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Interviewer/Number of Interview: SA, Interview 2 (SA19)

Date of Interview: May 7, 2019

Name of Interviewee Assigned by Researcher (to protect identity): Respondent

Year of Birth: In the 1990s

Gender: Female

Country of Origin: Birthplace is U.S. Her family is originally from Palestine.

Year of Immigration: N.A.

Note: In the transcript, *I* refers to Interviewer, and *R* refers to respondent/interviewee. To protect the identity of the interviewee, some responses to questions are not provided. In such cases, this statement will show in the transcript: Information is not being made available. In other responses, specific details that might identify the family members are omitted or made more general.

Abstract:

The respondent is a Palestinian-American woman who was born and raised in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. She is a college graduate who was diagnosed with anxiety, depression and PTSD a few years ago. In the Interview, Respondent discusses how her condition has impacted her throughout the past few years and how her mental health has really deteriorated, impacting her personal relationships in life. She discusses the type of support, or lack of, from the community and those around her and gives insight on what she feels can change within the community to really help others like herself. She discusses future goals and striving to branch out of Milwaukee, and the integrated and familiar, yet toxic, community she grew up in. Respondent describes her biggest struggles dealing with mental health issues, bringing awareness to members of the community, and encouraging others to go into professions that can help the youth in the community, specifically those undergoing mental health related issues.

Key Themes:

Mental Health, depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, family, relationships, generational differences, counseling, religion, stigma of mental health issues, need for more Muslim counselors and social workers, changes needed in Muslim community, problems paying for medicine and mental health counseling

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Transcript:

S: Okay so I'm just going to tell you a little bit about the project that we are working on. I am a student at Marquette University conducting interviews on people with differences of abilities and Milwaukee Muslim immigrants. The project is under the leadership of Dr. Enaya Othman, who you may know. She's the president of the nonprofit organization, the Arab and Muslim Women's Research and Resource Institute, and Assistant Professor and director of the Arabic and cultural studies program at Marquette. It's important that we understand the experiences and perspectives of Muslims who have any difference in abilities or who are caregivers -- in your case, you are the individual with it. Currently there is a lack of knowledge of people's experiences, the barriers that they face or things that they may need like resources that they need. So we're just conducting interviews as a first step to bring more awareness to these issues in our community and kind of like understand the weight of cultural beliefs and how they may impact these kinds of issues. We will be spurring dialogue within the Muslim community and scholars- and that's why we are also interviewing Imams and other Muslim people within our community. So your story is important to us in just educating others and identifying needs that you, specifically, may have -- and other people like you may have.

I: So the first question is what's your age?

R: [Early 20s]

I: Okay, and then where were you born?

R: Milwaukee, Wisconsin

I: So how do you identify yourself in terms of your National background?

R: Palestinian, American

I: Okay, and what's the highest level of education that you have completed and in what?

R: Bachelors [More specific information is not being made available.]

I: And where did you complete that?

R: [Information is not being made available.]

I: Okay, and are you currently married? What is your marital status?

R: Not married

I: Okay, and you can choose to not answer anything- you can say pass. Do you have any children?

R: No

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I: Do you currently work outside of your home?

R: Self-employed.

I: Okay, so how many hours a week, about, would you say you work? Or does it depend?

R: [Typically 20-30 hours per week]

I: Okay, so, part time.... so that I do have a better understanding of your situation, identify if you have one of the following. Since I do know your case, we're talking about mental health. Are you currently going through this, or is this something you went through in the past?

R: What do you mean?

I: Like is this something that has happened to you and it's over, and you want to talk about your experience? Or is this something that you're still kind of feel like you're currently battling?

R: I think I've endured many things and I'm still battling it. So there is not necessarily a root cause, I think they're just like a bunch of little things that just added up and that were neglected so that over time it just became worse.

I: Like it built up?

R: Yes

I: Okay, so could you kind of describe the issues related to your disability that you experienced? Just anything and everything that you feel like you do experience and the way it impacts you negatively or positively if you feel like it does?

R: Uhm, [A few years ago], I was diagnosed with depression, anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder. The PTSD was because of certain events in my life [during college.] It was just very bad at the [time of diagnosis]. Let's see. I was very anti-social. I didn't know how to make friends or keep friends, and that's something I still struggle with. I would say I have a very distorted sense of self and also distorted sense of time. You go through life kind of living in your head more than in real life. You're always late. You put off things longer than you need them to -- you have anxiety going anywhere or see anyone. You overthink anything you say or do. It's just honestly a lot of stuff. It's so hard to explain to people.

