

2018

# Factors that Influence how Sunni Muslims in Western Michigan Perceive Violence

Joyce Busch  
*Walden University*

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# Walden University

College of Social and Behavioral Sciences

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Joyce Busch

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## Review Committee

Dr. Richard Worch Jr., Committee Chairperson,  
Public Policy and Administration Faculty

Dr. Kevin Fandl, Committee Member,  
Public Policy and Administration Faculty

Dr. David Milen, University Reviewer,  
Public Policy and Administration Faculty

Chief Academic Officer  
Eric Riedel, Ph.D.

Walden University  
2018

Abstract

Factors that Influence how Sunni Muslims in Western Michigan Perceive Violence

by

Joyce M. Busch

MA, Western Governors University, 2015

MSS, United States Army War College, 2011

MA, Western Governors University, 2007

MBA, Touro University, 2003

BS, United States Military Academy, 1987

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

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## Abstract

Decisionmakers in organizations like the Department of Defense and the State Department rely on accurate information to develop strategies to engage foreign populations. There is gap in understanding how perceptions are formed in religious adherents, specifically understanding how Muslims determine if violence is an acceptable or unacceptable behavior. Informed by Hobföll's conservation of resources theory of stress, the purpose of this case study was to identify and understand the religious and secular factors that influenced a group of Sunni Muslims in Western Michigan to accept or reject violent behaviors. Research questions focused on how this population's perception of violence was influenced by religion, various sources of information and threats of loss. Convenience sampling was used to identify the participants for this study. Data were collected from face-to-face interviews with 10 Sunni Muslims living in Western Michigan. The interviews were recorded, transcribed and the data were inductively coded and examined to identify trends in the information. While identity and religion were important to understanding how Muslims view the acceptability of violence, perceptions of the justice system's effectiveness emerged as an important factor in understanding an individual's tolerance for violent behaviors. The results of this study may contribute to positive social change by informing leaders who engage large Muslim populations about how perceptions of identity and justice system efficacy impact the acceptability of violent behaviors.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

### **Introduction**

Approximately 84% of the world's population considers themselves to be a member of a religious group or faith (Global Religious Landscape, 2012); however, prior to the attacks in the United States on September 11, 2001, many Americans had little understanding of the religions, faiths and cultures of the Middle East. Following Al-Qaeda's statements explaining the religious motivations behind the deadly 9/11 acts and Aum Shinrikyo's justifications for the sarin attacks in Japan during the 1990s, many in the U.S. government began to recognize how the combination of religion, ideology, and politics could result in violent and deadly outcomes (Gates & Steane, 2010; Reader, 2012; Weinberg & Eubank, 2010).

While many acknowledge that religion can be used to justify a wide range of actions both peaceful and violent, there is little agreement on which specific factors contribute to how a religious adherent perceives peace or violence. Understanding the role religion plays in a society and recognizing how it interacts with other cultural influences to shape an individual's perceptions is critical to understanding how best to engage with other cultures. In this study, I attempted to explain why notable religious adherents and peace advocates such as Mahatma Gandhi, the Dalai Lama, and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. view violence as objectionable behavior while other religious leaders see violence as an acceptable means to achieving an end. I examined the reasons and

conditions that shape the perceptions of a population in order to provide managers, planners, and policy makers in governmental organizations with information that may be helpful to make informed decisions.

In this chapter, I discuss the study's background, offer the problem statement, and outline purpose of the study. Additionally, I introduce the research questions and discuss the nature of the study, along with my assumptions, and the study's scope, limitations, and significance.

### **Background**

In recent research on religion and violence, scholars have worked to determine whether religion encourages or inhibits violence (Huber, 2011; Kippenberg, 2010; Sukma, Ma'ruf, & Abdullah, 2011). Bradley (2010), Cliteur (2010a), Cliteur (2010b), Ibrahim (2009), and Scott (2009) have demonstrated how religious leaders use religion to condone, advocate, and even direct believers to commit acts of violence while Walsh (2012) and Van Pelt Campbell (2011) attempt to prove that an individual's religious beliefs can serve as encouragement for its believers to reject violence and to conduct their lives through peaceful means. Additionally, a significant portion of the recent literature (Falahi, 2010; Scott, 2009; Weinberg & Eubank, 2010) has been focused specifically on how Islam or Islamic texts advocate violence and has neglected to address other roles that Islam may play in the formation of individual perceptions.

