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# Identity choice of Somali College Students

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**Identity Choice of Somali College Students**

by

Faisal Hayow

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

St. Cloud State University

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree

Master of Arts in

English: Teaching English as a Second Language

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### **Abstract**

Somali youth in the U.S. are introduced to a culture of racial division and an array of identity choices, and whatever trajectory they take will eventually be determinant of their language development. Race is a very key aspect to my research in discovering the effects of race and identity in the perceived development of immigrant English language learners in the school systems in America. Identity is potentially one of the most important factors in development of the learner's motivation to excel in college. My research questions are the following: How are Somali college students molded into an ethnolinguistic category? How does the choice of their identity affect their perceived academic achievement in colleges/universities? What invokes Somali College students to black culture?

My participants were from Somalia, an East African country. The Somali participants I chose for the study were all immigrant males whose ages ranged from 18-34yrs and all were enrolled in college or university for a minimum of one semester. It was crucial that each participant have been in the U.S. a minimum of two years or more. This assumed that each participant had spent enough time in the U.S. to begin adjusting to the culture and, therefore, has had ample time for formation of identity. My study reaffirmed that attitudes of Somali nationalism were prevalent and ultimately held true to be a central component of Somali identity amongst those immigrants to America. Phenotypical divisions based on race did not have much meaning or significance to Somali immigrants. Rather, Somalis were found to be very ethnocentric and most could not relate to divisions between White or Black. . Because of their identity some felt their resources and networks were limited as a direct result of their identity. Phenotypical divisions based on race did not have much meaning or significance to Somali immigrants.

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## Chapter I: Introduction

### Problem Statement

Somali youth in the U.S. are introduced to a culture of racial division and an array of identity choices, and whatever trajectory they take will eventually be determinant of their language development. Somalia is a country located in the horn of Africa with an estimated population of 10 million. The earliest Somalis to arrive in the U.S. were sailors in the 1920s and by the 1960s some Somalis entered the country with scholarships on student visas. From the 1980s to the 1990s refugees began being admitted to the U.S. mainly in states like Washington D.C., California, Georgia, and Michigan. However, after 1991 a civil war broke out that led to the ousting of then president Mohammed Siad Barre, which led to the displacement of 45% of the population. Some reports by the U.N. have mentioned that in 1992 tribal clan fighting caused civil unrest and with that came the scarcity of food, and between 1991-1992 30,000 Somalis died of famine and starvation (Briton Putman & Cabdi Noor, 1993). An article by the *Star Tribune* titled, "New census data: Minnesota Somali population grows" mentions that the Somali immigrant population in Minnesota is still the largest in the United States. Last year's population (2010) number was 27,000 Somalis based on an American Community Survey while the next year's (2011) number was 32,000 Somalis with some estimations taking the number as high as 36,000 with a low end of 29,000 Somalis. Somali immigrants are younger than the median population of the state which is 37 years of age, a decade older than the median of 24 years or younger for the Somali immigrant population (Williams, 2011).

Somalis are a very homogeneous ethnic group with 99% of Somalis being Sunni Muslim and yet the most dividing and contentious issue among them is lineage and tribal affiliations. As regards the length of stay in the U.S., 78% of Somali immigrants have been in the U.S. for 0-5 years and this was taken from the census from the years 2000-2014, indicating the influx of Somalis to Minnesota and the U.S. even as recent as 2009. Similarly, the data regarding their economic status show that 62%

of Somalis are below the poverty level and that 46% do not possess a high school diploma. Such data is indicative of the economic disadvantage that the Somali diaspora live in.

The educational situation/background of the Somali immigrants' is worth noting in Minnesota. According to "New Immigrants in Minnesota: The Somali Immigration and Assimilation," Darboe (2003) speaks about the issues faced by Somali immigrants in assimilating to Minnesota. One of the many factors that hinder or become obstacles to the ease of assimilation for the Somalis is the critical social factor: education. Statistics show that the Somali immigrant population has shown growth in student enrollment from 1,409 in 1997-1998 to 5,123 in the years 2001-2002. In Minneapolis, Roosevelt High school has the largest Somali student population in the entire state. Likewise, according to data among the minority groups in the Minneapolis school district, Somalis have a 12.6% dropout rate just only behind the Hmong students and above the Spanish speaking students. Somali immigrant students also surpassed their counterparts from the Hmong and Spanish student groups in reading scores with Somalis at a 58% comprehension level with Hmong students trailing behind at 47%. Darboe (2003) also mentions that spatial assimilation is a problem whereby Somali immigrants, due to the language deficiency, are made to live with their ethnic people. This affects their education, as the older immigrant population moves out to the suburbs and enroll their kids to schools in the suburbs, the quality of education is enhanced. For instance, schools in Eden Prairie provide better education than in the inner city and chances for future employment are also improved for students graduating from schools in the suburbs (Dabore, 2016, p. 464).

Religion plays a central role in the formation of the culture, values, and norms of the Somali immigrant population. Being unaware of how dominant of a role religion plays in the lives of Somali immigrants allows educators and Whites to be oblivious to the clash of civilizations occurring for this particular immigrant population. According to Islamic teaching, Somalis believe in the importance of charity, reverence to parents and of more importance the mother, who in prophetic tradition the prophet Muahammed<sup>1</sup> is attributed with the saying, "the path to the heavens lies between your mother's feet". In

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<sup>1</sup> This narration is falsely attributed to the messenger; it is considered a fabricated statement.



Somali culture no matter the age of the children; the mother is to be viewed as the nurturer and the consultant for her children. Somali culture is unlike Western culture; when the children reach the age of 18 or older, they gain autonomy from their parents. As part of the religious culture Somalis respect their elders and address them with honorifics such as uncle or aunt (Farid & McMahan, 2004, p. 2). From my own personal account, religion is a core part of Somali identity to such an extent that being Muslim and Somali are synonymous. It is not all too common for younger children to see Muslims of white skin whether Middle Eastern, Asian or European as non-Muslims because of the strong association between being Muslim and Somali: one being an indicator of the other in a one to one relationship. Likewise, Somali parents have a strong pride and responsibility in assuring that their children memorize the Quran (the holy book of Islam) which is in Arabic, and therefore demands that many children at a young age learn the Arabic language. Parents take their kids to a Duqsi, the equivalent of a weekend religious studies school. Many Somali families are judged on their devotion to Allah and religiosity. If drug use and other forms of liberalness are seen, many are shunned or excommunicated from the community.

Somali immigrants also face stress in societal areas such as housing, financing, and isolation. Due to the financial strains and burdens faced by many in the Somali immigrant community; they are left with no option but to live in Minneapolis in low-income apartments. This affects the education opportunities the school children have. Yet, the benefits of living in the inner-city include what is mentioned by Farid and McMahan (2004), "Mostly, Somalis move to these neighborhoods for social activity, availability of religious services, and for the social support of the larger Somali community." As a child to Somali immigrants to America we tend to follow the same course as many in the Somali diaspora living in low-income housing or living on a government subsidized housing voucher section 8 as its commonly known. Many Somalis tend to support other family members and you have people living in numbers exceeding the occupancy limit.

Despite the many obstacles, Somali parents value education for their children and as is said in a famous Somali proverb, "*Aqoon la'aani wa iftiin la'aan*" (Being without knowledge is being without light) (Koch, 2007, p. 1). Parents, however, are unable to comprehend the teachers due to the language barrier as

Altioolppa-Niitamo (2004) mentions, “The parents of the students at the Forest Hill showed their interest by coming to the school sometimes humble and disoriented..... Immigrant parents often perceive their children’s formal education as the only pathway to social mobility...” (p. 86). Rather many Somali’s families are disrupted, with parents of low educational background who are left unemployed or underemployed and who are unable to assist their children with homework or in any academic fashion. Despite the lack of educational support, the positive influence and the strong support they receive from parents is very powerful. Many Somali children receive strong encouragement from their parents to pursue their education. So, as result Somali children know how valuable education is to them but also to their parents as well. Education is strongly regarded with Somali families, often times a lack of education is seen in the eyes of the parents as a sole causer of corruption in a person’s morals and dignity.

The questions of race and identity in TESL are of growing significance in the field; hence the plethora of research on the topic of race (Ibrahim, 1999; Kubota & Lin, 2006; Taylor, 2006), identity (Liang, 2006; Marshal, 2010; Nero, 2005; Piller, 2002; Vanderick, 1997), and other structural issues (Kanno & Varghese, 2010) that affect the eventual literacy gains of ESL students.<sup>2</sup>

Ibrahim’s (1999) article is a critical ethnography examining a group of French speaking refugees who come to Ontario, Canada. They attend a Franco-Ontario high school and the refugee group is made to fit into an ethnolinguistic category by hegemonic forces making them speak *Black English*. The study explores how these refuge students are affected by the identity choices and educational forces predetermined to marginalize Blacks and those who adopt their style of speech. Taylor (2006) paper looks at a 30 immigrant ESL students enrolled in an anti-discrimination program designed to make students cognizant of racial and discriminatory experiences they’ve encountered. The research more generally argues that racial power dynamics are key to the development of identity formation for many immigrants. Kuboto and Lin (2006) introduce subjects of race, ethnicity,

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<sup>2</sup> The terms used to refer to such programs and students vary from LEP (Limited English Proficiency), or ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) ELL (English Language Learner) multilingual, and bilingual, etc.

racialization, critical race theory, and white studies into the field of TESOL. Nero (2005) discusses the morphing identity of ESL students and puts into questions the notation of *native speaker* along with the current second language acquisition pedagogy. Nero proposes a pedagogical theory that incorporates language identity, awareness, and development (LIAD) a means of dealing with the heterogeneous identities of ESL students. Vanderick (1997) discusses the importance of creating an ESL classroom that is safe without prejudices or hidden force limiting the successes of students. Vanderick pushes the idea of teachers being aware of *hidden* identities and the struggles people with such identities face like gays, or other oppressed minorities and to be able to openly present their identities without fear of persecution. Piller's (2002) research studies cross-cultural marriages and the percent of L2 speakers of English and German who say they gained high proficiency. The article challenges the commonly known cut off age for gaining native-like command of the L2. Rather, many could pass as natives in certain domains with certain audiences, which highlights the amazing nature of identity construction among learners of a second language. Liang (2006) discusses the sociolinguistic dilemma faced by Chinese learners called code-switching. The speaker is conflicted about whether to use his L1 and thus gain approval from compatriots or use his L2 and thus gain acceptance from the target language members. Such a paper guides the reader to understand the complexity of the identity resolution problems L2 learners face and the pressures from acquiring the native language and gaining acceptance amongst its speakers all whilst maintaining the bond between native L1 speakers. Marshall (2010) investigates the treatment of multilingual students at a university in British Columbia, Canada. The students experience processes coined by the author as *re-becoming ESL* it discusses the treatment of such students as a problem to fix. Many students are made to feel as if they were attending high school ESL classes with many of their academic courses being taught at an ESL level. Kanno and Varghese's (2010) article uses Bourdieu's cultural reproduction theory to explain that many immigrant ESL students are unsuccessful in 4 year colleges due to other factors

beyond language proficiency: Like structural constraints, limited resources, and tendencies of many to self-exclude from participation in colleges/universities.

Being of Somali descent, I found it to be a unique opportunity to explore the identity issues Somali immigrants in the college systems face and to also be a researcher, who also shares parallels with the subjects of the study in terms of the complexities of identity resolution and the stigmas behind race, native language, and the stereotypes of being Somali in Minnesota. As a first generation Somali American myself I struggled with many identity related issues. For instance, being away in the Middle East for most of my middle school years, upon returning to high school, I was placed in a ESL writing course which had me sitting in a classroom with other immigrant students, who unlike me were not born in the U.S.: some only having been in the country for 4 or 5 years. I found myself in a classroom with immigrant students when clearly I was an American. Also I struggled with making friends. I did not necessarily fit in with the whites at my high school nor did I fit in with the blacks or even the immigrant Somalis who I found the most affinity with due to their assuming me a Somali immigrant and thus welcoming me. Where do I fit? Who am I? These questions permeated my mind and I assume the mind of many Somali youth in America. Somalis are racially black but yet cultural Somali and religiously Muslim, and many are immigrants facing issues of discrimination, racism, and Islamophobia.

The problem statement is: Are Somali youth are pressured to be lumped into a specific racial category and not made to embrace their own culture and heritage, how do their choices of racial/cultural membership affect negatively or positively their eventually learning of the English language?

## Chapter II: Literature Review

The struggle of identity formation as it relates to English as a second language students and refugee immigrants in North America is an issue requiring a renewed vigor in addressing changes needed in teacher pedagogy and for the larger society. This includes institutions recognizing the multifaceted layers of identity that students have. Despite the many improvements in understanding the fluidity of identity and the change to a cosmopolitan America, the monolingual idea of English only is still manifest in public learning institutions (Kanno & Varghese, 2010, p. 312). Indeed, many students go through a liminal process when they are entered into learning institutions and thus, are made to instantly fit into homogenous ethnolinguistic categories assigned to them such as Somali, Hmong, or Asian, while totally ignoring the vastly different linguistic backgrounds (native in L1 or L2), level of literacy in their L1, and their individual experiences with English back in their native countries (Nero, 2005, p. 195). Not only are immigrants and English language learners in North America pigeon holed into a particular racial classification, yet paradoxically, they are also made to be excluded and disadvantaged from prestige dialects and from prestige culture and power positions. According to Ibrahim (1999), “For example to be black in a racially conscious society, like the Euro Canadian and U.S. societies, means that one is expected to be Black, act Black, and so be the marginalized other” (p. 353).

### **Race**

Race is a very key aspect to my research in discovering the effects of race and identity in the perceived development of immigrant English language learners in the school systems in America. Rather, race has become a power tool to silence and subjugate many from minority races like Blacks, Asians, and Mexicans. Race goes hand and hand with racism in America, where racism is now becoming a major topic of discussion in TESOL. Many researchers have adopted varying theories and hypotheses to account for racism in education. Ibrahim in his article, “Becoming black: Rap and hip-hop, race, gender, identity, and the politics of ESL learning,” takes a critical ethnographic approach in

which he examines the environment and socio-political circumstances that if ignored could bias his research. Race in the postcolonial era is a very powerful influencing factor in the development of the L2 amongst African immigrants to the U.S. and Canada. Ibrahim (1999) uses critical race theory in that African immigrants are confined to the social and racial boundaries pre-constructed by society, as he quotes terms like “*social imaginary*,” in his article to indicate such phenomena. This limits their subjectivities and conditions them to speak ‘*Black English*’ and thus be treated as Black and marginalized as black by the white audience. Taylor’s (2006) research on a 3-day innovative antidiscrimination leadership program is also going to be reviewed in this section. The paper takes into praxis many of the theories in TESOL pertaining to race and discrimination such as Critical Race Theory and White Studies and sheds more light on these theories in a more practical way.

