well to find a larger sample size that explores the dynamics of siblingship, family sizes, and only child dynamics on the phenomenon of Hifz. Three of the four participants were men and even though Layla provided exposition on her experiences as a woman, the other three did not overtly comment much on their status as men or the role that masculinity or manhood specifically played while being and becoming Huffaz. This may be due to the overwhelming number of male Huffaz and as such adds to the default assumption of the male experience as simply part and parcel of being a Hafiz, whereas being a woman was considered exceptional and adjacent to their

experience. Future research would explore further by focusing in on gender as an area of exploration and specification in the inquiries with both men and women and asking participants to directly comment on the phenomenon.

Another limitation was one of representation of ethnicity and race. Layla, towards the end of her interview, brought up an important point regarding the common phenomenon of Black Muslims being erased from the image of the Muslim American experience and emphasized to the interviewer the importance of including a Black Muslim in this study. Due to the researcher's own limitations in mostly having access to South Asian and Arab communities within Chicago, and no Black identified participants responding to the research flyer, none of the participants who came forward to be interviewed were of that community. Future research should focus on the experience of Black Muslim Huffaz and the unique intersection of their racial, ethnic, and religious identities. This dissertation focused on self-report and interviews as the primary mode of data gathering and future research on Hifz should include multiple interviews across time to increase depth.

Future Directions for Research

Other directions of research could include observations of Huffaz in the process of their education and interviews with family members to incorporate multiple perspectives in exploring themes of agency, intergenerational influences on why an individual becomes a Hafiz, and the impact of culture. As mentioned previously, the demographics of the participants in this study were overwhelmingly male, and mostly grew up in the city of Chicago. Whereas each participant discussed their experiences and relationships to their family and parents specifically, future research should explore the other side of the dynamic, focusing specifically on the perspective and experience of parents in the lives of Huffaz. All four of the participants discussed the

important role that their parents played in either supporting their decision to become Huffaz or forcing them to do so. Considering that Siraj and Imran may not have become Huffaz were their parents not so inclined to push them in that direction, understanding the motivations that parents have in desiring their children to become Huffaz would provide further context to this phenomenon of interest. It would be oversimplistic to reduce such a phenomenon to simply one's primary attachment figures, but it is important to seek further data around the subjectivities of parent's in molding their children, in their perception, as well as the perceptions that those in pedagogical roles hold such as scholars, teachers, religious leaders, and Hifz educators. Surveys could be conducted as well as in depth interviews to view the process of the Hifz teacher in order to explore the participation of their role in the facilitation of the Hafiz as a product of the Islamic educational system, but also a series of psychological and interpersonal exchanges.

As mentioned in the literature review, Muslim parents may often emphasize the importance of maintaining certain religious, culturally influenced or otherwise, values in their children. Siraj and Imran's stories emphasize the very embedded nature of how an apparent religiosity within the family and inflexible expectations can impact a developing Muslim child. His story explores the nature of drug use and a potential relationship to violence and abuse, and the embeddedness of drug use as socially influenced as well as the way hierarchies, even within a religious institution, can foster silence, obedience, and secrets that creates distance between parent and child. Imran's relationship to his father was tenuous at best, highlighting the way in which the image of the parent can often overlap with image one has of God. Imran grew up in a financially stable home and with access to good schools meanwhile Siraj grew up in a financially constrained home with a father who, according to Siraj, made bad financial decisions that made life more difficult than it had to be. The process of doing Hifz overlapped with other broader

decisions made by parents regarding finances, where to live, broader community association, and the kinds of schools, public and mainstream versus private and Islamic, that their children would attend. Further research examining the decisions and motivations behind the parents of Huffaz would allow for more data around this unique generational challenge of raising young Muslims who continue to struggle with faith, culture, and nation of origin.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

The purpose of this dissertation was to shed light on a phenomenon that has become highly prevalent in circles of Muslim communities yet has not been given enough of a critical review from a developmental perspective as well as a spiritual one. The stories in the research presented gave exposition that will hopefully inspire others as well as provide a stark reminder of the ways in which systems and parents can fail the very people they are originally created for. Some of the participants reflections will help us to think positively of institutions, parents, and children who have come through the crucible of Hifz to accomplish both worldly success in the form of academics but also identified with a strong spiritual and religious ethic, as is the goal of religious education. Other stories give us the ways in which family and institutions become entrenched in following the letter of the law and losing the spirit in it. In every city and institution we can find a Layla and Nabil that show us how a well-organized and compassionate stance can create students who resonate and feel harmonized with their faith and the responsibilities of Hifz. We will also find an Imran and Siraj who have been betrayed in many ways and left to pick up the pieces and figure it all out for themselves through multiple attempts at reaching out to God, but with obstacles put in their way; an almost Sisyphean task handed to them.