Researchers who have examined the role of religion in the formation of individual and group identity have suggested that globalization can be seen as a potential threat to a society's identity (Basedau, Strüver, Vüllers, & Wegenast, 2011; Sen & Wagner, 2009). Other researchers (Aly & Striegher, 2012; Mani, 2012) have discussed how religion creates individual and group identities that can ultimately form an in-group consisting of those within the group or society and an out-group consisting of those who are not part of the group or society. Studies have shown that protection of this religious identity using these groups have been used as justification for violence (Ginges, Hansen, & Norenzayan, 2009). While several researchers have conducted quantitative studies to identify the factors that contribute to violence, insufficient qualitative research has been conducted to examine the relationships, interactions, and consequences amongst the various factors that contribute to the belief that violence is acceptable.

The behaviors of religious adherents have also been the topic of examination by researchers to determine if the very nature of religion is violent or peaceful (Beyers, 2011; Ginges et al., 2009; Henne, 2012). In these works, there is a common premise that religion is a critical factor in understanding why an adherent accepts or rejects violence. What scholars have not thoroughly addressed in the recent literature is the notion that religion, as an institution, may play a minor, supporting role in a religious believer's attitudes toward violence. My intent in this study was to identify how other factors can influence the way that a Muslim adherent perceives violence. This research is needed to

help policy and decision makers understand the most relevant factors, beyond the influence of religion, that affect people's perceptions of violence.

### **Problem Statement**

There is a problem in some governmental organizations responsible for making critical decisions. Despite the continually growing need to engage people from different cultures, there is often insufficient information to understand how and why individuals from different cultures form and hold their beliefs. This problem has negatively impacted some of the interactions Americans have had with individuals from other cultures because they were either uninformed or misinformed about those they would engage (Juergensmeyer, 2010).

A possible cause of this problem is a lack of relevant information about how cultural norms are formed and maintained. Perhaps a study investigating which factors most significantly influence a religious adherent could assist in making critical decisions. Globalization is becoming an increasingly significant issue in international engagements. Recent U.S. government involvement in the Middle East has demonstrated that intercultural relations have also become more significant issue in recent years, but the problem of insufficient information has not been fully resolved. In order to address cross-cultural interactions, it is necessary to know more about perceptions and how they are formed. I determined that a case study designed to identify and examine the factors that influence religious adherents may help to address this issue.

In much of the world today, violence is generally considered an unacceptable behavior. Laws, ethical standards, and social norms are ways that a society indicates its level of tolerance for violence against another person. They are also the means for directing consequences against those who violate a society's conventions. While the specific principles of each society's morality may differ, there are several similarities amongst the factors that influence a society's norms.

The economic and political environment in which a society lives has a significant impact on the attitude of the individuals in that society. In highly developed nations with effective, inclusive governments, individuals tend to be less susceptible to terrorist violence than those in authoritarian regimes with significant social or economic inequalities (Çinar, 2009). Religious beliefs can also influence how individuals in a society perceive violence, especially if the holy texts of a particular belief contain passages that can be interpreted to condone or even advocate violence.

Understanding not only which factors influence the perceptions and attitudes of a society, but also how they influence a society's beliefs is critical to successful intercultural engagements. Despite the benefits of developing this understanding, some researchers have been hesitant to broach this subject because of the sensitivity of the notion that religion might encourage violence. Indeed, Cliteur (2010b) has noted "a great reluctance to study this relationship" (p. 205), which can have potentially disastrous results.



Although researchers have conducted quantitative studies to understand how religion affects the commission of violent acts (Canetti, Hobföll, Pedahzur, & Zaidise, 2010; Johnson et al., 2009; Littleton, Axsom, & Grills-Taquechel, 2009; Littleton, Kumpula, & Orcutt, 2011), insufficient effort has been made to understand how religion interacts with other factors to affect the perception of violence. Understanding these interactions can provide valuable insight to not only academics and scholars, but also to planners and practitioners for use in international or intercultural engagements. For example, from a national security perspective, Cliteur (2010b) suggested that “only on the basis of a realistic estimate of the facts can a successful counterterrorist strategy be developed” (p. 205) and if there exists a lack of relevant data to inform the critical decision makers, the outputs could be as irrelevant as the inputs.

