

## Muslim Marriages in the Western World: A Decade Review

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### Abstract

This paper reviews research studies that have examined Muslim marriage trends in the western world for the past ten years (2005-2015). Studies were classified in six categories: 1) Impact of religiosity on marital relationship; 2) New forms of courtship and marriage in the Muslim community; 3) Women issues and marriage; 4) Appropriate marital instruments utilized in working with Muslims; 5) Counseling with Muslims; and 6) Marital quality. Important areas for future studies are highlighted.

*Keywords:* Muslim Marriage; Muslims and West; Marriage Decade Review

### General Trends in Marriage Literature

All around the world, healthy marriages are essential for healthy societies, and benefit everyone involved, including the community at large (Waite & Gallagher, 2000; Kamp Dush & Amato, 2005). Married individuals experience many social, physical, and psychological benefits in comparison to their unmarried or divorced counterparts (Bramlett & Mosher, 2002).

Research about marriage and marital relationships has been focused on white heterosexual married couples for a long time. However, for the last decade, research about marriage has included African Americans marriages and other racial/ethnic groups (Raley & Sweeney, 2009; Bryant, Wickrama, Bolland, Bryant, Cutrona, & Stanik, 2010; Crissey, 2005; Harris, Lee, & DeLeone, 2010), same sex marriages (Andersson, Noack, Seierstad, & Weedon-Fekjaer, 2006; Franke, 2006; Olson, Cadge, & Harrison, 2006), interracial marriages (Qian & Lichter, 2007; Schueths, 2012), women (Wenzhen, 2009; Lichter, Qian, & Mellott, 2006; Clark, Bruce, & Dude, 2006), immigrants (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2010), and cohabitating couples (Lichter, Qian, & Mellott, 2006; Liefbroer & Dourleijn, 2006). Thus, it seems like the research trend is now more geared toward understanding experiences of different minority groups that have not been researched before. Another important trend is the publication in English-language journals of studies researching marital challenges for couples beyond the United States and Europe,; this makes it possible for people all around the world to become more familiar with challenges facing families living in other countries. For example, Güney (2011) compared 127 research studies about marital satisfaction done in Turkey and concluded that the data was drawn from samples of highly educated and higher socioeconomic status couples reporting higher level of marital satisfaction, and suggested that future studies should evaluate the ecological context for lower socioeconomic status couples in Turkey. Li-li (2008) investigated trends in marital satisfaction of immigrant daughters-in-law from rural settings to Shanghai, indicating a higher marital satisfaction for these women. Xia (2009) examined the higher level of marital challenges for rural versus urban couples in China, and Kostas (2010) investigated the impact of socioeconomic changes on marital satisfaction for couples in Greece.

Furthermore, the prevalence of marriages through internet matchmaking processes is part of the new trend as well. For instance, in a comparative study, Dutton and colleagues (2009) indicated that online dating is increasing rapidly. Their study revealed that 6 % of married couples in UK, 5% of married couples in Spain, and 9% of married couples in Australia met online. However, in comparison to the amount of studies on interracial, cohabiting, and same sex couples, there are not that many studies about online marriages in the world (Dutton, Helsper, Whitty, Li, Buckwalter, & Lee, 2009).

## The Muslim Mental Health Literature

Similar to Muslim families living across the globe, Muslims living in the West strongly emphasize getting married as part of their religious responsibilities. Muslims believe that divorce is allowed but discouraged by God and should

be used only as the last solution. Family is considered an important unit for society since it passes along social and spiritual values, and the health of families directly affects communities' wellbeing (Hodge, 2005). As may be expected from this emphasis on healthy families, much concern has been on the Muslim couple's healthy functioning (Alshugairi, 2010). Ba-Yunus (2007) reported divorce rate of 32.33%, and Alshugairi (2010) reported a divorce rate of 21.3 % among Muslims in the United States. While there is not enough research to examine these trends, it is very apparent that Muslims value marriage and are concerned about high divorce rates. Muslim religious leaders and mental health professionals are also reporting unease with marital conflicts and dissolutions in their communities (Nadir, 1998; Siddiqui, 2009; Chapman & Cattaneo, 2013). This article examines and summarizes major research articles about Muslim marriages in the West during the past ten years (2005-2015) and provides recommendations for important research topics to be explored for the next ten years.