I: But that impacts your everyday behavior your everyday relationships?

R: Yeah, my quality of life is just not the best, you know? And it doesn't help when you don't really have a lot of friends that understand it, just because it's something that is not really talked about or where a lot of things are seen as an excuse.

I: Yeah, you can't really have them like understand what's really going on in your head, you

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know, so it's just the way -- like a personal inner battle that you have to go through.

R: Yeah, exactly.

I: So what factors do you think might have led to this condition? Just in general. And you don't have to get specific, but just in the realm of things. I know that you said there was not one root cause, but do you think it was friendships? Do you think it was your family? Do you think it was your religion? So what do you think was a factor that led to this?

R: Honestly, I think if I were to generalize at least one factor, it would be like a toxic community.

I: Do you think that this relates to your being Arab or Muslim or the Milwaukee community or your primary culture/nationality?

R: I wouldn't know. I just feel like Milwaukee is a very unique place. I feel like there's so much struggle and sacrifice that came into living here but through that, there's just a lot of disconnect between generations and just not knowing how to really be there for each other, and I think I was just neglected as a kid. Misunderstood by friends and family. This environment could be better. I feel like a lot of it is environmental. I could thrive somewhere else.

I: Yeah. OK so you can go on about the factors -- do you think it's related to you being Arab or Muslim?

R: I don't know. I have always grown up feeling different to my surroundings and never really had a close circle of friends you know; everything was really temporary and everything is kind of drifting and a lot of it is my fault through habits and mindsets that were created by my mental illness. It just makes you distance yourself. I'd want to blame everything on a cause or an illness. I'm very self-aware so I don't like blaming others ...

I: And I mean it's a buildup so it's not like..

R: I just like to think there's a cause and effect but what keeps me sane is that I didn't become this way on my own. Umm you know I've endured so much, like in my years of living. I don't think I've had the same experiences as my friends and you know and even now it's just really hard. I'm trying to use Ramadan to really heal from things and stop letting the past affect me but when you have PTSD it's like you're constantly reliving it, as if it happened 5 minutes ago. And these are just things that are just hard for friends and family to understand. I know my mother doesn't like seeing me feeling this way. She will tell me to get over it and not let it affect me. It just hurts seeing what I go through affects other people.

I: So what do you think of the nature of the care that you see from those around you at that time, especially when you were diagnosed or a peak time? What was the nature of the care you were receiving from people around you?

R: I don't know. I've had moments where I've felt confident about it, like I could help someone

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else by talking about it. But I've also had moments where I've felt just ashamed, and I've felt like I was a mistake. I was better off not being here. Just distance myself from everyone. I shouldn't have said anything. It's like I never really felt like I was okay, and I never really felt like I was in this place where I was safe to express how I was feeling. Or you know being in a safe place to heal because the healing process is messy. I never feel like I had that yet. So my ultimate goal in life -- like what gives me hope -- is maybe just changing my environment but throughout what I'm trying to do is like restart my own mindset so I just feel like the environment is probably the root cause because people in places just affect you, and as much as I hate that, I was influenced as a kid. I was just more vulnerable and sensitive than most.

I: That's why like you can change what's in your control and everything else...

R: I'm trying.

I: And everything else you kind of try to let go of, you know.

R: The thing I don't want to see is like the environment is the root cause, so go somewhere else. I don't think it's that simple because I feel like if I don't try to fix what's in my mind, it's just going to constantly follow me through my academic life, my professional life, friendships -- and that's what it's doing, you know.

I: It'll go with you wherever you kind of go so it's something you got to battle first before you can really change. Yeah so sounds like there's a lot of progress that has been done.

R: Inshallah

I: So what do you think -- and we kind of talked about this a lot -- but what are the biggest challenges that you faced regarding your difference in ability, we don't like to call it disability we see difference in ability.

R: That's cute. Like challenges how so? Like symptoms of it or like how it affected me? Like things happened because of it?

I: What are the biggest challenges that you face? Just in general. What are the biggest challenges that you face?

R: I just want to keep it concise I don't want to go all over the place

I: So let's talk about how it's impacted you psychologically and emotionally -- your lack of support from people friends, family.

