

Behind the Backlash: Muslim Americans After 9/11 by Lori Peek. Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 2010. 230 pp. \$26.95

It is often said that the attacks of September 11, 2001 united Americans like never before. People joined together to grieve, provide comfort and aid to those most in need, and affirm their national pride. In *Behind the Backlash*, Lori Peek points out that this common narrative ignores a terrible truth: Muslim Americans, many of whom had lived in the U.S. their entire lives, were largely excluded from the “community of sufferers.” Not only were their worries regarding future terrorist attacks and sadness in response to the nation’s losses deemed illegitimate, but they also faced a second tragedy all their own – consistent prejudice and discrimination following the attacks.

Expertly organizing data from in-depth interviews of one-hundred forty Muslim Americans conducted soon after 9/11, Peek provides a compelling and intimate look at members of a community struggling with events that suddenly overtook their lives. Throughout, Peek demonstrates great skill as a researcher and writer by seamlessly weaving salient themes from the academic literature (e.g., immigration, assimilation and socialization, social identity, prejudice and discrimination, gender, and emotions) into the narrative without letting her references to the literature distract from her storytelling.

The book’s main contribution is its first-hand accounting of Muslim Americans’ experiences with, and efforts to cope with, prejudice after 9/11. Peek’s study participants experienced many insults and much hostility in public spaces. (Peek’s interview data make clear that official estimates of hate crimes during this period vastly understate the problem.) Less sensational, but perhaps just as damaging psychologically, were the

ubiquitous stares participants received in public; Peek identifies four types – hate stares, intimidation stares, suspicious stares, and apprehensive looks. The greatest testament to the cumulative harm her subjects experienced as a result is the extent to which they altered their daily routines. Some remained inside their homes for weeks after 9/11. Many of those who ventured out avoided public transportation, traveled only in groups, avoided eye contact with non-Muslims, and restricted their conversations to English only. Arguments erupted between those who wore traditional Islamic dress, often women, and their family members who worried that this visibility endangered their safety.

Peek's study participants described an impressive resilience among Muslim Americans as they coped with these difficulties. For example, Muslim Americans reached out to one another in extensive "telephone call-chains," sharing information and providing moral support and advice over the phone. In addition, many used the post-9/11 backlash as an impetus to better educate themselves, as well as non-Muslim peers, about Islam.

No book is perfect. In my view, Peek pushes too hard to provide a coherent narrative, likely overlooking some diversity of experience among her study participants as well as other Muslim Americans. For example, in fastidiously documenting anti-Muslim prejudice and discrimination, Peek sometimes gives the impression that her study's participants were never treated with kindness or fairness by non-Muslim Americans. Peek also suggests that her findings extend to Muslim Americans in general without considering the ways in which the experiences and points of view of her young, educated, participatory, mainly New-York area sample (see p. 7) may have differed from those of other Muslim Americans.

This criticism is of little consequence relative to Peek's contribution, however. *Behind the Backlash* demonstrates the value of systematic qualitative work in the social sciences. By allowing her participants to speak in their own voices and then by engaging in the arduous work of integrating those many perspectives, Peek offers tremendous insight into the Muslim American experience in the wake of 9/11.

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