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## **PERCEPTIONS OF IRAQI IMMIGRANT EMPLOYMENT DISCRIMINATION IN THE METRO DETROIT AREA**

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### **Abstract**

*Society is changing rapidly and the United States is a global community in transition. The Arab Spring, home grown terrorism, geopolitical conflict, nationalistic politics and amebic ideological groups such as ISIS have fueled interest in American Muslims. This phenomenological qualitative study explored the lived experiences of Iraqi American Muslim immigrants as it relates to perceived employment discrimination. The study also explored whether or not such perceptions of employment discrimination impacted Detroit area American Muslims motivation to apply to future employment opportunities. The results of the exploratory research indicate that nearly half of Iraqi American Muslims felt that discrimination increased negative perceptions reduced their likelihood of applying to similar open positions in the future.*

### **Keywords**

*Iraq-American, American Muslim, Employment Discrimination, Immigration, Integration*

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## **1. Introduction**

With subsequent Middle Eastern wars, Iraqi peoples have become a larger group of immigrants to the United States and face issues adjusting to American work life. The population of Iraqi Muslims is expected to double by the year 2027 creating a significant subculture within the country and will need to find gainful employment (Raid, 2001, U.S. Census Bureau, 2013). Understanding subculture's employment concerns will help further settle them into new job opportunities in the American workplace.

Dissonance in the labor market has an impact on Iraqi-American Muslims and how they relate to their host country. Stakeholders should consider the importance of strengthening non-discriminatory employment opportunities to help this population function at its fullest capacity. Discrimination by organizations lowers their chances at full integration leaving them feeling alienated without adequate employment to support themselves (Omar, 2013).

Violations of employment related social contracts reduce positive feelings of work affectivity (Rousseau, 1995). People have a sense that effort should equal reward and when it doesn't Iraqi-American Muslims may adjust their attitudes and perceptions of their employment prospects and adjust their behavior accordingly. In the case of discrimination, social contracts include expectations of reasonable effort that compares with their fellow countrymen. Perceptions may be subjective but can have a significant influence and the willingness to expend job search effort.

This qualitative, phenomenological study will explore Iraqi-American Muslims' perceptions of employment opportunities and employment discrimination in the Detroit, Michigan area. Semi-structured interviews helped collect responses from 25 Iraqi-American Muslims to investigate their perspectives on (a) ethnic background; (b) discrimination; (c) frequency of discrimination experiences; and (d) their personal stories of discrimination. Creating higher levels of understanding can help stakeholders develop stronger policies that encourage gainful employment among Iraqi-American Muslims.

## **2. Employment Discrimination**

A U.S. 2003 Census Bureau report indicates there was an increase of 29,429 people with Iraqi ancestry from 2000 to 73,896 in 2010. The country will experience a 76% increase of Arab peoples from 850,000 in 2000 to 1.54 million in 2010 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2003, 2013). If

this large group of Muslims is not given the same opportunities as other Americans, they may become isolated and segregated from the larger population, following similar trends of alienation in other Western countries (Dalacoura, 2006).

Open societies that fully integrate Muslim communities, while still respecting their unique differences, have beneficial features that lead to higher labor engagement. Progressive societies are based on citizen freedom and promote ten basic values of democracy, social justice, social equity, social equality, non-racism, openness, accountability, the rule of law, respect, and reconciliation (Euvrard, 2006). Each of these values is a belief that societal members and institutions follow in their pursuit to develop a competitive economy.

Failure to recruit minorities limits the potential of organizations to maintain profitable operations. Neglecting the training and potential contributions of one particular group—that of Iraqi-American Muslims—in the workplace prevents organizations from utilizing their global knowledge and unique perspectives (McGee, 2008).

In countries and companies that don't respect diversity, a different set of values takes precedence that limits knowledge integration. Minorities may be subject to varying employment conditions and wage discrimination based on stereotypes that cast them into limited growth occupations (Ambwani & Dyke, 2007).

Race and religious consciousness further erode the general trust in society created a perpetual cycle of perception and reality that weakens business competitiveness. Companies are robbed of their human capital because gatekeeping hiring managers use discriminatory mental heuristics that discount minority skill sets that reduce minority job affectivity. Minorities may withhold their labor skills and limit engagement with the larger community.

Discrimination may be a bigger problem than reported. Iraqi Muslim American Immigrant's complaints of discrimination are significantly underreported because immigrants are not always fully aware of their rights and are afraid of retaliation (Smith, 2009). Lack of awareness of equal opportunity laws mixed with feelings of fear can have a profoundly negative impact on integration.

Wages of Arabs and Muslims continue to decline from 9% to 11% (Kaushal, Kaestner, & Reimers, 2007). Some of the group was seen as foreign, dangerous, and outside the standards of the country. As the nation comes to grip with the destructive nature of terrorism, the American

Muslim population became seen as a single entity of foreigners. The idea of Muslim and born American seem disassociated.

As American adjusts to a global marketplace it will need to put to full use the skills and abilities of Iraqi-American Muslims by reducing incidents of employment discrimination. Developing a strong sense of cultural openness and awareness can help in increasing the human capital stock and diversity within the country. Creating greater knowledge of the benefits of tapping diverse sources of knowledge leads to better hiring practices. Maximizing human capital will help organizations become more adaptable and able to adjust to new market trends. Ensuring that all races and religions have equal access to employment and opportunities is beneficial for both the companies and the nation as a whole.

### **3. Statement of the Problem**

The general issue is that discrimination is often perceptual by nature, and the interests of minorities and immigrants may be ignored in society thereby reducing opportunities for integration and human capital advancement (Blancero, DelCampo, & Marron, 2007; Carroll, 2006; Gordon & Lenhart, R., 2008).