Critical Race Theory, for instance is a theory which reexamines the relationship between, race, race ideas, and power. The principles of this theory revolve around racism as deeply ingrained phenomena in current day society, racism as a socially constructed concept, and racism as beneficial to the elite race (Kubota & Lin, 2006, p. 482).

Liggett (2014) using critical race theory (CRT) explores the interconnectivity of race and language learning. She relates three themes in the CRT framework that can be lucidly tied to Teaching English to Speaker of Other Languages (TESOL). Those three themes are acceptance of racism as an ordinary permanent fixture in life, effect of European colonialism, and the use of narrative storytelling to express experiences of oppression (p. 115).

The first theme is racism as being a normal natural way of life. Liggett (2014) describes this linguisticism as a routine everyday occurrence with learners of English, who often times experience discrimination due to accent or fluency issues that many English learners face. Liggett (2014) makes another strong case of her racism and linguisticism intersect especially in U.S. education policy. The case of, the No Child Left Behind policy is a poignant example of policies that promote English-Only teaching. This policy introduced by the Bush administration cut in half funding for bilingual education

programs. In addition, this policy does not require schools to have bilingual programs all at the same time mandating that English Language Learners (ELL's) take standardized tests in English in unison with native speakers. Liggett (2014) describes this discrepancy saying that,

linguicism is accepted as ordinary... effectively veiling racial discrimination... The elimination of first language maintenance along with English Language Learning in bilingual education plays out accurately for Spanish speakers from Mexico as they experience high levels of discrimination based on race, accent, and country of origin. (Valdes, 1996; Valenzuela, 1999)

The second major intersection between race and English language learning is being cognizant of European colonialism. How has colonialism and its spread contributed to linguistic bias and dominance, and what cultural interpretation can be used to better understand its effect on languages and peoples? It is vital to foreground the significance of European colonialism in spawning linguicism and the culture of "English Only" policies. For instance, at the head of the twentieth century, science was used to further dehumanize and marginalize non-European Americans. Some European scientists supposedly found correlations between head size and intelligence, thus proving the superior intelligence of European Americans over African Americans comparatively. Likewise, some scientists correlated English proficiency with cognitive abilities. In modern times this mentality of the European colonists is manifested racially and linguistically. Linguistically, due to the 'English Only' policies that have become symbolic of patriotism, nationalism, and character (Liggett, 2014, p. 117).

Liggett (2014) cites language policies as now being a continuation of colonialism whereby English is the dominant language and no accommodations for learning in a foreign language are tolerated in public schools, such as Proposition 227, which was a result of an "English Only" movement championed by supporters in California.

There is also White Studies, which examines white privilege and the colorblindness many privileged whites have. This privilege is seen to help maintain the status quo and keep in place policies

and structural limitations on the dominated races (Kubota & Lin, 2006, p. 483). Whiteness is an unspoken code whereby a person of color is not granted accesses to enter and the holders of the code are whites exclusively. However, the denial to access is not explicit for blacks; rather it is hidden under layers of complexities and political correctness. Part of the covert nature of White privilege is the difficulty in convincing active holders of such privilege to assist in ending this disproportionate power balance that is in favor of white dominance. McIntosh (1997) refers to white privilege as “an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, maps, passports, codebooks, visa, clothes, tools, and blank checks.” McIntosh (1997) compares white privilege to male privilege both are forms of privilege that disadvantage their counterparts. White privilege is systematic and amounts to unearned power. McIntosh describes this systematic processes of white privilege as one designed to overpower minority cultures. When describing the man culture and the affordances they enjoy she writes, “In proportion as my racial group was being made confident, comfortable, and oblivious other groups were likely being made unconfident, uncomfortable and alienated. Whiteness protected me from many kinds of hostility, distress, and violence....” Rather, white privilege is increasingly harder to combat when whites are moving to a sentiment known as zero-sum game, whereby if one group is receiving special care another is necessarily being neglected. In this case whites are feeling that racial equality is leading to an anti-white culture, which diminishes white dominance (Norton & Sommers, 2011, p. 215).

In a school in Ontario, Canada, white administrators of a diverse student population reflect on their roles as administrators: the work they undertake, the challenges of being cognizant of their own privilege as members of the dominant culture, and the power afforded them as such. This coupled with the de facto norm of schools who promote the dominant white culture and who create the ‘other’ category or space for the minority group by alienating and limiting accesses to opportunities. In their reflections they account for instances where their Whiteness privileged them. At the early stages of their upbringing, some described socio-economic advantages like in the case of Debbie (pseudonym),



who reflects, “I lived out my childhood in a suburban community in a five-bedroom house in an area that was predominantly Jewish and upwardly mobile. I was not aware of the privilege growing up because many of the people I interacted with always seemed to have more than I did” (Donsky & Champion, 2015, p. 242).

Matt the school principal of the k-8 school in his reflections echoed the same sentiments: “It was at this time I became aware of my White privilege I was teaching in a school where many of the parents were new immigrants. I was well known, my family was close by to offer support working in a school system that I had known since kindergarten” (Donsky & Champion, 2015, p. 243).

In another incident an administrator displays prejudice towards the new teacher requesting from the principal to ‘check on him.’ The principal later confronted the administrator (secretary) saying, “I returned to the office and talked to the secretary about bias, and how we judge people based on their appearance, stereotypes perpetuated in the media” (Donsky & Champion, 2015, p. 243).

White privilege is most ostensible in the online advertisements posted for jobs in the English Language Teaching profession (ELT). In a study conducted by Rucker and Ives (2014) analyzed 59 websites advertising ELT jobs, a web-based corpus was designed to section the websites’ content based on four topoi: teacher qualifications, benefits, work environment, and country description. Out of all the websites analyzed 81% had the native speaker (NS) requirement (Rucker& Ives, 2014, p. 741). In some websites this requirement was explicitly mentioned: “We do not accept applications from non-native speakers and those not resident in Japan.”

Likewise, 85% required qualifications from an accredited university in one of the inner circle countries: U.S., Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa. These countries are all predominantly white, and these countries accommodate the first aforementioned requirement that the applicant is a NS. While the data showed only 17% of the sites analyzed required experience from the applicant.

In 2016, TESOL released a statement pronouncing, “TESOL strongly opposes discrimination against non-native English speakers in the field of English language teaching. Rather, English language proficiency, teaching experience, and professionalism should be assessed along a continuum of professional preparation” (Rucker & Ives, 2014, p. 737).

Rucker and Ives’ study unmistakably corroborates that White privilege is a real concept and can be even perceived by the actions of countries like Korea and the Gulf countries generally. They emphasize or impress upon applicants that in order to apply you must be white. This is conveyed implicitly through images on websites portraying white teachers visiting an exotic country and teaching beautiful young children, or explicitly by requiring applicants to be from the inner circle countries. All of this bespeaks that if you are White you are automatically given employment in the ELT profession, with higher pay than non-native speaker counterparts regardless of experience and along with that lower expectations than those applying from India (a predominantly English speaking country). This is just an example of one of many forms of White privilege, yet the sad fact is only Whites are the ones able to change the discourse, by speaking out against such inequalities.

For ESL, in a case study conducted by Taylor (2006) initiated a summer camp in 2000 known in Canada as an “ESL Equity Leadership camp,” also known as the “ESL Antiracism Camps” (p. 526). This study focused on radicalized power dynamics and its interplay with social identity through ESL. The camps were designed to help students better understand the complexity of their identities and it also gave insight to the perceptions of race, power, and discrimination from the point of view of the students. This also shed light on the race education of the institutions that these students hail from (p. 539). Taylor (2006) says, “Within this analysis, discourses of racisms and linguicism do not spark random acts of xenophobia; rather they are central to the very processes, to the very terms of belonging and legitimacy by which ESL students struggle to construct their social identities as credible speakers of English” (p. 536). Race has been studied using ever growing innovative methodologies, including what Ibrahim (1999) has done called “ethnography of performance,” which assumes that

students are players in society and that each individual plays their role in expressing their identity, race, and subjectivities. The study examines a group of African immigrants enrolled in a French speaking school of Ontario, Canada, and it studies the ways in which they act out their race affiliations through hip-hop culture and other forms of expression. The African students involved in the ethnographic study were mainly from, Somali, Ethiopia, and Senegal. The socially constructed society we live in influences many African immigrants to align themselves with those groups that are most similar to them in terms of plight, skin color, and socioeconomic status. Actually, Ibrahim (1999) gives examples of student interviews where African immigrant youth displayed linguistic proof of their association with black culture especially rap; the following is an excerpt from an interview with one of the students:

Yo, this is Shapir. I am trying to say peace to all my Niggers, all my bitches from a background that everybody in the house. So, yo, chi lout and this is how we gonna kick it. Bye and with that pie. All right, peace yo.

The above excerpt just highlights that students are using the variety of English common to members of the hip-hop community, which only solidifies the notation that African youths are pressured by society into fitting into a predetermined ethnon linguistic and racial classification. One of the students in the research study explains that she had no choice upon coming to Canada but to associate with black culture. Due to the lack of access to actually black members of society many African youths are forced to take knowledge from the T.V. and from music and more specifically hip-hop. The student, who felt she had to associate with black culture, ended up giving a biological explanation as follows below (p. 361):

We identify ourselves more with the Blacks of America. But, this is normal, this is genetic. We can't, since we live in Canada, we can't identify ourselves with Whites or country music, you know [laughs]. We are going to identify ourselves on the contrary with people of our color, who have our lifestyle, you know. (group interview, French)

Overall, the article sheds light on the significance of knowing the power that language and race place in learning and literacy. If students aren't recognized for their different linguistic domains and if hip-hop culture isn't instrumental in the curriculum as a form of expression for minority groups then hegemonic forces take play and many from the Black community will be undermined and the road to literacy will be challenging (Ibrahim, 1999, p. 366). In Wolfe (2011), racism is seen as covert and hidden, but yet still powerful and impactful in the lives of many minority and immigrant students. The term "microaggression" is used to explain the subtle form of racism committed by teachers and institutions that solidify the marginalization of minority students. This case study is centered around the use of "microtransformations," which are ways in which minority and Black students negotiate their subjectivities, meaning their deconstructed sense of self. Identity is viewed as every changing and it is molded and shaped by history, context, language and relationships. Microtransformations are ways in which White teachers can change racist trajectories in the classroom setting by having White teachers who are critically aware of race issues and who implement anti-race curricula. This changes the power dynamics in the classroom along with empowering the student giving him/her more resources allowing for more agency and allowing students to transform racialized subjectivities. (p. 79) The subjectivities of the minority student are shaped by perceptions of who they are based on their ethnic background. Wolf (2011) states regarding this, "In other words, in order to participate in the educational institution, students of color must often come to see themselves as powerless, or diseased." Despite the massive microaggressions that minority students face, especially that of ESL, there still is hope in providing a positive space for "microtransformations," which are small instances of change in the interaction between native White dominant culture instructors and the minority student. And to possibly engage minority students to create a different discourse. This discourse as is mentioned by Wolfe (2011) disrupts the status quo and encourages critical discourse (p. 80). The study by Wolfe (2011) is a case study in which two students are evaluated through a complete semester. The school is dominantly Latino (62%) and it is an inner city school with very few White students. The

study examines an ESL literature class and the micro-transformational processes that occur. The ESL class has a literature theme called “reading deeper,” which pushes students to look for larger themes and implied meanings, or in other words to identify biases against minorities through examining literature film, and media. One of the minority students named Roberto is challenged to participate as he questions the purpose of the theme. Mrs. Halliday (Roberto’s classroom teacher) displays an instance of micro-transformation as the student goes from being non-engaging in classroom discussions to more engaging and vibrant. The idea of this is that Mrs. Halliday helped to explain that she had dispelled the misconceptions regarding Mexicans which in turn provided Roberto the confidence and comfort to be able to contribute in the classroom or in some way find his voice (p. 87).

Mosley (2010) describes a case study exploring a University student named Kelly (pseudonym) majoring in Education and Psychology and how critical race literacy applies to student and teacher interactions in the shaping of racist or antiracist constructs. The study highlights through observations of Kelly’s interactions when tutoring for literacy and or other involvements like Book Club where students are made to read books individually and then in groups extend the storyline or the theme of the book. Through these interactions a number of interesting concepts come to light. One of Kelly’s students reads a book and the character is identified by the student as Chinese instead of Chinese American, whereby the student due to stereotypes assumes that all Asian featured peoples are Chinese (p. 461). It is important to have teachers actively addresses race issues so as to instill confidence in the students and to encourage forward thinking. However, as Mosley (2010) mentions race issues are usually swept under the rug by predominantly White teachers, as some are influenced by peers to maintain the silence. Mosley (2010) writes, “Talk with peers may lead pre-service teachers’ comfort addressing race in their own classrooms.” Therefore, the case study found that many teachers are reluctant to addresses race issues and as Kelly mentions in her journal reflections she deems herself as a “passive antiracist.” She brought the term in reference to her lack of involvement when babysitting a child who said, “the black kid broke my doll” (p. 464). Race issues are important

to be addressed in student curriculum and to invite multiculturalism as it evidently all leads back to literacy development or the lack thereof.

Ajayi (2011) describes the importance of understanding teacher backgrounds and the influence that has on students and their own teacher pedagogy. The study interviews 57 teachers from the inner city of Los Angeles. The interviews reveal that teachers coming from varying backgrounds have different experiences; as a result, their teaching is reflective of their perspectives. For instance, African American teachers tend to look at teaching from the perspective of past to present, meaning they are concerned with dealing with the social inequalities. Below is an excerpt from an interview conducted with one of the African American teachers:

I grew up in a neighborhood where I worked and I saw how the system was failing these students. I want to offer these students the same opportunity as other students in other neighborhoods. They deserve to learn and be exposed to the same things as students from other affluent communities.

However, their White counterparts were driven by the difference between their culture and that of their students and as such White teachers wanted to establish connections with their students and gain a deeper understanding of their situation. The following is an excerpt from of the White teachers:

I grew up in a very different/opposite situation than my students. I try to appreciate, value and learn from their cultures. I feel I can add a different perspective to the students.... I am young, speak Spanish and I make them feel at ease with me.