## Method

### Selection criteria

To be included in this review, studies had to be about Muslim populations living in the U.S. or Europe; the topic had to be related to marriage; and studies had to be conducted within the last ten years. All dissertations, books, book chapters, or reports were excluded.

### Process

A database literature search was conducted using keywords: "Muslim", "marriage", "couple", and "marital" in November 2015. Several articles were retrieved through Google Scholar, ProQuest, EBSCO and Science Direct search engines, and the abstract of each article was reviewed for relevancy. Articles that didn't fit these selection criteria were not reviewed. Among these abstracts, 26 articles seemed relevant, fit the selection criteria, were studied in full text, and categorized.

## Results

A comprehensive literature search revealed six important categories: 1) Impact of religiosity on marital relationship; 2) New forms of courtship and marriage; 3) Women issues and marriage; 4) Appropriate marital instruments utilized in

working with Muslims; 5) Counseling with Muslims; and 6) Marital quality. See Table 1 and figure 1 for an overview of reviewed studies' topics and the methodologies they employed.

### The impact of religiosity on marital relationship

A great number of studies have focused on the impact of religiosity on the marital relationship. Lambert and Dollahite (2008) indicated that Muslim couples who included God as their third partner and viewed marriage as a religious institution, found spiritual meanings in marital commitment and enjoyed their relationships. Nelson, Kirk, Ane, and Serres (2011) examined the relationship between religious and spiritual values and moral commitment in marriage and found a positive correlation among them. Furthermore, Dollahite and Lambert (2007) found that being involved in religious activities promotes marital fidelity for Christian, Jewish, and Muslim couples. Alghafli, Hatch, and Marks (2014) examined the perceived role of Islam on marital and familial relationships, and found that many Muslims believe Islam has a positive influence on marital relationships, unites families, and, when understood and lived by properly, protects women from abuse and oppression. Marks (2005) also indicated that Christians, Jews, and Muslims perceive religion to have a positive impact on their marriage.

### New forms of courtship and marriage in Muslim community

The latest studies regarding Muslim relationships indicate that courtship and marriage forms are changing, especially for the youngest generation of Muslim adults. The proliferation of interfaith and intercultural marriages, non-arranged marriages, and the prevalence of marriages through internet match-making processes reveal that marital forms, structures, and meanings are changing rapidly for Muslims in the West. Lo and Aziz (2009) found that Muslim Americans use of internet matchmaking services to find marriage partners has increased. Interfaith and intercultural marriages between Muslims and adherents of other religions have also increased. For example, Riva (2010) explored the marital dynamics of Catholic-Muslim couples in Italy and the challenges these couples encounter and offered some suggestions for mental health professionals. Al-Yousuf (2006) explored the changes in faith and identity in Muslim-Christian marriage. Alshugairi (2010) indicated that first-generation immigrant Muslims had a higher marriage rate, were more likely to be married to partners from the same generation and ethnicity, and had the lowest percentage of marital age gap of less than five years. In a study of four com-