Addressing this issue is important because as sociologists have recognized, understanding the complex interactions that influence human behavior can be critical to improving interactions between different nations, states, and cultures. Since the inception of their discipline, sociologists have studied religion to better understand its relationship with society (Beyers, 2011; Cinoğlu, 2010). Specifically, they have worked to understand how religion influences society and how a society in turn, influences religion. Émile Durkheim and Max Weber are two of the most noted sociologists to contribute to this understanding. While both authors attempted to explain how and why a society functions,

their diverse backgrounds and influences led them to different conclusions on the role of religion in a society's culture.

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the French sociologist Émile Durkheim published "The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life" in which he posited that religion reflects society and serves to provide a community with the basis for its ethical and moral standards (Anderson, 2012). He further argued that religion imbues social norms with a sacred character, thus often evoking an emotional reaction to compliance or noncompliance with the religious ideals (Durkheim, 1912; Anderson, 2012). Max Weber, a German sociologist focused on the influence religion had on the economic development of a society, examined whether religion promoted or discouraged the growth of capitalism (Berger, 2009; Weber, 1958). After having examined several of the largest Western and Eastern religions, he determined that while Protestantism promoted capitalism, Catholicism and many of the religions practiced in Asia discouraged such worldly pursuits that would ultimately result in capitalism (Berger, 2009; Weber, 1958).

In this research, I incorporated many of the basic tenets argued by these renowned authors to examining the influence of religion on a group's perceptions of violent actions. While Durkheim's notion that religion induces an emotional response seems to have validity, Weber's idea of an association between religion and social relationships also has merit. Sociologists today have built on the theories of Weber and Durkheim to propose various explanations for how religion affects a society, and I endeavored to further that

understanding by examining how religion influences perceptions and attitudes toward violence.

Previous quantitative research serves as a sound point of departure to understand how religious adherents form and sustain attitudes toward violence. In 2010, Canetti et al. published an article in which they discuss how researchers have used quantitative studies to examine the relationship between the religious beliefs of selected Israeli Muslims and Jews and their support for religious violence. The results of these studies suggested that the participants' support for religious violence increased when they had a psychological loss or perceived psychological loss. While these results offered important information to better understanding the perceptions of adherents, the authors acknowledged the need to conduct "more in-depth debriefing of smaller samples (that) may shed light on which theories best explain the relationships revealed in (the) study" (Canetti et al., 2010, p. 584). In this qualitative study, I was able to provide some insight on the relationships between the variables.

Additionally, several researchers have examined the relationship between the individual and group identity that religions form in a society (Aly & Striegher, 2012; Dingley, 2011; Schwartz, Dunkel, & Waterman, 2009; van Liere, 2009), but few have examined the complex interactions between identity, religion, and the perception of violence. I used a qualitative approach to comprehensively investigate the perceptions of adherents to better understand these relationships. Specifically, I examined the

combination of factors and circumstances that result in a specific attitude toward violence by religious adherents in Western Michigan.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this case study was to identify the factors that most significantly influenced the perceptions and attitudes of Sunni Muslims who live in Western Michigan in order to understand the conditions under participants found violence to be an acceptable behavior. These factors were not limited to religious factors, but also included secular considerations. For this research, I defined *violence* as the intentional use of physical force or aggression against another person with the intent to cause injury, death, or psychological harm (Violence, 2014). Because violence was defined as an action against another person, situations which involve the use of physical force against a facility or a location were not included in this research. I also did not address violence or physical abuse between partners, but did include violence conducted as an element of a conflict or war. I also examined terrorist attacks or assaults between individuals.

The participants for this research included self-identified Sunni Muslims living in Western Michigan, and I collected data through individual interviews. My initial intent was to collect data in religious facilities or worksites, but because of the potential sensitivity of the topic, I made allowances to ensure the participants were comfortable. Ultimately, the participants selected the locations for the interviews, with the majority of the interviews held at work or school locations.

For this research, I used a qualitative case study design. Qualitative research is used when “the researcher seeks to establish the meaning of a phenomenon from the views of the participants” (Creswell, 2009, p. 16). By using a qualitative approach, a researcher is able to deduce possible influencers to the perceptions under study rather than prove or disprove predetermined factors. Case study research “is a qualitative approach in which the investigator explores a real-life, contemporary bounded system...through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information” (Creswell, 2012, p. 97). This research design facilitated my study of the factors that impact the beliefs of individuals within a specified culture or social group. By understanding these factors, I could better understand why individual members of a social group perceive violence as an acceptable or an unacceptable behavior.