Clearly the two teachers differ in their approaches, but the beauty of such interviews is the ability to better understand teaching as a profession, to understand the driving force behind pedagogy and to also understand certain teacher student dynamics and relationships (Ajayi, 2011, p. 271). As such Lee (2014) describes the notion of doing race, which implies that race is not a rigid identity or culturally fixed in society, but rather people constantly preform race. That is people are in charge of how they

deal with each other and whether or not they perpetuate racism or whether they free each other of the burdens of racism. Teachers are agents of racism knowingly or unknowingly as Lee mentions,

Race is a worldwide system of social interactions involving everyone... race doesn't require racism. Even people without racist thoughts or feelings will participate in the processes of doing race just by being part of a society that is organized according to race. Understanding race as a system of everyday practices in which we are all implicated allows insight into how our own actions might inadvertently reinforce practices of institutions that perpetuate racial inequality.

This quote requires thought into how our actions as teachers and educators can benefit or harm the literacy development of our students, especially those minority students and international students from around the world.

It is very important when discussing the identity of a Somali immigrant in the educational setting to discuss race and perceived learning. Race is important as it relates to education and employment in a racial stratified American society. The educational gap between Blacks and Whites has been documented by the National Assessment of Educational Progress report. Black students in the 12<sup>th</sup> grade scored 30 points behind whites. Moreover, Somali immigrants are racially considered black and as such are expected to underachieve in educational settings. However, Somalis have a strong sense of their ethnic identity and national identity as Africans and try to separate themselves from non-immigrant American blacks (Bigelow, 2008, p. 29). Upon arriving to the U.S. Somali immigrants are immediately placed into the racial category black, stripping them of their ethnicity and aligning them with the struggle of the black people in America, who face institutional discrimination, racism, as well as financial inequalities. Lee, Madyuma, Lam, and Jumale (2014) write discussing this issue, "Somali immigrant students may be expected to adopt low school performance as a form of adaptation to their perception of the opportunity structure... Somali immigrants are often assigned the stigmatized racial category" (Lee et al., 2014, p. 126).

Lee et al. (2014) examine the application of Fordham and Ogbu's dissertation about the Somali immigrant population in America titled "The burden of Acting White." This paper is centered around the phenomenon known as "acting white." This concept refers to the idea of academic excellence and academic superiority as privileges awarded to whites only thus excluding blacks from attaining academic successes due to this presumption that academics is reserved for whites and that economic mobility is for whites exclusively. Rather, those black students who excel in academics are seen as "acting white." Some black students in America conceal their academic achievements, which explains the title of Fordham and Ogbu's study, "The Burden of Acting White." However, in their current study, Lee and others try to examine if this phenomenon of acting white exists among Somali immigrant students. In order to figure if this phenomenon of acting white exists among the Somali immigrant community, along with its manifestations that include: peer pressure on high achieving students and social isolation in school settings.

The study took a sample of 47 out of 120 nine to twelfth graders, enrolled in Baro school (pseudonym). The quantitative aspect was to create a social network among the 47 who shared an extracurricular activity. This was achieved by administrating a survey asking them to list their closest peers within the group. From that group, a follow-up interview was conducted with 8 of the 47 participants. This part of the paper was the qualitative analysis component of the study. The follow-up interviews helped to further understand the social networks, at the micro-level by looking closer at school experience and immigrant experience. Along with breaking apart the school characteristics as well as social interactions to answer the question: does the phenomenon of acting white exist among Somali immigrant students? The subgroup of eight students were divided into three groups based on academic achievement and size of social networks. Some interesting findings were discovered, despite limitations of the study. There was no evidence found linking academic achievement and the size of social networks (Lee et al., 2014, p. 149). In other words, out of the subgroup of eight, no real differences were found between high academic achievers in terms of peer ties. Rather, high academic



achievers had a slightly higher number of social ties. Likewise, Lee et al. (2014) in designing the social network analysis graph (SNA) of the 47 students classified peer ties into out-degree and in-degree (in-degree refers to the number of incoming ties coming from peers in the network indicating popularity. Out-group refers to out-going ties meaning choosing ties or friends). High achieving student had higher out-degree ties than the low and middle achieving students. This indicates not only is there no difference between high and low achievers in the number of social ties, but high achievers perceive themselves as having more friends than low and middle achievers (p. 138). This is echoed in one of the follow-up interviews conducted by Lee et al. (2014) mentioned below:

Interviewer1: Do you think high achieving students are popular?

Students21: (Low achiever): You could say that.

Interviewer1: How So?

Student21: Everybody knows they're smart.... I think people want to be like [them]

Interviewer1: Why do people [students] want to be like them?

Student21: They know the results [of] that person who is educated and has a successful future (pp. 138-139)

The study had its limitations, which included a lack of racial diversity at the particular school site and the lack of generalizability due to the sample size, one school. In Fordham and Ogbu's study, the phenomenon of acting white occurred in a racially diverse schools, unlike Baro a Afro-centric charter school with more representation of the Somali students populace in the institution, including principal and teacher positions. However, from the contributing factors that did not allow race to affect or discourage Somali students from achieving was also a strong ethnic identity. One of the students interviewed expressed this sentiment as he said, "My mom is a Somali and my dad is a Somali. They tell me good stories back when they were my age. They use to say that Somali was a good place and stuff like that" (Lee et al., 2014, p. 145).

Overall, this small case study did give a glimpse into the immigrant experience of Somali students and the meanings associated with academic achievement and how they form their identities.

Race in America differs from its pre-immigration days when blacks came as slaves. Race issues in North America have far exceeded the simple dichotomy of black and white. Race has become more complicated with the influx of African and dark skinned immigrants from Brazil or more broadly South America. In the United States and Canada racial stratification is along the lines of race or as described by Canadian society as either white or a visible minority. In the Canadian census from 2001 the term visible minority is described, “The 2001 census describes visible minority as defined by Employment Equity Act. The act defines visible minorities as ‘persons, other than aboriginal peoples who are non-Caucasian in race or non-white in color’” (Kusow, 2006, p. 539).

In the study titled, “Migration and Racial Formations among Somali Immigrants in North America”, Kusow (2006) conducts a case study on Somali immigrants from Canada in 1996 and a case study with two focus groups in America and the average age of all sampled participants ranged from 19 to 60. The males in the sample were 26 and females were 15. Out of the sample 83% graduated high school and 43% graduated college. However, 57% earned less than 10,000 Canadian dollars a year (Kusow, 2006, p. 537). From his analysis Kusow (2006) found themes from his qualitative research after analyzing the data. Some patterns emerged like pre-immigration experience of color-based race dynamics and encountering color-based racial categories (p. 538). It was very interesting to note the lack of awareness among Somali immigrants in the area of color-based racial divisions that existed in America. One participant said, when asked,

Author: in Somalia did you ever think about issues related to race or skin color?

Enow: No, it never occurred to me, I never even heard about the problems between blacks and whites...

Author: What do you think is the reason?

Enow: Because we didn't have anybody who white. All of us were 100% per cent of the same religion and colour. We never had anybody was superior or inferior in terms of colour. But if you think about ethnicity in terms of tribes we had that problem, but not colour. (Kusow, 2006, pp. 541-542)

In some interviews the participants cannot comprehend the notion of race, especially its use as a tool for stratifying society. The 32-year-old female when asked:

Author: How about issues of race?

Hubbrow: Back Home?

Author: Yeah

Hubbrow: [Hesitated]

Author: Remember in Canada, we think in terms of black and white

Hubbrow: Right, right, never heard of that word before....

It is quite obvious from these highlighted example interview responding Somalis, at least those interviewed, had very little understanding of race and race-based divisions. One of the simple explanations given was that Somalis are 100% black therefore, not having to deal with racial issues, rather dealt with ethnic or tribalistic forms of division (Kusow, 2006, p. 542).

The next logical question is how do Somalis deal or cope with the new norm in their host countries, respectively the U.S. and Canada. The reality is that race-based categories do not exist in Somalia and so what identity would they assume, black or white? The way in which Somalis deal with racial stratification is firstly recognizing the negative societal drawbacks. One respondent said,

Well, I am not a white person but when I watch T.V. like the Jenny Jones show and the like [laugh] they see blacks as dirty that do not work. Even if you look at the dictionary and examine the word black, it says dirty, ignorant, all the negative stuff... (Kusow, 2006, p. 543)

The above transcript reveals that not only does the respondent comprehend how society in North America categorizes him solely on skin color, rather the respondent knows the negative stigma

associated with being black. Indeed, this sentiment of the participant is echoed by some Somalis in Maine after the governor wrote an open letter saying, “Please pass the word. We have been overwhelmed and have responded valiantly. Now we need breathing room. Our city is maxed-out financially.” The Somali community felt alienated, saying as reported by the *New York Times*, “We think your letter is an attempt to agitate and incite local people...” Even prompting Maine’s Senator Angus S., Jr. to say, “I know Larry Raymond (governor of Maine) and he is not a racist. I would not have written that letter he wrote” (Belluck, 2002). Likewise, more recently presidential candidate Donald Trump in a campaign rally said, “So we’ve just seen many crimes getting worse all the time. And as Maine knows, a major destination for Somali refugees. Right? Am I right? [shouts and applause] Well they’re talking about it, Maine’s Somali refugees” (Thistle, 2016). Trump’s statements about Somali immigrants in Maine draw rebuke.

## **Identity**

Identity is potentially one of the most important factors in development of the learner’s motivation to excel in college. Many immigrants come to America and have to learn to speak a third, fourth other language. Languages form identities and realities for the speaker. A great example of this is in Hawaii, where ESL students from Micronesia, a region in the Pacific Ocean considered to be from the U.S. commonwealth, faced issues of identity. The students from these island regions were not welcomed and were discriminated against by a group of locals, Asians who migrated to the area in the plantation era. These locals labeled the islanders as FOB’s (Fresh-Off-the-Boats) and ridiculed them for not being aware of Hawaiian culture (Talmy, 2010, p. 41). Edwards (2009) says, “Any investigation of language that considers only language will be deficient” (p. 1). Therefore, language is not just a mode of communication; rather, it is symbolic and represents the culture and the identity of speaker. Identity issues are also faced in bilingual classrooms where students have to pick and choose the moments for using their L1 or L2. The impetus for one over the other is ingrained in the understanding of the complexities of one’s identity. Many students avoid using English in ESL

classrooms to avoid alienating themselves from their L1 communities. In a study of bilingual students from China attending a University in Canada a qualitative study that combined classroom observations and face-face interviews revealed the pressure for more advanced L2 speakers to conform to their less proficient counterparts as is evidenced from the transcript of a student below:

When you are in a class with many people from Taiwan and you speak English all the time, some people would consider that you are conceited and think your English is very strong. Then others would say “Stop showing off.”

Bigelow, Hansen, and Tarone (2009) investigated corrective feedback and recast with Somali immigrants, and in doing their research they provide very telling evidence of issues of identity and literacy. In an interview with one of the participants, a Somali adolescent was asked about their opinions regarding their teachers, school, and their own language proficiency, and they mentioned that they were falling in all their high school classes and blamed it on the fact that their native counterparts have been in school since childhood. In terms of identity Bigelow and others found that Somali immigrants had other ways of judging their identity and value which included their sense of pride regarding memorizing the Quran and that it was the biggest accomplishment in their lives.

Identity among Somali immigrants to the U.S., particularly Minnesota, is fluid and multifaceted. Rather, there is as Bigelow (2011) asserts hybridity of identity among the Somali diaspora, as evidenced from the texts of a few students she analyzes. Hybridity is a term referring to as Bigelow (2011) defines in her literature review, “Identities that strive to reconcile or blend cultural practices and viewpoints across different places and times are often termed, “hybrid” (p. 31).

In her analysis of the three texts, Bigelow (2011) extracts examples of the hybrid nature of identity among the Somali diaspora in the Twin Cities. The first text was an online discussion surrounding a Somali author named Nurrudin Farah, who came to promote a novel he wrote called *Knots*. The event was held at a bookstore called Chic and was attended by a hundred or so Somalis. The online discussion was conducted via a book review by a man named Abdirahman Aytne. The

discussion was about a comment a Mr. Farah made at the event, that Somali women should not be made to veil like Arab women. It caused an uproar online with many people criticizing Mr. Farah. Mohamed, one of the people who commented on the contentious statement by the author, expressed his contempt for the comments. He congratulated his fellow ethnic members in his post for sticking up for their religion. Mohamed used code switching and thus expressed his hybrid identity and to this Bigelow commented, “Muhammad’s use of code-switching suggests hybridity due to his use of multiple varieties of English, Somali, and text messaging vernacular” (Bigelow, 2011, p. 34).

From her analysis Bigelow makes a couple of important observations as relating to identity. She notices several factors that shape and form identity. Among those factors: internal tensions among members of an ethnic group, along with youth culture, pressures from institutions, societal norms, and prior migration history. Somali immigrants are often misunderstood being that they are phenotypically black: society tends to lump them as being from the African American racial category, without realizing heritage, ethnic background or culture. Bigelow states,

It would be interesting to know how Muhammad is read by others in the wider Minnesota society. Is he read as a young man who is becoming black, or adopting an identity in which he aligns himself to what he imagines is the black or African community? If so, Muhammad’s likely complex racial, religious, and ethnic identity may be masked by quick reads or assumptions on who he is or what his affiliations are. (Bigelow, 2011, p. 34)

Therefore, it is key as Bigelow (2011) points out to ask the educators in the U.S. school systems the question, what role does home language play in education?

Martha Bigelow, in her paper presented at a forum in 2007 titled “Somali Cultural Capital at School: The Case of a Somali Teenage Girl,” introduces the concept of cultural capital and social capital. These concepts are taken from sociology. Cultural capital refers to the non-economic advantages a person has, like education, skills, and other qualifications that can be turned into economic gain. Social capital refers to the networks and connections that a person makes that allow

him/her to gain cultural and economic capital. The social capital that Somali immigrants have is also important in understanding the identity of many Somali students. In the article Bigelow does a case study on a participant named Fadumo (pseudonym), who at the age of 6 forcibly migrated from Somali because of the civil war in the late '90s. She and her family had to live in refugee camps in Kenya and Ethiopia before being resettled in western countries as refugees. Bigelow describes the life of many Somalis and writes, "Refuge camps are characterized by violence, exploitation, lack of schooling opportunities, scarcity of food, inadequate housing, and unsanitary living conditions" (Bigelow, 2007, p. 11). Fadumo later was resettled in Minnesota and began 9<sup>th</sup> grade in an urban high school with a student population that was mainly Somali or African American. She later in her junior year transferred to a Somali charter school and graduated with a 3.85 grade point average. In the case of Fadumo, with whom Bigelow conducted a semi interview ethnographic study in an informal setting, the researcher (Bigelow) was tutoring Fadumo as part of an after-school tutoring group. She noticed that Fadumo drew upon strong social capital, her home life, particularly her mother, who had strong expectations that her children would complete school. Likewise, Fadumo would ride a bus to another local center to receive homework help in a bilingual setting often from her peers, who were more fluent and had lived longer in the U.S. However, despite the ability to positively influence her social capital and to gain cultural capital, Fadumo did face isolation in the institutional level as far as it relates to making connections with fellow classmates, who were White. Bigelow (2007) affirms this situation and says, "She said that the only White people she knew were her teachers and me the researcher" (p. 17). In short, Bigelow comments that despite Fadumo's successes, she still had markedly low language and literacy skills, which meant that it would be harder for her to accomplish her goals of getting into a nursing program. The question Bigelow (2007) asks educators is was a 4-year high school experience sufficient for someone like Fadumo an immigrant with very little to no educational background? Fadumo's social capital along with strong religious affinities were underserved thus limiting her cultural capital (p. 19).