Table 1

| Study                                     | Title   | Category                                      | Method       |
|---|---|---|--------------|
| 1. Lambert and Dollahite (2008)           | The threefold cord: Marital commitment in religious couples   | Impact of religiosity on marital relationship | Qualitative  |
| 2. Nelson, Kirk, Ane, and Serres (2011)   | Religious and spiritual values and moral commitment in marriage: Untapped resources in couples counseling?              | Impact of religiosity on marital relationship | Qualitative  |
| 3. Marks (2005)                           | How does religion influence marriage? Christian, Jewish, Mormon, and Muslim perspectives                                | Impact of religiosity on marital relationship | Qualitative  |
| 4. Dollahite and Lambert (2007)           | Forsaking all others: How religious involvement promotes marital fidelity in Christian, Jewish, and Muslim couples      | Impact of religiosity on marital relationship | Qualitative  |
| 5. Alghafli, Hatch, and Marks (2014)      | Religion and relationships in Muslim families: A qualitative examination of devout married Muslim couples               | Impact of religiosity on marital relationship | Qualitative  |
| 6. Lo and Aziz (2009)                     | Muslim marriage goes online: The use of internet matchmaking by American Muslims  | New form of Muslim courtship and marriage     | Qualitative  |
| 7. Riva (2010)                            | Interreligious and intercultural families in Italy: An analysis of North African–Italian marriages                      | New forms of Muslim courtship and marriage    | Case study   |
| 8. Al-Yousuf (2006)                       | Negotiating faith and identity in Muslim–Christian marriages in Britain   | New forms of Muslim courtship and marriage    | Qualitative  |
| 9. Alshugairi (2010)                      | Marital trends in the American Muslim community: A pilot study  | New forms of Muslim courtship and marriage    | Quantitative |
| 10. Grewal (2009)                         | Marriage in color: Race, religion and spouse selection in four American mosques   | New forms of Muslim courtship and marriage    | Qualitative  |
| 11. Al-Johar (2005)                       | Muslim marriages in America: Reflecting new identities  | New forms of Muslim courtship and marriage    | Qualitative  |
| 12. Ahmad (2012)                          | Graduating towards marriage? Attitudes toward marriage and relationships among university educated British Muslim women | New forms of Muslim courtship and marriage    | Qualitative  |
| 13. Abdolsalehi-Najafi and Beckman (2013) | Sex guilt and life satisfaction in Iranian-American women   | Women issues and marriage                     | Quantitative |
| 14. Bano (2007)                           | Muslim family justice and human rights: The experience of British Muslim women  | Women issues and marriage                     | Quantitative |

Table 1—*continued*

| Study   | Title   | Category   | Method          |
|---|---|--|-----------------|
| 15. Ali, Mahmood, Moel, Hudson, and Leathers (2008) | A qualitative investigation of Muslim and Christian women's views of religion and feminism in their lives                 | Women issues and marriage                            | Qualitative     |
| 16. Haque and Davenport (2009)                      | The assessment of marital adjustment with Muslim populations: A reliability study of the Locke–Wallace Marital Adjustment | Marital instruments utilized in working with Muslims | Quantitative    |
| 17. Asamarai, Solberg, and Solon (2008)             | The role of religiosity in Muslim spouse selection and its influence on marital satisfaction                              | Marital instruments utilized in working with Muslims | Quantitative    |
| 18. Rippy and Newman (2008)                         | Adaptation of a scale of race-related stress for use with Muslim Americans  | Marital instruments utilized in working with Muslims | Quantitative    |
| 19. Daneshpour (2010)                               | Guest editor's introduction: Systemic thinking in working with Muslim families  | Counseling with Muslims                              | Article Review  |
| 20. Al-Krenawi and Graham (2005)                    | Marital therapy for Arab Muslim Palestinian couples in the context of reacculturation                                     | Counseling with Muslims                              | Case study      |
| 21. Johnson (2013)                                  | Using REBT in Jewish, Christian, and Muslim couples counseling in the United States                                       | Counseling with Muslims                              | Case study      |
| 22. Sauerheber, Nims, and Carter (2014)             | Counseling Muslim couples from a Bowen family systems perspective   | Counseling with Muslims                              | Case study      |
| 23. Mourad and Carolan (2010)                       | An ecological approach to culturally sensitive intervention for Arab American women and their families                    | Counseling with Muslims                              | Case study      |
| 24. Kennedy, Godlas, Gale, and Parker (2010)        | Building bridges: Cross-disciplinary collaboration between family therapy and Islamic Studies                             | Counseling with Muslims                              | Case study      |
| 25. Springer, Abbott, and Reisbig (2009)            | Therapy with Muslim couples and families: Basic Guidelines for effective practice   | Counseling with Muslims                              | Basic Guideline |
| 26. Chapman and Cattaneo (2013)                     | American Muslim marital quality: A preliminary investigation  | Marital Quality                                      | Quantitative    |

munities, Grewal (2009) revealed a higher rate of interracial marriages among children of Muslim immigrants and discussed preferences for lighter-skinned mates; the young adults testing the boundaries of what constitutes an eligible spouse by drawing on religious sources that challenge their parents' ideologies of skin color and racial prejudices. Al-Johar (2005) found the new marriages of Muslims in America is departing from their previous ethnic patterns. Ahmad (2012) examined educated Muslims' attitudes toward marriage and relationships and indicated the shift from parentally arranged matrimonial matches to highly individualized and commercialized matrimonial events. It is encouraging to see how these changes are opening new horizons for Muslims' courtships and marital relationships.