Previous researchers (Abdullah, Sukma, Jamhari, & Musa, 2012; Basedau et al., 2011; Bradley, 2010; Canetti, et al., 2010; Devji, 2009; Ginges et al., 2009) have examined the relationships between religion and violence amongst Muslims in the Middle East and Hindus in Asia, but few if any have examined the perceptions of these adherents under the umbrella of American culture. Important factors in this research were the economic, political, and social establishments of American culture because they have an influence on the perceptions of the select adherents. For example, in the United States, democracy influences on an individual’s perception of violence. Brooks (2009) argued that democracy reduces terrorist violence, so a researcher may consider isolating the

influence of this factor to determine how democracy affects the way an individual perceives violence in his or her environment. Because much of the recent research has not been conducted in what are traditionally known as democratic countries, this factor has not been effectively examined as an influence of a group's perceptions.

My intent was to identify factors that influence the formation of perceptions and attitudes toward violence in populations that generally do not commit heinous violent acts, but that may, given specific conditions, condone, encourage, or support the commission of violent acts. The specific processes that an individual follows to become a terrorist or to commit violence against other people have been studied and documented, but insufficient research has been conducted to understand those who provide the necessary support for these individuals and their organizations. The results of this research may facilitate an improved understanding of the factors that influence an otherwise peaceful, law-abiding religious person to support an individual or organization that commits violent acts against other people.

While many will suggest that religion alone can be sufficient reason for a generally peaceful individual to support a violent action, researchers (Lusthaus, 2011; Mani, 2012; Sen & Wagner, 2009) have emphasized that religion may provide a *supporting* justification for accepting violence but that it was not the sole reason for supporting violent acts. In this research, I examined the role religion plays in the acceptance of violence, specifically violent acts committed against an individual. I also

investigated other relevant factors that allow religious individuals to accept, and in some cases, provide support for, the conduct of violence.

For this research, the phenomena of interest were the attitudes, perceptions, and beliefs of select Muslim adherents. Specifically, I examined how a group of Sunni Muslims in Western Michigan felt about violence conducted against another person. While this study addressed the role of religion in the perceptions of adherents, the research also included other factors that may have an influence on whether an adherent sees violence as an acceptable or unacceptable behavior. As previously mentioned, because I conducted this research in the United States, American cultural influences were acknowledged in the conduct of the study. Social, political, and economic considerations were also recognized and included in the research to differentiate the cultural influences found in other nations.

Because the factors that influence beliefs and perceptions are often difficult to isolate, I endeavored to identify the most relevant considerations in understanding an individual's attitude toward violence. For example, I examined circumstances in which religion may be used as a justification for violence rather than the primary reason for conducting or supporting violence. Additionally, I examined how secular reasons such as socioeconomic factors and political considerations affect a religious adherent's perceptions. Further, I examined sources of information to identify the most credible sources and to determine what impact credibility has on the perception of the adherent.

Specifically, I examined situations in which a believer's holy text directs their faithful to commit acts of violence versus situations in which a community or political leader has called for or advocated violence. Lastly, I investigated the impact of stress caused by actual or perceived losses on perceptions toward violence. While the loss can be material or psychological, actual or perceived, the impact in many cases can be the same. I thus examined the impact of stress caused by loss on the adherent's perception of violence.

### **Research Questions**

The central question for this research was: What factors influence how Sunni Muslims from Western Michigan perceive acts of violence committed against another person? The three secondary research questions that support a comprehensive response to the central questions were: (a) What role does religion play in the perception of violence by a religious adherent? (b) What sources of information most influence an individual's attitude on violence (e.g. religious texts, formal religious teachings, family, school news, other sources)? and (c) How do threats of perceived or actual loss affect how a religious person perceives violence?

The intent of the central research question was to identify and examine the most relevant factors that influence how a Muslim from Western Michigan forms perceptions on violence, specifically violence committed against another person. In that examination, I addressed the relationships and associations among the various factors to determine what impact each has on others as well as the perceptions being discussed.