One of the fears in highlighting this research is that it will be seen as a deliberate attempt to malign the already fragile reputation of Muslims in America. Violent, aggressive, repressed, and backwards? X marks the spot. Despite this fear, the intention of this research is to articulate the complexities that exist in how people see themselves. In doing so, it is hoped that the Muslim community can reflect for itself what such stories may tell us; the ways in which we are achieving the goals of cultural integration and institutional development and the ways in which

we may be falling short. Stereotypes and negative news around very real transgressions of abuse exist in many educational institutions and Islamic ones are not immune from this. In the past Chicago, the city where all four of the participants reside, as well as many other cities in the United States, there have been a handful of accusations and criminal cases opened exploring potential abuse that has occurred in seminaries, ranging from teasing and bullying, to financial, spiritual and sexual abuse (Houde, 2016). In light of a desire to see justice and prevent such incidents from occurring in the future, publications such as *In Shaykh's Clothing* and organizations such as The Hurma Project have produced literature, reflections, research, and conferences discussing the topic of spiritual abuse and the misuse of religious authority.

The role of psychosocial research has always been to feel the pulse of the community. The Muslim community in the United States is vast, diverse, and growing at much faster rates than ever before. It is paramount that as this community grows, social scientists grounded within the Islamic tradition continue to feel the pulse of the community and mirror back both the strengths as well as its areas for growth. As stated in the introduction of this dissertation, the perspective brought to this research is one grounded in spiritual presuppositions that scaffold the stories presented. These presuppositions are the ethical code of Islam, the worldview inherent in the Qur'an, and the example of the Prophet Muhammad. Shaikh Mikael Ahmed Smith in his book *With the Heart in Mind* discusses the role of emotional intelligence within Islam. He begins the second chapter of his book with an authenticated oral tradition of the Prophet Muhammad, "He who mixes with the people and is patient with them is better than the one who avoids the people and doesn't have patience with them" (Smith, 2019, p. 78). This statement intimates that the religion is a communal one and thus requires of us both deep and personal introspection

while recognizing that the manifestation of our Godliness is not in turning away from the community, but through empathy and witnessing, being one with it.

Human interaction is amazingly complex, as we all play multiple roles in the lives of those around us. We are fathers and mothers, brothers and sisters, and sons and daughters at the same time. One's inability to live up to the responsibilities that come with these various roles deeply affects the greater society. Young children without righteous caregivers as role models threaten the fabric of our collective moral codes. Fruitful and positive interaction is dependent upon emotional understanding. (Smith, 2019, p. 95)

Husayn ibn 'Ali, the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad states in an authenticated transmission,

I asked my father about the gatherings of the Messenger of Allah. He said, "The Messenger of Allah would not stand or sit except with the remembrance of Allah. When he would go to a people, he would sit wherever there was space available, and he would order others to do the same. He would give every attendee his due portion of attention, to such an extent that every attendee would think that there was no one more noble in the sight of the Prophet than himself." (Smith, 2019, p. 56)

The stories presented in this dissertation are an attempt to manifest this prophetic virtue of witnessing, paying attention to, and listening to members of the burgeoning young Muslim community through a lens of empathy, critical dialogue, and a shared commitment to communal growth. This level of prophetic care and concern requires intense scrutiny to the needs, states, and stations of the people that make up the community. Religious scholarship points us in the direction we need to go meanwhile social scientists can tell us where we currently are, whether through story or statistics. Each participant highlights a unique element of the rich diversity that

exists within this community and with the potential of more qualitative research, such stories can act as reminders of how far we have come and how far we still have to go.

In keeping with the theological and spiritual foundations of this research, I pray that this dissertation benefits the academic and broader community, and that it may inspire further research into this topic as well as highlight the need and desire for further curiosity into the lives of young Muslims in America. I end with a quote from the Islamic scholar, theologian, and spiritual master Rumi,

“Everyone has become my friend in accordance with his own opinion. He has not sought out my mysteries from within me” (Chittick, 1984, p. 13).

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