Race issues with Somali immigrants are shaped by several situational factors. Ajrouch and Kusow (2007) in their case study of Lebanese and Somali immigrants found that transnationalism and the distance between homeland and host country either complement or contrast with the adaptation of identity among the immigrant population. Thus, an immigrant group immigrating from a country in Europe to America, will find it easier to adapt due to the similarity in race and religion. However, the immigrants from Africa may have a more difficult time adapting to life in America, where people of Black skin are categorized as racially black and thus gaining them minority status in America. Many groups come from their home countries with varying levels of social capital. In the case of Somali immigrants to Canada as mentioned in Ajrouch and Kusow's (2007) study, they found that Somalis face differing social and racial conditions in Canada versus America. Somalis in their homeland are racially and ethnically one people and, therefore, Somali immigrants in their homeland are considered from the majority race. Religiously, they are also all Sunni Muslims, therefore also designating them as a majority. However, in their host country (Canada) Somalis are classified as Blacks due to the dark color of their skin and are further classified as a minority due to their religion. Unlike the Lebanese immigrants who in their homeland country were considered as a religious minority, because in Lebanese society people are religiously stratified, Shia Muslims at the bottom and Christians and Sunni Muslims representing the top of the ladder with more freedom and governmental representation (p. 79-88).

Somali immigrants in Canada due to their skin color encounter processes of "othering" referring to simple categorizations like black contrasting with white. Ajrouch & Kusow (2007) mention that Somali immigrants use strategies to deal with "othering." One strategy is to assert their religious identity, which allows ascription to a Pan-African identity that contradicts with the black/African/Jamaican identification given to them by default. So, from their research study Somali immigrants use religion as a way of highlighting their culture. Ajrouch and Kusow write, "Somalis come to Canada with multiple identities all of which represent a certain degree of otherness. However,



they choose to announce cultural-that is religious- based identity. Such announcement is mainly expressed through female behavior i.e. wearing the hijab” (p. 89).

The identity of Somali immigrants centers around Islam. Islam is by far the biggest indicator of identity for Somalis. I say this as a Somali American with two Somali parents who raised me. Any discussion of identity related to the Somali immigrant must include Islam. Collet (2007) did an interview study in which he took a sample of 30 Somali high school graduates and asked questions related to identity and how schools in Ontario, Canada, have accommodated their culture. The paper shined light on some of the religious issues faced by high school students as far as being accommodated culturally. Canada has declared its commitment to multiculturalism or multicultural diversity since the 1960s and 1970s (Collet, 2007, p. 134). For example, many Somali parents did not approve sex education for their children, citing that it opposed their religion, which in turn translated to opposing their culture. When Collet (2007) asked about the connection between Islam and being Somali a participant named Nadia had the following excerpted response:

BC: How does religion relate to being Somali?

N: It's important because religion keeps you safe. It helps you to stay away from certain things and certain bad things or wrong things...

One participant, who is a 25-year-old, replied when asked about the possibility of a non-Muslim Somali:

It's very difficult. First of all you would be considered a total outcast by the community.

You would not find a place amongst the Somali and it would be difficult for you to maintain a Somali identity [that] religion. (pp. 140-141)

From the above transcript it becomes a strengthened assumption not an anecdotal account that Islam is inseparable from Somali identity, culture, and national identity. Rather, as a Somali American and Muslim myself its quite overwhelming known that Islam is a primary identity marker in the life of my parents and in the life of my relatives both on my maternal and paternal sides. Among the Somalis in

the Twin Cities alone there over a dozen mosques either owned or rented by the Somali diaspora with attendees being majority Somali. The congregational prayers (the five daily prayers of Islam) are consistently established in the mosques by Somalis, especially the evening prayers when people get off from work. The high attendance is observed on Friday for the sermon and the prayer with mosques filling up with often times hundreds of faithful worshippers.

Motha (2006) conducted a year-long critical feminist ethnography studying four teachers from two different counties in one of the eastern states of America. Motha (2006) explores the nexus of race, language, and power and how it is negotiated between teachers: Margaret, Alexandra, Jane, and Katie, and their minority students. The four were recent graduates of a masters' program in TESOL, all teaching K-12 public schools as ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) teachers. All are White except for Katie who was adopted from Korea by a White family. In the study, the teacher's identity is a central focus as it relates to the connection between race and forming teaching identities in TESOL. Many teachers of color in the field struggle with assumptions that Whiteness is tied to merit and adequacy as a teacher. Likewise, some White teachers must be aware of the position they have in greater society (White privilege) and how that hierarchy can be replicated in the classroom. Rather, institutional racism is a fact of life and classroom practices determine the construction and negation of racialized identities. In most cases, Whiteness is inseparable from mainstream English, the legitimate and prestige form of English. English is viewed globally by many as an imperialist language and as such English teachers can be seen as colonialists by their students (Motha, 2006, pp. 497-498). Despite the undetected nature of the teachers' identities, all had antiracist agendas and in fleeting moments discussed issues of race and power in their classrooms. One instance, Alexandria attempted to challenge some of the stereotypes and negative assumptions regarding minority or immigrant students. She discussed in an interview how she had to encourage and point out to one of the Black students in her classroom to work harder due to issues of race:

Alexandra: But every now and again I try to get him to see how intelligent he is but he has to show that, unfortunately he has to show that more than others because he's battling this thing in the United States where Black boys are not seen as intelligent.

Suhanthie: That was addressed aloud? That a Black student has to work harder because of racism?

Motha (2006) mentions that Alexandria was trying to help her students negotiate their racial identities, yet risked inadvertently publicizing those stereotypes and amplifying them. It is further complicated by her position as a White teacher (p. 503). However, by her speaking to her students and bringing attention to issues of race she is emboldening her students to actively own and control their racial identities.

For her classroom Jane had to deal with issues of marginalization that occur particularly in the instance of the school newspaper, which one of her students named Jorge courageously brought up to Jane. Jane mentioned in her interview,

The school newspaper came out last week. This one kid flipped through it and said: "Ms. Fitzpatrick, this paper is racist! I said: Okay why? And he said: "Forget it" like I thought I was going to yell at him. I said No, no no, I pretty much agree with you, but I want to hear why you think that. And he said: It doesn't reflect anything about Hispanic kids it is all about American Black kids. (Motha, 2006, p. 503)

In this passage Jorge and Jane are negotiating their racial identities. The hierarchy in the relationship can be highlighted by Jorge's fear of approaching the dominant institutional figure a White teacher (Jane) who holds authority and Jorge a non-native speaker of Latino background, who is not sure of how to resolve the injustice of being made invisible by the school newspaper. However, Jane due to privilege is able to advise Jorge with the taking of decisive and bold actions to counter marginalization. Jane advises Jorge,

I said ok now what are you going to do about it? You have to find these small pieces and let them be able to do something with it. I said “Who are the kids who write for the paper? Do you and your friends write for the paper?” “No I should complain” I said do you want to write a letter to the editor? If you want to write a letter, I’ll edit it.... (Moto, 2006, p. 504)

In keeping with antiracist agendas Alexandria tried to bring awareness to the term American in her literature class and how it should not be exclusively referring to Whites. Alexandria explained in her interview what she said to her students about choosing folk stories,

I gave them a couple of choices but I really encouraged the native American perspective because I think that unfortunately the American folk tales are very me, rather than what America really is they’re very White American and they’re not representative of America at all. (Moto, 2006, p. 506)

Alexandria discussed her class status as a major point and not all Americans are White thus encouraging the Native American narrative. Secondly, she proved it is not numbers that substantiate or legitimize being American by focusing on the Native American perspective. Such an approach encourages neutrality in the classroom and balances the power dynamics in classroom allowing students to negotiate their identities (Moto, 2006, p. 506).

In short, ESOL teachers must be aware of, as Moto (2006) describes it, “processes and conditions that support racial discrimination including the ways in which colorblindness and non-differential arguments obscure issues of power and privilege” (p. 514). Such awareness and denial by ESOL teachers will prevent social practices in schools that perpetuate racist practices and identities, while all at the same time allowing ESOL students’ confidence to pinpoint and avoid racist practices.

### **Structural Limitations/Barriers to Entry**

Finally, immigrant and ESL students, I use these terms interchangeably, face many structural issues. These issues pertain to ease of accesses to colleges and universities and the facilitation of needs along with removal of barriers to successes. Many middle to upper class white Americans face very

little issues with entry into colleges and universities, unlike low-income immigrant minority members. The structural issues that ESL and immigrant students encounter include the requirement of 4 years English instruction in high school. This is a burden especially upon immigrants, who in high school are enrolled into ESL classrooms, thus, making their high school English classes void of transitory significance in college (Kanno & Varghese, 2010, p. 318). Rather, immigrant students are required to take a language proficiency exam just because they are non-American and English is not their first language. Kanno and Varghese (2010) touch upon this inequality when they say, "Several participants voiced their frustration that only non-native speakers were subjugated to having to prove their linguistic preparation, when in fact being a native speaker in no way guarantees college-level academic literacy" (p. 318). Another topic relevant to immigrants or minorities in educational institutions is the notion of hidden identities, whereby, the person purposefully conceals a part of their self for fear of stigmatization just like in the case of heterosexism in America a parallel can be drawn to that of concealed identities in Universities. How often are minorities made to conceal their inadequateness due to their poor educational background or due to poverty and the lack of equal accesses (Vanderick, 1997). Thus, many immigrants are made to fit in and any differences are ignored. This only maintains the pressure on minorities and immigrants in colleges to be like everyone else. A great illustration of this would be an example mentioned by Kanno and Varghese (2010) of a ESL instructor who says, "I don't want them in my class unless they are at the right level because they can't pass my class" (p. 325). This clearly shows that institutions in America have an English only methodology, however, according to Cummins book titled, "Language power and pedagogy," (as cited by Kanno & Varghese, 2010) they fail to recognize that 20%-25% of all college students will be ESL students! How can one ignore such numbers and the changing demographic with Hispanics in the near future becoming the majority?

In short, the Somali immigrant struggle is one that is multifaceted and requires cutting the layers of the onion to reach the core of the matter. Somali students are no different from the subjects

that were studied in this literature review; they all encounter the same perplexing issues of identity, race, and literacy development. A first year college or university student has the agency, which refers to the ability of choice in academic planning, identity formation, and language use, as they transition between structures. The structures are the cultural ways of learning and institutions (Marshall, 2010, p. 44).

### **Chapter III: Research Methods**

#### **Research Questions**

My research questions are the following:

1. How are Somali college students molded into an ethnolinguistic category?
2. How does the choice of their identity affect their perceived academic achievement in colleges/universities?
3. What invokes Somali College students to the black culture?

## Chapter IV: Methodology

### Participants

My participants will be from Somalia, an east African country in the horn region near the Red Sea. However, due to war many refugees have fled the country to neighboring countries like Djibouti, Ethiopia, and Kenya as well as the other Diaspora community around the world including the state of Minnesota. The number of Somali immigrants living in Minnesota in official numbers ranges from 10,000 to 25,000 and unofficial reports say 50,000 Somalis (Bigelow, Hansen, & Tarone, 2009, p. 35). The Somali participants I choose for the study are all immigrant males whose ages will range from 18-34 years and all must be enrolled in college and university for a minimum of one semester. Since this study is focused on identity of Somali college students, it is crucial that each participant have been in the U.S. a minimum of 2 years or more. This assumes that each participant has spent enough time in the U.S. to begin adjusting to the culture and, therefore, has had ample time for formation of identity, and from there subsequent evaluations regarding formations of identity and perceived learning in colleges can be made. The participants will be recruited from local colleges and universities in Minnesota and most of my recruiting efforts will target those Somali students residing or attending colleges and universities in the Twin Cities. I collected 12 subjects from varying colleges and universities, in an effort, to present a representative sample of Somali immigrant students enrolled in higher education institutions in Minnesota. The participants were screened for educational background and college experience in the U.S. For the purpose of this study, the interviews were limited to those Somali immigrants with a year's worth of college or university experience. These are the variables that were qualified for the purpose of this study.

In this section I will discuss the findings from the interviews I conducted with the 12 participants, It was very promising to notice the similarity among many of the respondents to the questions posed. The questions were designed to answer my research questions. The participants were male Somali immigrants with 2 years or more of college/university experience. The interview



questions were open-ended and allowed for participants to respond freely allowing the participant the opportunity to tell stories or share experiences. Narratives and stories in research can be collected in two ways; either by participant observation or by way of research interviews. As participants manage and organize their responses into stories they are engaged in discourse that all people engage in daily (Coffey & Atkin, 1996, p. 56).

The participants are Somali immigrant males who have at least 2 years of college or university experience. (SM). Each participant is given an hour with most participants talking half the time to complete the interview. Participants were given the option of conducting the interview in Somali their native language or English depending on what they were comfortable with. All the participants conducted their interviews in English except for one. As a Somali speaker I was able to translate and to transcribe the interview. Each participant has ample time in answering the research questions I avoided coaching responses and only posed follow-up questions if I felt the participant strayed too far from the original question or for clarification. Some respondents gave long responses and some sufficed with brief responses, while others felt it necessary to give their back story and talk about their upbringing all the way to their eventually arrival to the United States of America. Table 1 depicts the ages, years of residence, and years of colleges experience.