### Marital Quality

Several studies have examined marital satisfaction, stability, and marital quality among Muslims. Some studies explored different dimensions of marital satisfaction and marital quality among Muslims in the western world. Chapman and Cattaneo (2013) investigated marital quality of Muslim Americans and reported mainly healthy and satisfying marriages for Muslims who participated in their study. Marital problems included issues with in-laws, family or friends, finances, and differing interests and conflicting attitudes concerning sex.

### Women issues and Marriage

It seems like Muslim women's identity, needs, and the challenges they face in marital relationships have been examined extensively within the past decade. Abdolsalehi-Najafi and Beckman (2013) explored the relationship between sexuality, guilty consciences, and life satisfaction among Iranian-American women. Bano (2007) examined the experiences of British Muslim women in relation to issues related to family justice and human rights. She explored the tension between feminism and Islam while drawing upon empirical research to explore the use of religious arbitration by British Pakistani Muslim women. Ali, Mahmood, Moel, Hudson, and Leathers' (2008) findings indicate a complex relationship between feminism, gender roles, culture, and religion with the majority of Muslim women reporting that their religion supports feminist principles and that they can easily identify with many feminist principles.

## Marital instruments utilized in working with Muslims

Gibbons and Hamby (1997) cautioned researchers about using instruments that are developed in western cultures, how they may not apply to nonwestern samples, and suggested adopting reliable instruments when conducting research about Muslims (Chapman & Cattaneo, 2013). Some studies tried to validate scales or questionnaires that can be used with western Muslim populations. Rippy and Newman (2008) adopted a psychological race-related stress scale to be used with Muslim Americans. Haque and Davenport (2009) did a reliability study of the Locke-Wallace Marital Adjustment Test for Muslims. Asamarai, Solberg, and Solon (2008) created a new instrument called the Assessment of Muslim Marital Satisfaction (AMMS), with versions in both Arabic and English.