R: I just feel like the environment makes people, because of the environment and how it shapes people. I don't think I'll ever have a good support system here you know. I think that's not anyone's fault, it's just...

I: Does this include your Muslim friends specifically, or is this friends from all kinds of

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backgrounds just everyone we think.

R: Well, I don't know why. That's a hard question really -- I don't have many non-Muslim friends. I just feel like there's something about the environment and how things that are neglected to talk about -- everything our mind sets are. I just feel sometimes I have a different mindset. I feel very different all the time. I think one of the worst things that I hate is how I feel so distant from friends and family because of it, and I could easily just feel very tired of everyone and not want to speak or and be involved or anything. That comes--

I: Your capacity just hits a max more than you, you would want and you'd want to break open the shell.

R: Yeah. I just don't like this version of myself to do that -- you know especially after graduation, I just get so used to not talking to anyone and it just becomes harder and harder trusting anyone. Getting up every morning just becomes harder. It just became easier to freelance instead of working at a firm, even though I really need to make that next step, but that's kind of a battle that I'm facing right now.

I: Those are steps you know like you said SO you think like those are kind of the main like emotional impact it's had on you?

R: Yeah it makes you feel worthless. My confidence plummeted over the years. Honestly like I remember beginning, I remember just being a senior in high school and just wanting to go to [a particular kind of program in college -- more specific details are not being made available.] And just immediately, every dream I had was just shot down.

I: So you don't feel like you've had people in your life who've tried to eh, who've really succeeded in just like uplifting you, especially family. Family is important -- at least to me personally. That's who I see the most who I live with and that is who I would expect to be the people to kind of like really give me that support and make me feel adequate, make me feel like "no you can do this" you know.

R: I think my mom does, but it would help to have like that side of that kind of example of your version of success that you want to adhere to, but I unfortunately wasn't given that. And I have different perspectives and opinions about how that should be. So when it doesn't meet what those around you have, you kind of just feel like everyone's pushing you down and telling you not to just be you -- where you want to be -- so it's just very limiting. But when you have that, it affects you so much. What my least favorite thing about it is how it makes me feel inadequate, like how I start to believe it, even though I know I have more potential than I give myself credit for. I have self-destructive habits where I don't work as hard or not as productive. I don't show up and don't go out.

I: It's just a barrier; it just holds you down and you're not accomplishing everything you want to.

R: Then you feel like you're in a rock and then one day when you're feeling a little better and you come out of the rock there's so much collateral damage because of people that you distanced

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yourself from communications that you ruined. That's just a constant cycle. It's like you never know when it's going to hit. I just crave consistency and there are other worse symptoms, like health-wise you know.

I: Yeah you think like physical, like responses because I know like, personally, I used to get really bad panic attacks and my anxiety would make me throw up; I would physically get stomach aches. I'd throw up, I would get dizzy, and I would have induced panic attacks and chest pains.

R: It becomes physical.

I: Yeah it really really does.

R: Yeah I have the same thing. I actually had it very bad and couldn't eat. I was hospitalized a few times. I lost so much weight just because of my depression. I don't feel healthy at all. I feel very drowsy all the time. Loss of appetite and also a big appetite like you feel like binge eating -- just not consistent at all. I went through a couple medications, and then there's also the issue of insurance and being able to afford everything.

I: So that kind of takes this into our next question, but before that I wanted to ask you if your experiences had an impact on your religious and spiritual... like any spiritual crisis that you went through or any religious conflicts you've gone through?

R: Yes, I feel like I was at a point in my life where I had it all figured out with religion you know. You grew up so obedient, you just listen to what you're taught and everything. But then there came a time there was tension between someone who I associated my religion with and had much respect for. When there was tension between them and myself, it kind of affected my religion in a way where I was made to feel like I was inadequate as a Muslim or not Muslim enough because I was depressed. So that affected me you know like I think it affected my prayers. This was a few years ago and it was like the worst because you know my religion was everything to me. As kid, like I said, I didn't have many friends. I remember I used to ditch recess just to be at the masjid and just to feel like safe. I never felt safe in the community or in high school. We just didn't have a good environment. We just had a bunch of people that were out to get each other and I feel like we still face that. Everyone is just out to get each other, out to bring each other down, wanting to know who did what, who did this, and who said this, and look who they're marrying. It's just the most obnoxious and toxic behavior, and it scared me because I was so naive -- so naive and vulnerable. Like I was too empathetic. Having a personality like that, around others like -- it just made me want to be by myself. But when I felt distant from my religion, that was probably the worst. I think that's where a lot of the suicidal ideation began. It's hard to explain I-- [PAUSE] Its confidential right you said?