Table 1

*Participants*

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Years of Residency</b>	<b>Years of College</b>
SM1	34	22yrs	3yrs
SM2	30	15yrs	4yrs
SM3	32	12yrs	10yrs
SM4	32	17yrs	4yrs
SM5	31	15yrs	4yrs
SM6	34	16yrs	7yrs
SM7	28	10yrs	5yrs
SM8	30	10yrs	5yrs
SM9	27	17yrs	5yrs
SM10	29	16yrs	6yrs
SM11	31	17yrs	7yrs
SM12	29	3yrs	16yrs

**Research Methods**

In this qualitative study I examine the effects of identity on perceived learning among Somali college/university students. In answering my research questions, I first conducted an interview study of the 12 subjects, as to understand from their perspective the struggles they face in College/University and what racial afflictions they may have and other pertinent questions to answering my research questions. Interview studies are an excellent way of studying non-tangible phenomena and to also discover the thought processes and feelings and accounts of the ELL learners. The type of Interview I conducted was an open-ended or unstructured interview as mentioned by Mackey and Gass (2005). My interview questions were preapproved by the IRB (Internal Review Board) and I also received permission to use my letter of consent. Two signatures indicate one for the participant being recorded

and another to allow recording of participants for the purpose of transcribing pertinent parts of the interview used in the study.

### **Instruments**

In my interview studies I used a microphone recorder that I borrowed from the library. Their microphone recorders make and model was the following: the Olympus Digital Voice Recorder model; VN-8100PC. I then had the audio files saved, as an Mp3 audio file on my password-protected laptop. The last two participants were recorded on my iPhone 6 and those audio files were saved on my secured laptop. The audios were later used for transcription purposes. The recordings are strictly for the researcher to access with audio files being deleted upon completion of the degree.

### **Research Framework**

In my research I will have 12 participants each session will be 1 hour long with interview questions that are structured to answer research questions 1, 2, and 3. I will collect data from the 12 participants who qualify and fit the parameters. I have set out using snowball or chain-referral sampling. The 12 will be all male participants. The reasoning is partially practical because of the religious censure of females, in Islam, coming in contact with males in seclusion for a significant time period and due to research-related motivations. The research motivations include the visible identity of Somali Muslim women wearing the hijab (head scarf worn to cover hair) and the veil (a long over draping garment that covers from head to toe). I will take notes during all my interviews with participants and I will ensure that proper steps will be taken to assure confidentiality. For coding I will use nominal coding to preserve the identity of my participants and I will analyze my data by coding any emergent themes and or patterns. The theoretical framework that I will use in helping me piece together the varying processes and phenomena in the data is known as the Conditional/Consequential Matrix, it allows the researcher to address sampling problems, and it allows one to explain the complex dynamics going in the data alongside detailing the consequences, context, interactions, and consequences (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 90).

The Matrix is excellent in mapping out the various layers of the data starting from the most abstract and then down to the very definite aspects of the data. For example, I will be dealing with in my research the most upper level abstract ideas, government, race, culture, U.S. educational institutions, and down to the more detailed Somali students and issues of race and identity, why the Somalis speak varieties of Black English and not the official prestige dialect and subsequent perceptions and attitudes. The data will contain interview transcripts of Somali college students, and those transcripts will contain insightful information of why Somali students perceive themselves in a certain way, what circumstances lead to the formation of their identity and the subsequent consequences of their newly formed identity in the country. The interviews will reveal the dynamics at play from racial attitudes to religious overtones, societal pressures to fit in and the complex formation of identity that meshes all this different aspects of self. The results I expect will be that many Somali students will have negative attitudes and perceptions of the college system due to the lack of integration and cultural awareness of both Somali immigrants and the level difference between the backgrounds of the various students and their personal journeys before arriving in America. The interplay between identity choice and host social stigmatization are crucial to examine and I expect the paradigm used by Corbin and Strauss (2008) may reveal the various conditions which are the why, where, and how of the findings including the interactions and emotions which are the circumstances that lead to certain occurrences along with consequences. I believe that Somali College students enrolled in Minnesota public colleges will most likely be made to align themselves and identify themselves with Black culture and as a result face the many problems facing the Black community, including negative serotypes and stigmas including a perceived decrease in learning.

## Chapter V: Discussion

### Research Question 1

#### *1. What invokes Somali College students to the black culture?*

This question did not follow the results found in the study of Ibrahim (1999) in which African immigrants in French Ontario displayed strong affinity with the African American culture particularly Hip Hop, rather in my interviews such strong affinity was not present. Several themes emerged from the interviews that Somalis are less invoked by black culture than a more ethnic/ religious identity as well as shared experiences with Blacks.

**Ethnic identity.** Somalis have a strong ethnocentric attitude that allows them to navigate some of the identity conflicts they encounter in America. A plethora of such examples were found in the interview responses. For instance, when SM3 was asked about being black he replied:

I grow up in Somalia for the better part of my life and I was growing up in Somalia there is no one else but Somali you are the main culture identity.

When further asked about how others perceive or see him as a Somali SM3 explained:

Well, I think I'm easily identifiable as a Somali to some Somali American as an African too many like complexion. When I'm walking anyone could see that I'm Somali in Minneapolis [laugh] An immigrant If I walk into a congregation like a city people could identify me as an immigrant as Somali as African.

Somali heritage and culture is passed on generationally as evidenced by SM3 when asked about speaking English at home:

My wife is educated just working on her doctorate studies in nursing I'm finishing up my masters. So we're an educated Somali American family. We consider English as our second language. It's not the first we try to raise our children with the primary language [Somali]. We trying to raise our children with the awareness that they have a unique language and culture.

It is a very salient and powerful identity being a Somali, rather being Somali gives some of the participants a sense of comfort and simplicity by resolving for them complex issues of identity. When SM3 was asked a follow-up question about his feelings regarding being put into the category of black or having to play the role of a black man SM3 replied:

I just needed to know the box I was being put into but other than that I wasn't here I didn't grow up in my formative years I came here at age 22 I had a view of how the world is I was part of mainstream group Somali.

SM3 found that his stay in American simplified identity issues because the many tribes that exist in Somalia, which can be confusing including remembering the confusing ties of lineage. SM3 explains:

Back home people call you by father or mother. You are that identifiable in a Somali community people know each other Faisal (researchers name) is such and such brother or Faisal's father is such and such. You come here and all of a sudden this black man. So I know my identity. So I can accomplish a lot of things when it comes to education. For the first time knowing I'm a black man [laugh] I'm not the son of [laugh] So they make things easy for you.

One of the participants attributed his ethnicity as a Somali to be a contributing factor to why he took education seriously. When SM5 was asked about how other see him he replied:

I see myself Somali Muslim and at the same time I see myself as an African American and you know I 'm proud of where I came from which is a Somalia. That's tell me I'm Somali and I can do some of the things like taking education seriously.

SM5 gave a very ethnocentric and distinguishing characterization. Almost alluding to the notion that because of his ethnicity and his clear identity as a Somali he is able to take education seriously. Somalis from a macro analysis are a very independent and hardworking people who value education. Rather, Somalis value education and have a parable, "*Aqoon la'aani wa iftiin la'aan*" (Being without knowledge is being without light) (Koch, 2007, p. 1). And at a very young age are made to memorize the Quran (the holy text of the Muslim faith). I myself was made to begin learning Arabic

literacy at the age of 8 years. Alitolppa-Niitamo (2004) mentions that Somali parents despite their low educational background and language barrier are a positive influence to their children in encouraging education. Some Somali parents deem a lack of education as an indication of a lack of morality and it diminishes ones integrity (p. 86).

For many participants being Somali is highly visible in Minnesota as SM1 discusses his work environment:

If there are two or three black people they know that we are black but we are different so they'll try and ask you where you are from.

When asked about how others see or perceive him SM1 strongly affirms his identity:

Of course we know our ethnicity. We know deep inside we are Somali and that is our ethnicity and we have our traditions we acknowledge all that stuff.

One of the participants SM6 actually described a lack of concern for the issue of race and being labeled as Black due to his strong national and ethnic sense of identity as he details:

To be honest with you I don't think about being black because of who I am or where I came from. I came from the continent where everybody is black.

When SM6 was asked regarding how other perceive him he replied:

I think they will perceive me different than the average American Caucasian person. They will think I'm Somali I have a different history culture. Different way of life.

SM8 also describes feeling a sense of pride being Somali and not desiring to integrate or assimilate into greater American society for fear of losing his own identity as a Somali. SM8 passionately explains the reason for not wanting to assimilate:

Some people see me as a Somali I'm proud of it.... Personally, I try not be a person where I see myself trying to fit into the melting pot. Some people are like you have no choice and you have to be a part of this. But then at the same time I feel like I have my own identity and I don't want to lose that. At college there is some students who are I mean some of my friends have other friends and they don't know about their identity. Who they are and all that. Personally, I like to be who I

am. I try not to fit in. Or try not to assimilate. In this country it is hard unless you try to keep up with your identity and know who you are. You gotta know what limits you have. If you try to end up being Uh I have a friend I gotta do what their doing and all that then you will end up being part of that melting pot not knowing who you are. Where you came from. I try to stay who I am and I know that I am a Somali.

Again the same theme reappears that many of the Somali immigrants interviewed expressed a sense of pride over their ethnicity as Somalis as SM8 describes when asked about being black:

I feel pretty comfortable being Black being proud of my heritage. Sometimes at work or school that kinda plays a role. You might not associate us with Black in terms of America U.S.

Ten of the 12 interview participants found being Somali a source of pride, motivation, and comfort. SM10 describes how his ethnicity impacted his identity but also his social life and educational aspirations:

I grew up in a community where majority of the people were Somali especially every apartment I went to or neighborhood they were all Somali. We were all friends spoke Somali to each other we all hanged out. If it wasn't for that I probably would be struggling I would not fit.

SM8 found solace in having a strong Somali diaspora community in his neighborhood. It gave him a sense of belonging. From the macro-level this participant grew up in America at a very young age and therefore crafted strong bonds with fellow Somali Americans. This allowed him to form his identity much easier as a Somali American rather than simply believing he is black or African American stripping him of much of heritage and culture. SM8 describes growing up in Somalia and how crucial it was for him to have been exposed so heavily to his culture at a young age:

When it comes to home and my community I feel I'm not being judged the next person I see kinda looks like me. They speak the same language as me. We know each other we all grew up together we grew up with each other that kinda makes you feel more welcomed. You don't feel like you're an outsider.

SM8 also draws from his ethnicity a strong motivation to excel in education even using his peers as a yardstick to measure how far he could succeed:



My identity impacts as a college it means a lot to me because it gives me meaning to do something especially being a Somali student it motivates me especially when I see my Somalis or fellow Africans that are getting educated it drives me to become better to succeed at things because you can only do as good as people you relate with.

When SM12 was asked about being black or a black male he reiterated that he was Somali and it seems in turn that necessitated the generic categorization black that is phenotypically based:

Same thing as being Somali is being black. I don't feel any different. Being Somali man is again being black I haven't seen any difference.

SM12 actually over affirmed being Somali even to the extent of not acknowledging being American even though he spent 16 years in the country as a resident. When asked about being American SM12 very frankly stated:

No Somali period.

When I refined the question and asked to recount his experience in America as a Somali SM12 replied:

It's the land of opportunity comparing the land between America and Somali there are advantages and disadvantages for both. Some of the advantages here [America] safety opportunity work but living wise and the lifestyle its much better in Somalia.

It is evident from the interviews with the participants that Somali heritage and ethnicity plays a crucial role in shaping the identity of Somali immigrants. Even allowing some to remain positive amidst all the challenges they face in a racist society that only sees skin color as the means for social stratification. Many participants dismissed racism and discrimination as not impactful in their lives and not harmful to them psychologically as a result of their strong sense of ethnic identity.

**Religious identity.** In analyzing the data, I found many of the participants did not see themselves as Black rather racism was always deflected for religion. Whenever participants were asked about being black many resorted to bringing the more salient and relevant identity of a Muslim. The literature shows that Somali immigrants are deeply religious and that Islam is ingrained into identity and culture alike. Collet (2007), in a case study, found that Islam was part and parcel of being Somali as he quotes a

participant in his study, ““It’s very difficult. First of all you would be considered a total outcast by the community. You would not find a place amongst the Somali and it would be difficult for you to maintain a Somali identity [that] religion”” (pp. 140-141). When I interviewed the participants about being black the answers for some immediately referred back to their identity as Muslims. Many of the participants considered religion to be a deciding factor on how they choose to self-identify but it is not a statement of religious devotion. When asked about being Black SM4 replied:

I don’t worry about being black But I’m worried about being Muslim.

When asked about being a Muslim SM4 gave a more detailed account of why it worries him more than being black:

The main problem is being Muslim living in this country as a Muslim is very difficult.

Because of your religion. Because example I am a student you know. A boy who is Christian who we both came from Africa receives an A and I receive a C live right before my eyes.

So, SM4 is clearly more disturbed by the backlash he is receiving for being Muslim than the racism or discrimination he may or may not face as a black man in America. One of the participants SM6 gave an insightful response to the question of being Black. He paired Blackness with two other master statuses that affect him equally: being an immigrant and being a Muslim:

To be honest with you I don’t think about being black because of who I am or where I came from. I came from the continent where everybody is Black so that may change my perception but sometimes when you are the only black person in the classroom or you and somebody else. Then you kinda notice you are black and immigrant and Muslim. So I call it the triple threat.

SM6 actually gives a term for these three aspects of his identity the triple threat each as he says increases his visibility as outside of the mainstream the majority. Again in this case being Black is just one of the many parts of his identity formation as he qualifies it the triple threat. Being a Muslim was

such a salient identify marker among some of the participants that it came up when asked about being Somali. SM2 details the issues he faced as a Somali immigrant and explains:

Another issue you are a Muslim I remember taking a math class in college and there is a lady who use to sit next to me and we would do homework together till it was the time to pray and you know when the call to prayer is called we have to excuse yourself from class and go pray and every day she sees me having a little pray mat in my bag and I pull it out. What does this mean?

SM2 is describing how pulling out his prayer mat and going to pray at school garnered questions from classmates, hence putting his religious identity to the forefront. Many Somali immigrants have similar incidents where they have to leave an ongoing class to make prayer often in very open and exposed areas of the campus. Thus making religious identity very salient amongst Somali immigrants in the college/universities.

One of the reasons SM8, a Somali immigrant whose family initially settled in San Diego, a major relocation center for the first wave of Somali immigrants to America, discusses his difficulty with his Muslim identity more so his because he lived in an area with few Somalis and often times he was confused with other immigrant groups as he recalls:

And some get it confused and say we are from Dominican Republic don't know how we look alike I guess you we are never looked into that.

SM3 goes on to share his experience of how Islamophobia and world politics were affecting his life as a Muslim:

And you have things going on in the world terrorism and have people associating us with terrorists the media portraying that. One of my cousin's friend got pulled over she got pulled over on 9/11 and she was one of those people who didn't happen to watch the news. She was driving and pulled over for no reason. She was wondering why she was like do you know what you people did? You Somalis you Muslims.

