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Abstract Only – Work in Progress

“Well, They’re Talking: American Muslim Women and Cross-Gender Interactions”

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This paper examines the ways in which American Muslim women undergraduates construct difference and ordinariness, focusing on their interactions with men. While some Muslim women date, even casually, during their undergraduate education, others feel the stress of difference as they work to avoid “ordinary” dating patterns. Some American Muslim women construct their identities using the avoidance of dating, or physical contact, or close friendships with men, while others construct their identities around being comfortable talking to men, or having male friends. Parental and community norms are important to them, but, in general, they tend to find a middle ground between mainstream college norms and parental beliefs. Generally, Muslim men and women both hold their reputations to be important, and adjust behaviors accordingly, especially in Muslim spaces such as Muslim Student Association (MSA) events. The “official Islamic” norms in MSA spaces are generally stricter than those of individuals involved in these organizations. The gender segregation practiced in these spaces is generally not reproduced in the individual and collective lives of Muslim students, even many MSA leaders. Muslim women students combine Muslim, cultural, and mainstream American college norms to construct their identities on the ground, in the “third space” where they do their identity work. They “do not quite fit” whether in the “official” Islamic spaces of MSA, their parents’ expectations regarding interaction with men, or the mainstream undergraduate world.