I: Yeah just me and you.

R: [Respondent explained that she had attempted suicide. Many of her family members and friends don't know about that. Those that do, don't understand it and give their own explanations, which aren't accurate and tend to rely on inaccurate knowledge of depression,

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anxiety or suicide. She strongly believes that her depression and anxiety (and resulting behavior) have a chemical component – there’s a chemical imbalance in her system. Additional information from the transcript is not being made available.]

I: People don’t understand, people don’t really know [why].

R: Yeah I think that’s the worst part.

I: How much help did you seek professionally you know? Like what was the quality of the healthcare you received?

R: I had both normal and good care, but it's just hard to keep up with it, expense wise. Also you're not white and there's always this disconnect between you and your therapist because they only understand things based on their own culture. And it's so hard because you don't want to say anything and make them think something different of your religion or your background. You know like you just want them to see you as another person that struggles with depression and like any other patient, but you'll always feel like the only thing they have to say is about culture or religion.

I: Do you think you were ever, on a large scale or small scale, discriminated against or is it just that they saw you as kind of like “the other”?

R: Just small micro aggression -- I don’t really think its micro aggression.

I: It doesn't have to be intentional.

R: Their solution seemed to be like change your religion, change your culture, then you will be okay. That's what it seems like; that's what their attitudes seem like. And it bothered me because, even though I'd express that not every Muslim family or community is like this, you know there's always something good and bad in every culture and everything, it seemed like they were saying, “oh you're fine, you just have a bad religion or culture.” That's what it seemed like their attitude was.

I: And that doesn’t help.

R: It doesn't honestly, you want to be able to talk to someone, you want to do the responsible thing for yourself and seek help and treatment.

I: So have you sought advice for help from somebody within the Muslim community?

R: I think I did once like a family counselor.

I: How did that go?

R: It was too expensive, and I don't feel like it really went anywhere. It was hard to talk about -- I guess I just didn't trust AT THE TIME. [Respondent discussed the experience and especially

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appreciated seeing another perspective outside of her family. But she also felt like there was no hope, although she made this statement: “But then it also brings you back to your faith, where it's like Allah understands at least so you just have to look at the brighter side.”]

I: What kind of changes do you think could happen within the Muslim community, or Islamic school or ISM that would be helpful?

R: I don't know. I guess it's like you don't want pity, you don't want sympathy. It's just about knowledge or like acknowledging that this is a real thing. Teach it in your schools. But it's so hard because a lot of us were first generation and we probably understand it more, well, honestly. So like when we have older and more traditional parents, they really see it as something wrong with you, which will just make kids judge other kids and everything. I don't know, but just create a safe community where you explain that depression and anxiety often have a chemical component. Create a non-judgmental environment where people who even stray away from the faith or have difficult situations in their family are able to go to the mosque and return to God instead of blaming people and making them not want to come to the Masjid. There seems to be a desire to want everyone to be a certain way, which is like a very surface level -- most of them holding a traditional Muslim way, you know what I mean.

I: It's like so much deeper than that.

R: It's so much deeper than that because all the people probably endured so much in their life and went astray and came back the strongest Muslims, rather than someone who was like super sheltered on every level.

I: Yeah who just conform usually.

R: Yeah, just conform you know.

I: They understand what they're actually doing.

R: They come back to it and actually believe it.

I: So many people like myself have had to like stray and relearn their religion, study it again, read about it.

R: Yeah teach it to ourselves and bring ourselves back. There should be more Muslim counselors, though, and even in school -- even in college. I feel like it's so important for Muslims to have someone to go to go to talk to because of their transition from high school to college. At least like Islam school to college. I feel like when you have that, you're able to have that kind of support system outside of your own. I just feel everyone needs a support system outside of their immediate support system because you don't want anyone to look for support elsewhere outside and make them feel safer. They should feel safe in their faith within their community, not unsafe. You kind of go through things alone.

I: Have you ever considered moving, just to seek a different community that may help you?

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R: I don't think I would move to a different community but you know for a job for opportunities yes of course like just graduate school, to grow.

I: So it's not a personal move?