SM3 actually felt outcast by the blacks in particular African Americans, SM3 narratives how in his neighborhood he especially felt shunned:

When you come to the house you play at the basketball court African American kids would not consider you as a black. Because of your skin color I remember being chased a by a bunch of guys who thought I stole a basketball this basketball was brought to our house by the neighbor friend happened to get a basketball from a court and we just took it and was playing with it

SM3 felt very traumatized because of the personal experiences he had with his African American community which even prompted him to make the following comments about newcomers to America:

We should have a better system to put newcomers in a nice safer area because the reason why we brought them here to this country is to give them a better life.

SM3 felt that being around Blacks or African Americans exposed him to the lower-class of America or the under privileged and that reminded him of his experiences in Somalia a third world country with no functional government for just over two decades. When asked a follow-up question on he it made him feel to be shunned by Blacks growing up, he fell back on the importance of his Muslim identity:

Well I came from faithful family so my faith stood beside and stopped me from thinking negative. Obviously you're a human being that affects you some way. I did feel not welcome, I feel segregated I thought I assimilated I thought we were the same color people would accept me. Black people look at you weird. Caucasian always have their own group.

It is clear that being a Muslim for SM3 was more a surety to him than being black. Since he tried to assimilate and thought skin color would gain him acceptance only to find he was not accepted and often times SM3 commented his looks played a part:

They look at you have curly hair maybe your light skinned which are mixed.

SM11 expressed solidarity with blacks as long as they didn't affect him religiously. He saw his identity as Muslim and his Islamic practices to be the limits and means of disassociation with Blacks:

Some African Americans make me feel uncomfortable because of cultural reasons. As a Somali we have a religion and some cultural practices that different. When they practice things against our religion there is a bit of a distance.

Many of the participants in their responses made clear despite the different facets of their identity they choose to remain deeply rooted in their faith and uncompromising. They were not willing to assimilate to American culture to the extent whereby they felt assimilation contradicted their faith. SM3 when asked about being an American replied:

I'm keenly aware of that making sure that culturally I'm appropriate. I'm as American as they would expect me. That doesn't mean crossing the line doing something against my belief system.

SM3 feels patriotic yet does not cross the line when it comes to his religious values. In brief, Somalis are very drawn to their religion and being black seems to be more of a consequence of the land that they migrated too not an internal constructed belief of self. So, many participants used religion as an anchor to cement their sense of self amid the waves of identity conflicts they face.

**Shared experiences.** The interviewees expressed a great sense of shared commonality and affinity with Blacks drawing back to the adverse consequences of being Black in America. Whether racism, discrimination, and othering many of the Somali males in the interview expressed a sense of shared suffering even some acknowledging the dark history of slavery and its negative effect on African Americans. SM3 describes the solidarity he feels with the plight of African Americans in America:

I understand I read the civil rights movement that we are enjoying rights that I have been fought for bravely by African Americans and other Americans. A lot of things I'm enjoying

are the seeds or fruits of people who worked hard who fought for race in the U.S. But I mainly identify myself as a Somali American and I understand Somalia is a little bubble inside of you know a smaller circle of the U.S. society.

SM3 has a strong understanding and gratitude of what African Americans have fought for through civil rights movements and is aware that because of that as a Black colored man in America he is able to enjoy the fruits of exercising his rights fully. However, SM3 stills draws the line and makes it known that he is Somali, again emphasizing that many of the participants expressed a shared experience yet still remained Somali in their identity.

SM4 felt that because of his skin color he faces discrimination and feels sympathetic to the issues facing the African American community. SM4 describes his view on what it means to be Black:

Some of the White students because you're black assume that you're uneducated. They say themselves that they are dumb. However, the older White man who's experienced says the system is killing them. So, the older White [man] sees on the television us being beaten and the youth not attending school and how Whites own companies. You won't find Black company owners. The houses are rented and owned by Whites. So, don't ask why Blacks aren't in school the system is designed this way.

SM4 is able to empathize with the African American community because as SM4 put it "the older White man who has experienced says the system is killing them."

SM5 describes how being Black and Somali differs from what Whites experience on college campuses or what is commonly termed in the literature as White privilege. SM5 describes how being Black and Somali affected him:

Being Somali and Black was a kind've a little tough. When you go there mostly it's not like White college students if you goes at any time from one place to another place and university of Minnesota campus area if that what student in that area he doesn't face any problem when it comes to police. But if you are a Somali student and walking around maybe 1Am or 2AM

coming from library you might be stopped and asked what are you doing in this place. I already experienced that some of my friends at college experienced that.

SM6 interprets his association with Black culture differently, he denies any commonalities but yet affirms some sort of relatedness due to skin color and shared experiences. SM6 explains the complex distinction explaining:

You are Black at the same time you don't share a lot of commonalities and history with the Africans or Black people here in America at the same time you are related to them by way of your skin. And some issues they go through you share with them because of the color of your skin basically.

Likewise, when asked about being a Black male he detailed some of the same forms of racism and discrimination that the African American community face:

Sometimes when you apply a lot of jobs and you don't get response you check that box on there the race boxes probably check African American or Black then you kinda have in mind they don't call you because your black minority. Or when you get a loan from a car dealer or a bank you were turned down for an application you applied for credit card. Those are the things to pick out and say I am who I am.

Participant SM8 actually described it as a misconception to assume that racism is restricted to African Americans but as SM8 explains:

People are trying to be racist against them. But then at the same time we kinda fall in that as well. Being Black definitely has some effect on you. At school or at work. Especially at work sometimes you apply for a job you do your resume it might look good for you know the employer might give you a call. They might know who you are then once they find out who you are truly that kinda plays a role in your chances of getting in that job or getting denied.

SM8 felt that racism was not only specific to African Americans those whose ancestors have been enslaved for hundreds of years but it encompassed anyone with Black skin color or darker

melanin. Which made SM8 as a Somali immigrant feel vulnerable to the same forms of discrimination and racism suffered by African Americans. Many of the respondents reflected this attitude of being Somali yet also being Black in the sense of being a non-White and as such not privileged rather marginalized on top of their immigrant status. SM8 also had grasped a deeper sense of racism in America even describes how it can be proven statistically:

When you dig down to the system then that's when you find something. At work the problem is being a male. For example, if you are a Black male and trying to apply for a position specially a management position. There is a person of color with a different plan applying for the same job more chance that the person will get a job than a black man. There is a lot of statistics out there that can prove or there is some real experience that people have. If you look into organizations and you look into management, there is always the different color male being the dominant. If you look into every organization today. The president the vice president chief executive officer and all that you could barely find any black male that is leading an organization or is a president of some sort of high end company.

Participant SM9 also describes the discrimination he faced when asked about being a Black male and how he felt different as he described:

Being Black there is a definitely differences there are some preconceived notions that show up. For instance, one story I use to work at Rainbow pushing carts applying for this job. Even if I'm wearing we wore vests those vests that reflect light or what not it was pretty clear it had the Rainbow logo on the black making it clear we work for Rainbow. I mean you'll notice these subtle things as being a Black person. A car doors being locked a second time after you while you are walking by them. One thing I noticed when I was pushing carts throughout the summer and throughout the winter. In the summer it would happen a lot in the winters one thing I noticed we would cover our face we would have huge gloves on you couldn't tell who we were walking by and there, pretty neutral experience.



SM9 also describes similar experiences at home whereby he recounts being viewed as a threat in his neighborhood. SM9 explains:

And even at home its not good. At an apartment I lived in Bloomington a neighbor I lived with would continually lock his door two three times when I walk by. Those are subtle things that you notice as a black person and is not perceived by someone who is not Black.

SM11 details how he overcomes the different stereotypes he has to overcome being Black in America:

Being Black I would say there is a lot of stereotypes that are there for Black people being a minority sometimes there are stereotypes that Black people are uneducated or sometimes there are serotypes if you black you don't have good values or good principles or that you lived a very difficult life or ghetto life but that different for different people. But that's the issue you deal with trying to break that stereotype usually when I go t work I work in an environment with different people engineers consultants they see you as a Black person speaking with them dealing with Mathematics subjects they come to respect you as a person.

SM11, despite the harsh reality of discrimination and stereotyping he deals with, stays optimistic and recounts overcoming the stereotypes:

Sometimes it is about breaking those stereotypes. It is sometimes difficult because you already have to break down the stereotype of being Muslim your dealing with a stereotype of being a Muslim. It's a challenge balancing all those things. You learn to deal with it over time. When you meet new people you learn how to carry yourself. Being Black is somewhat difficult.

SM11 describes how Caucasian males feel around Black people using the term paranoid as he explains:

As a Black male in college it's a little different in a work environment sometimes you get the impression people might be afraid of you. Or they might have apprehensiveness of being around you at night. In areas less public. I'm not a person who's into race but I do see the parallel. Sometimes Caucasian male or women might be paranoid being around you especially

in the college. At work almost the same less degree. But there are some difference between the Black male and the Black female.

When asked, ‘Are you made to feel Black because of your skin color. Are you categorized as a Black person in America?’

SM11 replied:

I would say obviously they look at you basically from what they see initially that that I’m a darker skinned person obviously. I feel the assumption of being Black or being Black is almost automatic. If you deal with a person who has a lot of stereotypes of Black people, it’s a challenge. And if you meet someone accepting of different races and cultures it is easier to work and deal with these.

Again SM11 gives a fair assessment by also including those who are accepting and not racist or discriminatory. American society has come from its dark past of slavery where today we have a Black president in office.

In short, the various responses from the participants highlight that even though Somali immigrants have a strong sense of ethnic identity, with many reiterating their identity as a Somali, there still exists a sense of strong relatedness with the African American experience. Many narrated their experience with racism, discrimination, and stereotypes, causing some respondents to mention these experiences as what binds them with Blacks in America.

## **Research Question 2**

### *2. How does the choice of their identity affect their perceived academic achievement in colleges/universities?*

In conducting the interviews with the Somali immigrant male participants, I found several themes that emerged from the interviews. Many participants felt that they constantly had to deal with stereotypes, while some describe limited accesses to prestigious programs and some complained of a

limited social network. These are some of the salient themes that I have derived from my qualitative analysis of the data.

**Stereotype.** The word stereotype in the Oxford dictionary is defined as, “A widely held but fixed and oversimplified image or idea of a particular type of person or thing.” The stereotypes faced by some of the Somali immigrant participants provide a glimpse into the struggles faced by Somali immigrants in colleges/universities in America. All of the participants interviewed maintained a strong ethnic and nationalistic (homeland) identity, even as aforementioned citing their academic success back to their ethnic background. Stereotypes can be very difficult to overcome, especially racial stereotypes, which many of the Somali immigrants discuss in in their interviews. SM11 describes some of those racial stereotypes:

The way I feel they perceive me as someone who has a culture a person from a different country who’s an immigrant. Sometimes I feel if I don’t interact with them they think I’m not educated. If I don’t speak with them they might perceive I don’t speak English clearly.

SM11 also describes how others particularly Caucasian males and females stereotype him as dangerous and therefore, SM11 is able to sense their nerves as he explains:

As a Black male in College it’s a little different in a work environment sometimes you get the impression people might be afraid of you. Or they might have apprehensiveness of being around you at night. In areas in less public. I’m not the person who’s into race but I do see the parallel. Sometimes Caucasian male or women might be paranoid being around you especially in the college.

This sentiment of other people stereotyping participants as a danger on campus was similarly echoed by SM5 when recounting his campus encounters with law enforcement:

But if you are a Somali student and walking around maybe 1A.M or 2A.M coming from the library you might get stopped. And asked what are you doing in this place I already experienced that? Some of my friends at college experienced that.

SM3 bluntly describes some of the numerous stereotypes he faces, some partial due to various facets of his identity. SM3 from his point of view describes some of the stereotypes and prejudices as universally known to all immigrants:

Yeah first of all if you lived in this country long enough you know where you stand. You have a color issue and you have if you have an accent you have an issue. If you're a Muslim, it's a bigger issue. You fall into the minority whether you African or African American whatever you consider yourself. You go to an office people just think you are one of those dumb people, but really its how you present yourself. You see some people, when they just look at you they already have a perception about you. If you speak intelligently their perception will change which is very sad in this society we live in.

Again SM3 describes the different layers of stereotyping his has to face throughout his life and particularly his college life. He mentions, "If you speak intelligently their perception will change which is very sad." Most immigrants who have an accent or speak a different dialect of English are not perceived as intelligent because of not speaking the prestige dialect spoken mainly by White Americans. SM12 likewise was skeptical in admitting any discrimination or racism in his life but when asked how his identity impacted his college life he replied:

You do feel at times you are unnecessarily being discriminated against but you are looked at differently because of who you are because you either Black or Muslim or both. You are looked at differently sometimes you are treated differently that could mean with hate or fear. Some people might fear you because you're Muslim. Some might like you because of being Black. But experience wise every time you go out you are going out with your skin color your face. Maybe because you are used to it I don't show much attention to it.

SM12 seems to be aware of the different stereotypes and forms of discrimination yet he doesn't seem to pay much attention to it. This participant when earlier asked about being American, replied,

“Somali period.” So his confidence and sort of obliviousness could be tied to his strong ethnocentric attitude.

Likewise, many of the participants described similar stereotypes and forms of discrimination faced by the African American community. It seems the narratives are very similar between the African American plight and the Somali immigrant plight in some of the interviews. SM4 explains the racial dynamic he finds himself in due to being Black in skin color:

Some of the White students because you are black assume that you are uneducated. They say themselves that they are dumb. However, the older White man who is experienced says the system is killing them so, the older White sees on the television us being beaten and the youth not attending school and how Whites open companies. You won't find Black company owners. The houses are rented and owned by Whites.

When SM4 was asked about his experiences with other White college students and how his identity impacted him with respect to them he explains:

White students think you are dumb and don't understand others. That you don't understand the subject whatever. Because they look your reading noticing the language is a struggle. So, because of that they think you are dumb. But, we are better than you with our language barrier is able to accomplish so much. While the White student if he wants a job he can get right away.

In brief these participants deal with varying stereotypes and for some it's a normal part of life and for others it can be a daunting task knowing the difficult barriers that need to be crossed whether it be linguistic, racial, or even ethnic. Many of the participants feel however, due to their strong sense of Somali identity and their unwavering Islamic faith and strong social network of Somalis that such problems are mere external and can be overcome by maintaining their Somali identity and Islamic faith.