Semi-structured interviews helped collect responses from 25 Iraqi-American Muslims to investigate their perspectives on (a) ethnic background; (b) discrimination; (c) frequency of discrimination experiences; and (d) their personal stories of discrimination.

### **4. Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of the qualitative, phenomenological study is to explore Iraqi-American Muslims' perceptions of employment opportunities and employment discrimination in the Detroit, Michigan area. With greater understanding, the business community and lawmakers can consider the general needs of the nation by fostering stronger human capital policies. Strong societies based on citizen freedom promote and maintain the ten fundamental values of democracy, social justice, social equity, social equality, non-racism, openness, accountability, the rule of law, respect, and reconciliation (Euvrard, 2006). These values add to the integration and full utilization of minority skills.

## 5. Results

A total of 25 participants were used within the study. Data are organized using themes and patterns. These themes and patterns were put into tables (6.1-6.6) for the reader's comprehension. Interviews help assessed the form of discrimination experienced, the type of discrimination, how they felt after discriminated, and their likelihood for applying to new jobs, how it impacts others and how it changes them as a person.

A significant portion of Iraqi-American respondents indicated their ethnic background limited their opportunities for employment. Most either did not experience discrimination (48%) or were not hired for jobs in which they were qualified (28%). Other forms of discrimination such as work assignments, rudeness, and various undefined experiences were noted. When they felt they were discriminated against they either felt angry (43%) or experienced lower self-image (21%). A significant finding indicated that discrimination resulted in them less likely to apply for a position (71%). Discrimination wasn't isolated to the target but also impacted their families through lower income (36%) and increased negative perception of employment (43%). Experience discrimination also resulted in change in personality/perception (36%) and career switching (36%).

**Table 1:** *Question: Explain how being Iraqi-American may either increase or decrease your chances for successful employment? (n=25)*

Chances for Employment	n	%
Increases:	5	20%
Decreases	13	52%
Neither	7	28%

**Table 2:** *Question: If you have experienced employment discrimination, please explain your experience*

	n	%
Experience of Employment Discrimination		
Termination or Discipline	1	4%
Not Hired	7	28%
Work Assignment	2	8%

Undefined Discrimination	2	8%
Rudeness	1	4%
No Discrimination	12	48%

**Table 3:** *Question: If you have experienced discrimination what feelings were associated with the experience?*

Feelings toward Experience of Discrimination	<i>n</i>	%
Anger	6	43%
Outsider	1	7%
Lowered Self Image	3	21%
Unhappiness	2	14%
Indifferent	2	14%

**Table 4:** *Question: Do you believe that your experience of discrimination has impacted your determination to apply for open employment positions today? If yes, how so?*

Applying for Open Positions	<i>n</i>	%
Less Likely to Apply	10	71%
Changed Career	1	7%
No Impact on Applying	3	21%

**Table 5:** *Question: How does your experience impact others in your life?*

Discrimination Impacts Others	<i>n</i>	%
Not Enough Money in Family	5	36%
No Perceived Impact	3	21%
Negative Perception of Employment	6	43%

**Table 6:** *Question: What Changes are Associated with the experience?*

Changes Associated with Experience	<i>n</i>	%
No changes	4	29%
Impacted Personality/Perception	5	36%
Career Changes	5	36%

## **7. Analysis**

The data from the research indicated some themes that help to shed light on the perceived discrimination of Iraqi-American Muslims and their likelihood of applying to open employment positions. Of particular importance is the finding that over half of participants stated that they experienced employment discrimination in one form or another. Of those that believe they have been subject to employment discrimination, a majority of the participants indicated that they were less likely to apply to open employment positions. The results support the concept that discrimination can lead to candidates being less enthusiastic to apply for other open positions (Blancero, DelCampo, & Marron, 2007).

Likewise, an additional theme which presented itself through the research indicates that those who experienced discrimination had an impact on their feelings which included anger, lower self-esteem, being an outsider, or unhappiness in 86% of cases. Forty-three percent of participants believed that discrimination made them feel angry. This anger supports the concept that negative treatment in society and lack of resources can lead to negative feelings toward society (Platow, Grace, Wilson, Burton & Wilson, 2008).

Just over half of all participants stated that being Iraqi-American made them less likely to find employment when compared to other Americans. Reports of discrimination revolved around not being hired for positions regardless of their qualifications. This perception aligns with other research that suggests immigrants receive fewer opportunities than native born Americans even though they may be using the same job search strategies (Diel, Friedrich & Hall, 2009).

## **7. Conclusion**

The U.S. is a country of immigrants and has changed and adapted to new peoples since its beginning. The integration of American Muslims is beneficial for hedging their background and skills to offer the greatest diversity and human capital for American businesses. The saying “have glass full or half empty” applies to this study as nearly half of all participants have not experienced discrimination, and half feel that they have. Persistent discrimination can lead to adverse outcomes for this population regarding self-image as well as financial health. Those who feel they were discriminated against feel angry toward discrimination, and develop a pessimistic attitude toward employment opportunities. This pessimism could result in not applying for new positions or changing of careers where competencies do not become fully developed.

Discrimination may also limit the potential of this group to fully integrate into society. While the study is limited to a small population it does raise a significant concern over the effect of bias in society. Employers and government stakeholders should be aware of the adverse effects of discrimination on the Iraqi-American Muslim population in order ensure that participating stakeholders help this group fully engage in the labor market while avoiding the damaging effects of employment rejection and isolation.

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