R: I think I just kind of gave up on the whole looking for a community thing. I don't see myself depending on environment or feeling like I have a home you know like I feel like Milwaukee will always be my home and I hope I can get back, grow and come back and give back and help change the mindset in anyway but I know that staying here I won't thrive; I won't succeed because it's just a limiting environment. And like it's no one's fault. Again I don't like blaming anyone, even though like I did endure pain from many people. At the end of the day, we have to control how we react and how we feel from it and what steps we take to help ourselves combat these influences.

I: What do you think people's perceptions are, Muslims in our community, of depression, anxiety, PTSD? Is it a negative is it a positive, is there some that understand this, some are just kind of neutral?

R: I feel like some people still don't want to understand it. We just hate on things we don't understand because it's like they're so used to the tradition, like how they grew up in. Like they're in this comfortable space [and feel threatened by] any new ideas, ideologies, any new mindsets, or perspectives.

They just think it's made up. Or they just don't take it seriously because it's not really important. We prioritize the wrong things in this community sometimes, you know.

I: Do you think you being a female face these issues differently, than somebody being a male? Do you think it would have been different for a male?

R: I think it's scary being a female in this community. Honestly, it's like anything you say or do, they could just quickly switch it up. Just being female is like a limitation in this community because they only see you as one way, like a potential bride. They don't really see you as being able to do something for the community; there's like a social hierarchy in the community itself. I feel like, unfortunately, if more men and sheikhs and Imams address this issue and did acknowledge it and more men came up with "I have this and this" it would be more accepted honestly. When it comes to a girl, there needs to be like an ulterior motive, "why is she depressed. She's probably depressed because this and this and this" you know like and they question your intentions and why you became that way. That's my least favorite thing -- when anyone makes assumptions about anyone because no one will truly know another person unless they're like super close to them and grew up with them. Otherwise, you cannot question someone's intentions and invalidate how they feel when it comes to this. But I feel like for girls, it's so easy for anyone to do, you know.

I: They're more vulnerable.

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R: Yeah, very. They don't want you to speak up about things like this.

I: So what's something that you think our community, our health care providers, our teachers or friends and family and people in this community, what do you think they should know that could be more useful for people like you know you or others that go through any type of disability or any type of difference?

R: I don't know honestly, it's hard to answer that.

I: Well what do you think is something that, if you could tell everybody something that you would want them to know about, what do you think is something you'd say?

R: I don't know. I guess just simply be kind and not be close minded to something they don't understand or go through. Like sometimes it's...like alhamdulillah if you don't go through it. But at the same time someone could easily be your sister, your mom, your daughter. Imagine if they were enduring what this person is going through, and just be more empathetic and be a more nurturing and safe environment you know. It takes only one person -- it takes just the thing I said earlier -- ultimately it's just knowledge. Just not being ignorant about it will do so much, and it'll create compassionate/passionate people and make them want to open up free clinics. And you know become psychologists or psychiatrists and be part of that movement to fight the stigma against mental health in the Muslim community. Like we just need more of that. Except we go towards majors that our families want us to go through or some somewhere other than...

I: The money chasing the status as opposed to actually making a difference. I think that's why people don't really go into social work as much, don't want to go into counselling, psychology therapy.

R: Even though if there were more Muslims in the field, it would help so much. It would help the community; people overlook those small professions. Yes, social workers are really underpaid. I read recently about there was a job at New York City where they needed a master's degree from someone in social work and it was like for like LGBTQ Counselling and they're only paying \$23,000. [Respondent and Interviewer further discussed pay rates in the social work field and how other countries value this occupation more, and pay more for such services.]

I: I'm done with the questions, but I definitely agree that there is so much work that needs to be done.

R: There's so much that each Muslim can do through each of their professions, like offering some free legal counseling or health services. Some Muslim youth can't even seek it because they're scared that their parents will see it, or they won't be covered, or they can't afford it. If they don't have the financial or emotional support when it comes to it, and if they're suffering on their own, then it can get to a point where someone takes their life or does something very self-destructive and impulsive. I think the scariest part is that the Muslim community will just blame them, that they were cowardly and not pray for them because they're going to hell; I just think that's very sad. I don't believe that. I know we're taught that, but I don't believe it. Allah knows and Allah helps lead to that person who will be held accountable, but we don't see it that way,

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unfortunately. This is not justifying it of course; there's a cause and effect.

I: Thank you so much [for sharing your experiences and perspectives on changes that are needed].