**Limited accesses.** Many of the interviewees had very strong co-ethnic social networks to draw upon that were very helpful but lacked in cultural capital. As Bigelow (2007) discuss the concept of social capital which refers to the networks and connections that a person makes that allow him/her to gain cultural and economic capital. Cultural capital refers to the non-economic advantages a person has like education, skills, and other qualifications that can be turned into economic gain. This article is mentioned in my literature review and in her case study with a high school student Fadumo (pseudonym) Bigelow (2007) discovers that Fadumo's social capital is strong mainly consisting of her family and a strong co-ethnic support system. However, Fadumo still faced challenges transitioning from high school to College particularly due to the lack of cultural capital. As Bigelow (2007) writes:

Fadumo needed different kinds of support as she moved through high school. Schools need to take the role of helping students like Fadumo do such things as find out jobs students can do, apply for scholarships, fill out college applications and financial aid forms..... students like Fadumo may discover while they have much social capital they cannot exchange it for education aims because of lack of this crucial body of cultural capital. (p. 20)

Many of the interviews discussed challenges related to cultural capital as is detailed by Bigelow. Many respondents gave strong indications of their Social capital as SM2 details:

Oh yeah we feel that we have something in common that's what brings us together and we actually get to know each other. Actually I happened to be one of the founder of MSA (Muslim Student Association, a student organization) in this campus Jacksonville College (pseudonym). So, we came we brought people together. People liked it and up to today 't's still running. I feel happy when I see people of my color of my descent in a campus we get together and we share ideas.

A similar sentiment was shared by SM6 who discusses his co-ethnic social bound with fellow Somali immigrant students:

I think it gives you more happiness. You are more happy to see your own kind in College. It also gives you that energy to succeed even more. Because you know you have someone a stick that you can measure with who you are basically. When you see someone whose Somali immigrant just like you doing it. Doing more and succeeding more than you are you can measure yourself that person and say I can do this. I don't have to give up because now you have somebody to look up to as a role model. I see a lot at that time. When I was going to college. I would look at the people graduating ahead of me and know one day I can succeed just like they did.

However, despite the strong Social capital SM6 conceded to the lack of a strong cultural capital when asked about how his identity impacted his college experience:

It made me more aware of who I am. I would say it increased myself awareness to little engagement with others. To only socialize and interact with those who are interested to get to know me. There are a lot of students in the classroom or at work and they'd don't want they want to be nice, try to help you settle in or answer the questions you have. But they wouldn't be interested in hanging out with you after work or after class.

Peer relationships are key, especially with academic successes, as SM6 describes a situation where he felt without peer relationships he would have failed a class. This is similar to what Bigelow (2007) discovered with Fadumo having no White peer relationships aside from teachers and staff (p. 17).

SM6 recounts taking a class and having initially formed no peer relationships:

One time I was taking Anatomy and Physiology at that time I was working forty hours a week. And also talking a couple of classes in college. I couldn't find someone to study with. The first week of class I was the only African and a couple of Indian women. But the next week we had three students I think from Nigeria Kenya. Then we started this group study and we use to meet every three days a week. We use to meet one hour before class. Then go over the

material and then meet on the weekends to study for exams. So, I don't think I could have pass that class without help of those students or forming a friendship with them.

In this narrative SM6 attributes his academic success in the classroom to the relationships he formed with his peers. Yet, he is still limited by the lack of cultural capital whether it is his inability to establish strong ties with White students or his accent which is part of his cultural capital and being judged by it. Another participant SM11 acknowledged that, due to the limited cultural capital and his identity as a Somali immigrant student, he was limited in gaining access to certain programs, internships, and other resources, as he explains:

As a college student my identity is a big factor because of social norms the comfortability of people when it comes to opportunities joining certain clubs seeking out internships looking for resources its bit of a challenge. If you're joining a civil engineering club. There is uncomfotability with certain people maybe because of seeing your skin color you're from a different country might feel like they don't really wanna work with you who their comfortable with especially with opportunities.

One participant went further, mentioning along with limited resources and opportunities but the affect his identity plays on has on his grades. SM4 explains that not only is acceses to prestigious college programs limited for him he also feels that he is intentionally being made to fail his class as he articulates:

It affects for my grades, and job opportunities and acceptance to good programs like nursing, engineering because you are Muslim they won't allow you. The want you to stay in the lower class otherwise you'll be higher class. For example, if you try to enter a engineering program they will say why are you seeking this they don't have need for this in your country.

SM4 explains that partly what I mention in my literature review of White privilege. This privilege is seen to help maintain the status quo and keep in place polices and structural limitations on the dominated races (Kubota & Lin, 2006, p. 483). SM4 feels that because of his skin color he is denied



accesses to programs that could fundamentally change his class status, however he is faced with many barriers. From those barriers: limited cultural capital, his identity as an immigrant, and his identity as a Muslim.

SM1 felt limited due to his identity as a Somali immigrant. He described being affected in terms of not having increased his Cultural Capital and broadening his horizons by taking different courses and exploring the different resources available to him. SM1 briefly comments and says, “My identity it could impact in a way that maybe having more associations with other students taking interesting courses kind’ve try to like better me our community.” Moreover, the participants felt that because of their identity that many lacked the privilege and cultural capital to gain accesses to programs, internships, and resources that could have propelled them in a more successful learning environment, one that fostered and cherished their talents regardless of their ethnicity or religious background.

**Limited social network.** Many of the participants graduated and those who were still attending college were doing well passing their classes with exceptional grades. However, the frame of the discussion is “how does their identity as Somali immigrants affect their perceived learning?”. So in actuality the question is not were they learning, but “how was the learning affected?”. As such, many participants were confident in their learning abilities as SM2 proudly attests when asked how he feels other perceive him:

That question has a positive and negative but for me and my family we play a better role. Not like some who are underestimated because a lack of education or lack of communication or lack of resources people look at them down and don’t accept Al-hamdu lilāh [Allah praise to Allah] I went to school I struggled to become a better person and fit into society. Our family has done something to improve this country and played a role. Al-hamdu lilāh [All praise to Allah] I have a sister niece the first female police officer in this country and we have five

people who bachelor's degree actually six brother just graduated that a big thing not a lot of families have a graduate of our descent.

The feeling of pride and accomplishment is not missing as it relates to educational accolades and achievements. However, there are some factors that have affected the perceived learning of Somali immigrant students. From those factors is a limited social networks or, as I use from Bigelow (2007), who adopted the term in her case study of a female Somali immigrant, cultural capital. Many participants describe a lack of peer relationships or even professional networks that can gain them the needed cultural capital. When participants were asked about relationships with White college students many participants described having little to no meaningful interactions. When SM3 was asked how his identity impacted him with White students he replied:

In my classes when I went to the (local university) I did English as a major. There were almost no Somali students in that major. Mostly, I had classmates who were White or other races. In the classroom we interacted did projects together mostly academic things. I didn't connect with the White students as I did with Somalis as close friends. It was just hey John when are we doing this. We are doing a course together we need to study for this upcoming test. It was more academic more educational and not of a friendship nature. Not of a social nature and when the class was over we didn't have much to continue with. Very few friends.

SM3 describes his years attending University to have been without having many friends. This representative of the limited interactions Somali students had with their peers especially Whites. However, when asked about how their identities impacted them with Somali students or minorities the answer was much different. SM3 describes how his identity impacted him with minority students:

Well, yeah there were a lot of minority kids I knew on campus. Mainly Asian Americans like other White friends were just friends education wise in the classroom. A little more relationship with minority but not to the extent where I had a lot of Somali friends, who knew where I lived who would get out of the way to help me.

Clearly, SM3 is more amicable with minority students but does not possess as strong of a bond as say his Somali peers in college or university, therefore, limiting his cultural capital. When the social networks are mainly within the co-ethnic circle, the ability to attain more resources or access to internships, clubs, or programs is restricted as a result of the small social network. As SM1 again pointed out when asked about how his identity impacted his learning in college he said, “My identity it could impact in a way that maybe having more associations with other students taking interesting courses kindve try to like better me our community.” SM1 felt that his lack of associations with other students prevented him from taking interesting courses, which again affects his learning experience. Most of the participants describe an affinity and shared experience with other Somali students as well as minority students. SM4 described this affinity:

Minority students believe they are the same people they are happy around each other. They speak the same language they understand one another. They support one another. If a minority student is in your class you feel happy almost like they are your brother. The White student you may avoid, but the minority student you don't hide your secrets from them. You work on homework together with them, so you support one another.

In brief, the interviews revealed a strong sense of the identity of Somali immigrants. Many of the participants expressed pride in being Somali and it almost served as a safety net, bracing them from racism, white privilege, or other forms of discrimination pushing them backwards. This leads to a strong cultural capital where Somali immigrants rely heavily upon each other. However, such reliance upon just other co-ethnic groups leads to missed opportunities and limited resources. These were some of the problems that the participants raised during their interviews.

### **Research Question 3**

3. *How are Somali college students molded into an ethnolinguistic category?*

This question requires that we examine the issue of culture and linguistics and the different domains in which they apply, in order to acquire a more comprehensive picture of what forces are at

play in forming their ethnolinguistic identity. The first domain and the central focus of the study is the college/university involvement of the Somali immigrant, the work involvement, and the home involvement. These three domains allow us to look further into what factors cumulatively contribute into deciding how they are formed into their ethnolinguistic categories and which of these factors hold the most influence in this categorization.

**College/university involvement.** Many of the Somali immigrants in the interviews when asked about speaking Somali or English in college/university mostly described communication barriers due to accent or Caucasian students not knowing their ethnicity. So, a lot of times many students would have to explicitly mention that they were from Somali to establish some common ground. SM1 explains this as he openly commentates on his college experience:

There is a lot of stories especially work and when you work and lot of people notice your accent and they notice your looks some of them tend to ask you question about where you from what's your background and all that stuff so that's the typical thing for work socially going outside and for the college its very much kinda like most people in the college some of them ask were you from their educated I assume and their more open about it if you tell them your from Somalia they'll know you better.

This transcript highlights that many interactions with Somali immigrants are ones where a White male college student or co-worker is probing to find out who the person is and how to categorize them. Because in American society people are stratified racially—Black or White, economically—middle class, upper class, lower class, linguistically—native English or non-native, etc. It is very easy and expedient for Americans to fit immigrants into one or more of these classifications. SM1 describes college students as having a better understanding of him after asking where he was from, thus already impressing upon him the notion that he is not American and that after establishing home country origins its now easier to understand SM1. This would be an example of a student being put into an ethnolinguistic category by another. Ethnolinguistic categories pigeon hole a person into a more

simplified identity based on ethnicity and language. Either your Somali or American due to cultural and linguistic features of the Somali immigrant's L2 (meaning second language i.e. English) and perceived accent. Likewise, SM2 as a Somali immigrant describes the challenges he felt because of his accent and his culture:

So we had little bit of how the American system work how the schooling goes we had a little bit of education here and there although we had big time accent when we came here. We also had to overcome that.

SM2 describes his accent or his different linguistic features as a challenge he had to overcome.

Language is more than a mode of communication: it represents one's belonging in a society. As I quote from my literature review, Edwards (2009) says, "Any investigation of language that considers only language will be deficient" (p. 1). Therefore, language is not just a mode of communication; rather, it is symbolic and represents the culture and the identity of the speaker. So, even though SM2 came to America speaking English and studied it in an English-speaking country, Kenya, SM2 still faced challenges because of not speaking the prestige version of English in America. SM2 continues describing his challenges:

I did come across challenges whether it be my education and even at work those challenges were like people first of all the communication barrier and how people live in this country is a bit different from where I came from. Whether it be Kenya or Somali especially Somalia. So, I had to come across how people speak and different dialects.

SM2 continues to describe the communication barrier which included learning how Americans spoke and the different dialects they spoke in. This linguistic superiority is mentioned in my literature review as linguicism, which is a form of linguistic racism, whereby people are marginalized by the dominant culture for speaking a form of English that is not standard to them. Liggett (2014) describes this linguicism as a routine everyday occurrence with learners of English, who often times experience discrimination due to accent or fluency issues that many English learners face (p. 115). SM2 also had

to learn the dialect spoken mainly by white Americans even though speaking a Kenya dialect of English SM2 explains:

I came here speaking English what I had to work on was my dialect and also how to write things essays and process of constructing a thesis statement. It's interesting you come across people who don't like you because of your skin

The issue of race is relevant for many of Somali immigrants interviewed. For the Somali immigrants from countries where there is not racial stratification, such divisions can be difficult to grasp. This awareness was found in a case study of Somali immigrants from Canada and America by Kusow (2006). Many of the Somali immigrants when asked concerning the racial divisions in their respected countries one participant in the study replied, "No, it never occurred to me, I never even heard about the problems between blacks and White." When asked the reason for being unaware of the racial divide the participant in the study replied,

Because we didn't have anybody who white. All of us were 100% per cent of the same religion and colour. We never had anybody was superior or inferior in terms of colour. But if you think about ethnicity in terms of tribes we had that problem, but not colour. (pp. 541-542)

Participant SM3 gave a similar reply when asked about being Black, "I had a view of how the world is I was part of a mainstream group Somali nation. There are tribes other than that you don't go away from being Somali." When SM2 was asked regarding how others perceive him being a Somali immigrant in college/university, he mentioned some of the challenges including having an accent. SM2 describes having to speak intelligently. Does that mean he has to speak with a more standard white dialect of English? SM2 gives his insightful answer below:

Yeah first of all if you lived in this country long enough you know here you stand you have a color issue and you have a if you have an accent you have an issue. If you're a Muslim, it's a bigger issue. You fall into the minority whether your African or African American whatever

you consider yourself. You go to a office people jus think you are one of those dumb people, But really its how you present yourself. You see some people when they just look at you they already have a perception about you if you speak intelligently there perception will change which is very sad in this society.

SM2 explains that due to his skin color and his accent along with is faith he is pre-judged or assumed to be lesser of intelligence or unable to deal with others in academic settings. The Somali males in the interviews describe being perceived as being less educated due to their ethnic background, faith, and linguistic features by those in dominant culture primarily White Americans.

SM4 when asked about speaking English described that in order to speak proper English that you had to abandon you culture and totally immerse yourself into American culture. This means SM4 feels to gain acceptance linguistically you would have to also adapt American culture completely and renounce one's own culture ways and values. SM4 explains below:

I speak it [English] in school. At work sometimes when the customer is English native speaker. But most of the jobs you will work with immigrants. When you hang out with people who speak your language. Because other White people you don't share the same culture. If you wanna speak proper English, you have to date their women and drink alcohol.