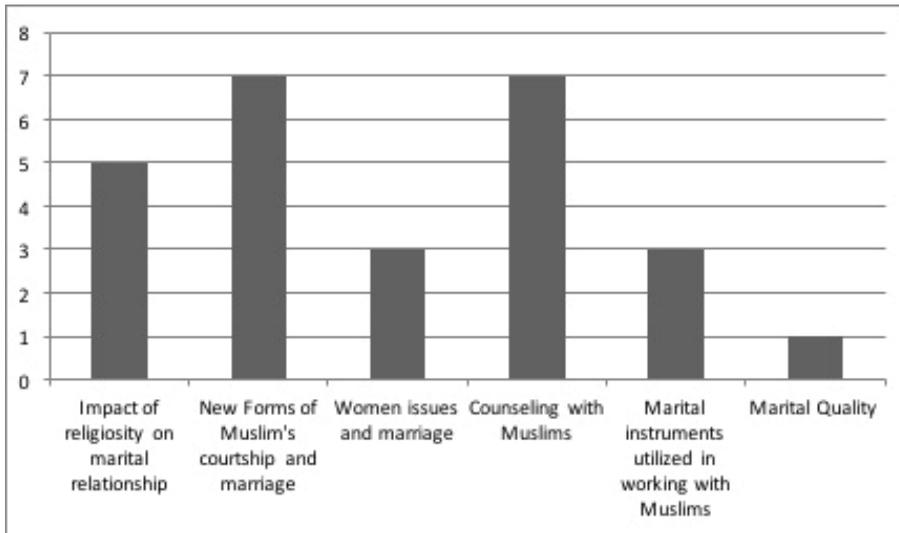
## Counseling with Muslims

Some researchers have expressed concerns about the mental health needs of Muslim families in the West. Daneshpour (2010) explored the importance of using systemic thinking in working with Muslim families. Al-Krenawi and Graham (2005) conducted a case study of Arab Muslim Palestinian couples' challenges who lived in America and then returned to Palestine. Johnson (2013) used Rational Emotional Behavior Therapy (REBT) with Jewish, Christian, and Muslim couples in the U.S. and reported the usefulness of this method in addressing marital issues of religious individuals. Kennedy, Godlas, Gale, and Parker (2010) produced a case study expressing the need for cross-disciplinary collaborations between family therapists and Muslim scholars. Sauerheber, Nims, and Carter (2014) suggested ways in which Bowen theory can be applied in a way that is respectful to the unique values, history, and expectations of Muslim couples. Mourad and Carolan (2010), in an ecological study, examined both macro system issues like culture and historical events and micro system issues like family dynamics in treatment with Arab Muslim women. Springer, Abbott, and Reisbig (2009) tried to provide culturally sensitive guidelines for clinical practices with Muslims.

## Discussion

As the population of Muslims increases in the West, so too does the need for systemic therapy informed and enhanced by awareness of the client's potential worldviews and culture-specific values and practices (Daneshpour, 1998). This study did a systemic review of the past decade's conceptual and empirical

Figure 1: Frequency of the studies on Marriage Muslim (2005- 2015)



advances in the study of marital relationships among Muslims. Preliminary reviews of articles that have been written within the past decade indicate that religious orientation has a great impact on marital satisfaction. Mental health professionals should be aware of the positive role of religiosity in helping marriages sustain and survive. Also, it is imperative for mental health professionals to increase their knowledge and skills about new trends in marital relationships for younger generations of adults, such as internet matchmaking, interfaith and intercultural marriages, non-arranged marriage, and all other preferences of new generations of Muslims. Furthermore, Muslim communities across the U.S. and other western countries need to have access to culturally sensitive mental health professionals in order to deal with many of these new developmental challenges. Muslim mental health professionals can be instrumental in helping these communities because of their familiarity with Muslims' relational and cultural contexts.

The increase in the number of studies focusing on Muslim women's issues indicates the need for higher levels of knowledge and skills about this group's challenges. Furthermore, considering the paucity of trained Muslim mental health professionals, marriage education programs and workshop are extremely necessary to prepare couples for marital relationships and to enhance marital quality. Also, there is a great need to construct and adopt culturally and contextually sensitive instruments. Daneshpour (1998) stated that the most significant difference in value systems between Muslim and Anglo-American cultures is Muslim families' preference for greater connectedness, a less flexible and more hierarchical family structure, and an implicit communication style. Additional research is still needed on the Muslim community's new challenges

and needs, and the forms, structures and meanings of marriage. More research about Muslim families will increase the knowledge of this community and thus increase the ability of mental health professionals to provide culturally competent interventions. Further, it is suggested that the focus of clinical practice should be from inside families' environments and contexts since western Muslim families have been influenced by evolving family dynamics as the result of many social changes (Daneshpour, 2012).

Finally, most of the studies about Muslims were done using qualitative methodologies, which indicate that the researchers were more interested in understanding this population's specific experiences. However, we suggest that more mixed method research studies should be conducted in order to have a better understanding of this group's strengths, challenges, and needs.

### Recommendations for the Next Ten Years

This study examined the last decade's trend in studying marriages of western Muslims. Further reviews are also crucial in understanding additional trends in immigration, mental health, acculturation, gender equality, and the importance of premarital education and relationships. It would also be very informative to conduct research studies that can look at societal and relational challenges of Muslims living in Muslim-majority countries and compare them with those living in the West. It seems very promising that the last decade's studies of Muslim family relationships has used a postmodern lens, paying very close attention to Muslim couples' subjective reality as opposed to using static and Eurocentric definitions in evaluating relational issues.

It is our hope that researchers continue to examine and explore Muslim family relational dynamics and focus more on the following areas of research: impact of gender on marital satisfaction; the changing definition of family; family caregiving; changing spousal roles; the rise of cohabitation and its impact on Muslim families; and the impact of acculturation on western Muslim children; and, most importantly, premarital and marital interventions for healthier functioning of Muslim families.

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