SM4 feels because of his identity as a Somali Immigrant White students assume that he is less intelligent or unable to comprehend the content of the class. SM4 describes his frustration:

White students think you are dumb and don't understand others. That you don't understand the subject whatever. Because, they look at your reading noticing the language to be a point of struggle. So, because of that they think you are dumb. But we are better than you despite our language barrier we are able to accomplish so much. While they White student if he wants a job he can get it right away.

SM6 feels because of his identity he is treated differently than others and describes being categorized as an immigrant for many reasons while more importantly includes his accent along with his cultural background. When asked about his identity as a Somali SM6 replied:

It's really obvious especially when you are a first immigrant college student trying to fit into the crowd. You always stand out regardless of how you try to hide your accent or the way you dress the way you talk the way you interact with others there is always the element of you being an immigrant.

SM6 feels despite his efforts of conforming to mainstream American culture and society, it seems he is pushed back and treated differently. SM6 feels his marginalization is as result of the ethnolinguistic category he finds himself in. He is categorized a Somali immigrant no matter how long he has been in the country. SM6 further continues to explain the subtle way in which he feels categorized ethnolinguistically:

It might not be obvious to the naked eye but its always in the back of your head. That you're an immigrant and your different from these people because a second language mother tongue is not English so you always have to find a way to interact speak and communicate with other people even though when your processing the language in multiple languages sometimes people misunderstand what you say. What you meant so its challenging but you get use to it.

SM6 has no choice but becoming numb to reality of how people treat him because of his unique culture and linguistic features. SM6 when directly asked about speaking English gave a very detailed response regarding some of the difficulties he faces in the college setting:

College, like I said earlier someone who is immigrant first generation college student you always stand out from the crowd. Because of your accent you might need help more than other students. So you might ask more questions after the class ends instead of raising you hand in class because you know you don't wanna interrupt the session with your questions the teacher



might say oh what is this guy talking about I already answer all of these questions in the class session.

SM6 feels because of his language barrier he isn't confident to ask questions and that he is often forced to stay behind after class to ask the professor questions concerning material he did not understand because of the language barrier. One participant SM7 actually acknowledges the accent issue but felt it did not affect him in any way other than his comprehension which he didn't blame anyone but himself. This was the outlier response SM7 says from the transcription:

Since I came here I was not born here I have a different accent. Other than that sometimes you gonna have issues to understand each other because of your accent but its not there is not a problem.

When I asked a follow-up question on how his accent brought issues to him SM7 replied:

Sometimes the way you pronounce is a little different how the American accent pronounce it so it sometimes a little hard time to understand each other and already explain, what you mean that a problem.

In conclusion, many of the participants felt because of their accent they were marginalized as Somali immigrants. Even though some came from English speaking countries and were fluent they felt that because of their culture and linguistic features, marginalized and designated as the other.

However, some because of their age of resettlement in America were able to pick up a more standard dialect of American English while others did face issues particular with language than they did with other aspects of their culture.

**Work involvement.** The work environment seemed to have been very conflicting and difficult for some of the Somali immigrants in the study. Some expressed feeling stereotyped and felt misunderstood, as SM11 recounts:

At work it's a little different everybody has the focus of doing their job. When dealing with your employees they look at you different. Sometimes they might perceive you to not

understand the American culture or the customs but when you speak with them and you realize you understand their practices and how they live life and they start to become comfortable when they realize how you live life and who you are and what you are about.

This demonstrates due to race or ethnicity Somali immigrants have to gain acceptance in the work environment and prove that they are American enough to get along with their colleagues. SM3 describes his attitude at work by being American but not to the point where he loses sense of his own culture and religion. SM3 expresses his thoughts about the work environment:

When I'm at work when I'm at campus or at my work place I'm aware that there are people who are working with me or studying with me who are coming in different ways of viewing the world. I'm keenly aware of that making sure that culturally I'm appropriate. I'm as American as they would accept me. That doesn't mean crossing the line doing something against my belief system.

Despite his work as a teacher as he later mentions SM3 knows that he must be "as American as they would accept me" describing a disconnect between the ethnic Somali part of his identity and the American. He continues on that note and describes this phenomenon:

Also making sure that environment and the expectation whether a classroom on campus I go to Greensville [pseudonym] whether it is a teacher meeting I'm aware of that and be part of that American culture of doing things. There is that duality. Once you are with the community you're a little bit different once you are with the mainstream society you're a little different.

SM3 describes his workplace environment and home environment as requiring duality. At the end he concludes with saying, "with mainstream society you are a little bit different." He is resigned to the fact that he is different among other Americans but that he remains American enough to be accepted. The participants I interviewed also struggled with their identities as Muslims, especially in the work environment. SM6 explains this struggle:

At work you have to pick your spots, you have to know where you pray what time to pray. It is a challenge especially when you are working with people that have a heightened awareness of Islam so the things you might say might be taken out of context. Like we start with Allahu Akbar [opening words of the Islamic prayer] for a lot of people Allahu Akbar means somebody is gonna do something bad.

SM6 also felt prejudged as a speaker of multiple languages because he spoke Somali. It seemed he felt judged for not being a monolingual like the rest of his colleagues. He recounts some of his experiences at work:

Not a pleasant thing to do when you are with American people who only speak one language they don't get it. When you speak another language they don't get it. When you speak another language they like oh what you talkin what language are you speaking. They might even know your Somali. The natural way to think would be he might be speaking Somali or Somalia.

SM6 feels that he is uncomfortable speaking his native language because his fellow Americans aren't accepting of other languages. He then describes the stereotype:

But they still will ask you the same question. How many languages do you speak even when you tell them several times you only speak Somali. When I use to work with daisyland [pseudonym] we use to have bi-weekly meeting like staff and my supervisor would say John (pseudonym) speaks three four languages. Somali, another African language she would throw it in there.

SM6 feels that because of his bilingual background people automatically assume that he is trilingual. Moreover, the work environment highlights a conflict between language usage and identity. Despite, the efforts of reconciling the duality of ethnic and linguistic differences at work many are left having to play a role in order to get by.

**Home involvement.** Many participants were the most comfortable in their home environments. Indicating that their ethnic identity as Somalis trumped their identities as Black

Americans or African Americans. As mentioned earlier many have very strong Somali based ethnic and nationalistic identities. So, the Somali immigrants in the interview study mainly identify themselves as Somali first which is also synonymous with Muslim, then America. This was very evident in their responses when asked about being Somali and American at home. When SM12 was asked about being American he bluntly stated, “No Somali period... Well, I’m Somali.” Participant SM1 describes it as normal and many participants describe doing activities that are normal and which substantiate their ethnolinguistic status as Somali Americans at home. SM1 describes his home experience,

At home its uh pretty much at home you’re with your family so then its kindve like you speak normally speak Somali you talk and sometimes try to listen to Somali radio go to internet and go to Somali News trying to keep up what going on.

With the internet and radio SM1 is able to maintain his connection with his home country and able to sustain his linguistic and social ties with Somalia and its current affairs. SM3 also when asked about being Somali at home describes activities that keep him engaged with the Somali diaspora here in Minnesota and the different strategies he uses in maintaining the identity of his children. SM3 details this in his interview:

I consider myself as a Somali father I live with my wife and two kids. We live as Somali family. We have an extended family helping us with the kids. We eat anjalo (a Somali cuisine comparable to a crepe) in the morning as most Somalis do. I participate in community gatherings. The mosques and stuff. My daughter is five she is now going to madrasah which is a Somali Muslim requirement for a child to be educated not only in the secular education system also in the other cultural Islamic studies that the child needs to participate in the community.

SM3 worries for his children’s education in the culture as well as being taught Islamic studies, which qualifies his daughter to, as he says, “participate in the community.” This is also an indication that

Somali immigrants to America have a strong ethnic identity which is also supported by social programs like Duqsi (weekend school) which is primarily a place to maintain and even develop the Somali language among the children. As I have been a Duqsi teacher for over a decade the mode of communication is Somali and even at times being Somali means being a Muslim and not being a Somali was equal to being a non-Muslim.

In short, the ethnolinguistic identity of the Somali immigrants were that they identified as Somali Americans which is strongly based on their Islamic faith. Many participants showed strong affiliations with their ethnic culture citing it as a means for educational successes and also a blocker of many racist or discriminatory practices they may be facing in college or university.

## Chapter VI: Implications and Conclusion

### Implications

This study focused on the identity of Somali college students those with a year's worth of college experience. The study was a qualitative analysis of 12 participants ranging from the ages of 18-34yrs. The study focused on the race of the participants, perceived learning in college, and ethnolinguistic classifications. In the analysis portion of the paper, many themes arose from the interviews that reaffirmed cited works in the literature review portion of my research paper. For instance, Bigelow (2008) examined racial bias against Somali youth and found strong resistance to racialization amongst them. Kusow (2006) study mirrored the results of this paper and found race to be a non-factor among the Somali immigrant population.

The results of this paper on race lay out issues of race in academics. Participants in this paper found race to be a significant factor in the level of achievement reached. Teacher bias and cultural unawareness played major roles in Somali immigrant males feeling discriminated against. The participants in this study found teachers had little to no awareness of Somali culture and religion, leading some to feeling voiceless in the classroom. Wolfe (2011) described this form of racism as microaggression subtle forms of racism that are played out by teachers and institutions. Microtransformations are needed. This means having teachers who are critically aware of issues of race, cultural and religion. Better curricula are need to improve the learning environment of students to one that is more neutral and accepting to students of all backgrounds.

Language is another form of racism that immigrant students face particularly Somali immigrant college students. The question of ethnolinguistic pigeon holing was asked to help understand the dynamic of identity formation of Somali college students and their use of the target language. Liggett (2014) uses the term linguicism to describe the discrimination English learners face due to the accent or fluency of their English. In this study I found the participants were judged based on their language skills some were identified solely based on their language. This is a problem many

immigrants face but how can this study be applied. Teachers need to be aware of the differences between the Somali immigrant community and the African American community and the cultural and religious differences. Applying CRT theory (Critical Race theory) in teacher curriculums and in teacher pedagogy. Teachers need to be aware of White privilege and its disadvantages for Somali students in the colleges or universities and strive to accommodate all students.

### **Conclusion**

I will begin with mentioning some of the limitations of this structured interview study. First, the paper did heavily rely on accounts of the Somali immigrants interviewed and other qualitative techniques were not used, for example focus, groups, observations, or action research. However, for the purposes of this paper my data was solely collected from my interview study. Moreover, my participants were only men, which limited my selection of participants to respectively males. Despite, the omission there were considerations, which prompted me to omit females from the study. They included that Somali women possessed ostensive religious markers (Hijab) on their persons which could have skewed the focus of my research. My study pivoted around Somali identity issues and the connection between race, language, and perception. I was afraid because of the Hijab (head covering) that it could have more strongly influenced the study more than other aspects of their identity. Last, I intended to control all the variables in my study, which included gender.

The interviews were conducted in mainly informal settings that included apartments, community centers, and included libraries of some of the educational institutions in the state. The participants were candid in their interviews which provided a strong hope that my answers would be thoughtful and unfiltered. Observer's paradox was a phenomenon I wanted to limit as much as it was possible. I felt the interviews gave me a glimpse into attitudes and views held by the informants.

In the interviews I found there was a strong similarity between the results of my data regarding Somali immigrant's identity and affiliation with Black culture and studies cited in my literature review. Bigelow (2011) and Kusow (2006) conducted similar studies with similar findings.

Phenotypical divisions based on race did not have much meaning or significance to Somali immigrants. Rather, Somalis were found to be very ethnocentric and most cannot relate to divisions between White or Black. However, due to this many Somali immigrants often limit their resources by closing off potential advantageous networks that could potentially assist their opportunity for upward social mobility. Overall, many of my participants were able to relate to the plight of the African American community even though some Somali immigrants felt added pressures; on top of being Black many dealt with religious discrimination. Due to the climate of Islamophobia in America, people trusted them lesser and lesser to a point were some feared them.

My study reaffirmed that attitudes of Somali nationalism are prevalent and ultimately hold true to be a central component of Somali identity amongst those immigrants to America. Likewise, similar to ethnicity, religion plays a huge role in the identity formations of many Somali immigrant males. This can be also evidenced in the interviews when asked about being Muslim. The question invoked strong views and attitudes. Islam in the media has been portrayed as a religion of terror and barbarism. This eventually strains the relationship Somali immigrants have with other Americans and for the purpose of this study Blacks of other faiths. In answering the question “What invokes Somalis to Black culture?” I kept an open mind and allowed the data to lead me. I was surprised that unlike Ibrahim’s (1999) study of Black immigrants to French Ontario, many Somalis tended to stick to their culture, a culture intertwined with Islam.

Identity was a core issue for Somali immigrants as it related to their college experience. Many had to deal with stereotypes, whether it meant giving explanations of how Islam and Muslims were not terrorists or assumptions that they were uneducated and so on. Rather, worst of all because of their identity some felt their resources and networks were limited as a direct result of their identity. Bigelow (2007) refers to this in her study as a lack of cultural capital many Somali immigrants lack such capital, hence, leading them to feel discriminated against.



In short, this study re-affirms those attitudes shared in similar studies mentioned in my literature regarding identity. It gives validity to my research because some of the research studies conducted with Somali immigrants were case studies and sampled a great number of participants. Yet, the findings were similar in areas of identity, almost identical statements when transcripts of interviews were compared between my study and those aforementioned.

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## Appendix

### Pre- Established Interview Questions

#### Part A

1. Interview Date

\_\_\_\_\_ Day \_\_\_\_\_ Month \_\_\_\_\_ Year , ( ) - ( ) Time

2. Interview Configuration

( ) Individual

( ) Pair

( ) Group

3. Information about the informant(s)

Name    Age    Female/Male    Years of Residence in America

4. Which Community College have you studied and for how long?

( ) 1 year

( ) 2 years

( ) 3 years or above

#### Questions on identity

#### Family, work and college

#### I.

1. Tell me a story about yourself being a Somali at home? At work? At College?

2. Tell me a story about being American at home? At work? At College?

3. Tell me a story about being a Muslim at home? At work? At College?

4. Tell me a story about speaking Somali at home? At work? At College?

5. Tell me a story about speaking English at home? At work? At College?
6. Tell me a story about being black at home? At work? At College?
7. Tell me a story about being a black male at home? At work? At College?

## **II.**

1. Tell me a story about how others see you as Somali at home? At work? At college?
2. How do your identities impact your life as a college student?
  - a. With other Somali students
  - b. With white students
  - c. With other minority students
  - d. With African-American students
  - e. With a Somali professor
  - f. With your white professors
  - g. With minority professors
  - h. With international professors