The secondary research question concerning the sources and the impact of stress caused by loss were additional factors that may also influence the perceptions of this group of religious adherents. Recognizing that the participants were limited to members of a specific religious group, the role of religion must be understood, as must the role of additional factors that emerged from the research including secular influencers such as economic, social, and political considerations.

I used a case study methodology to gather the required data to answer the research question. I was able to answer each of the four questions, including the central question and the three more detailed sub-questions, using the data gathered from the interviews. Additionally, I reviewed background materials, specifically the Muslim holy book the Qur'an, to gain an increased understanding of this religion.

Because of the potentially large number of relevant economic, social, and political factors that could have been identified and the lack of existing information on the relationship between the factors, I used inductive methods to conduct this study. After the interviews were completed and the data were recorded, I analyzed them to determine patterns of commonalities and differences. During the analysis, I identified themes and ultimately developed theories to offer a potential explanation for the existing attitudes and perceptions of these religious adherents.

### **Theoretical Framework**

I used the conservation of resources (COR) theory of stress as the theoretical framework for this study. Introduced by Dr. Stevan Hobföll in 1989, researchers use this theory to examine the various responses an individual may experience as a result of stress caused by a loss, potential loss, or perceived loss. The basic premise of this theory is that individuals “strive to retain, protect, and build resources and that what is threatening to them is the potential or actual loss of these valued resources” (Hobföll, 1989, p. 516). This theory is based on the concept that gaining, maintaining, and protecting resources drives individuals to act. It further holds that these actions may or may not comply with societal norms, resulting in behaviors that are considered to be otherwise unacceptable (Hobföll, 1989).

This model differs from previous models in that this theory addresses specific, observable behaviors individuals exhibit when faced with a stress-inducing situation. Hobföll (1989) noted that much of the research conducted prior to his presentation was largely superfluous and difficult to test. This theory, he asserted, provides “a specific set of behaviors and cognitions that may be observed in order to support, clarify, or disconfirm the model” (Hobföll, 1989, p. 521).

Hobföll (1989) also described several of the models that were current at that time to illustrate the ambiguity that motivated him to develop a more concise, comprehensible, and testable model to frame stress research. He described the theories of Cannon-Selye in

which these researchers defined stress as a response to external stimuli that may cause humans to lose resiliency (Hobföll, 1989). He noted that their work overly simplified the processes of human reactions to stress and did not sufficiently account for all of the potential variables that could affect the way people reacted to stressors.

The resources that individuals are motivated to preserve can be classified into four distinct categories: *object resources*, *conditions*, *personal characteristics*, and *energies* (Hobföll, 1989). A house, for example, can be considered an object resource while a marriage or tenure can be considered conditions as they pertain to the COR theory. Personal characteristics and energies are more difficult to define, but examples of the former include those personal assets that contribute to resilience, such as those things that would increase an individual's perception of their self-worth. Examples of energies include time or money, not because of their intrinsic value, but because of their ability to acquire other resources.

According to the COR theory, situations in which these resources are threatened would create stress that would elicit an observable response from an individual. In response to this stress, people employ a variety of coping mechanisms to mitigate the loss, often by reprioritizing what is important or replenishing the resources that were lost. Identifying the specific ways people replenish the lost or threatened resources is what differentiates the COR theory from the ones developed prior to its introduction.

While I examined material loss such as land or wealth in this study, I also examined factors such as individual and group identity to determine how the loss or potential loss of these resources affects religious adherents. In addition to studying these factors, the role of religion was also an important consideration as I conducted the research. While my overarching objective was to identify factors that influence a religious audience, secondary goals included (a) understanding how the credibility of a source affects an individual's perceptions, and (b) understanding how a loss or perceived loss affects perceptions and (c) understanding the role of religion in an adherent's perception toward violence.

I also incorporated the idea of "loss-control strategies" in the research, which according to Hobföll are employed by those who experience loss and have few resources to provide options to overcome the stress caused by loss. These loss-control strategies are described as "hav(ing) a high cost and poor chance of success" (Hobföll, 1989, p. 519). Recognizing that these means of coping may not be consistent with local customs, social norms, or laws, the COR theory offered not only the connection to the root cause, but it could also play an important role in proposing solutions by addressing the stress caused by the resource loss. By showing why a religious adherent would accept the conduct of violence, potentially in contradiction to religious teachings, this research can potentially offer insight into possible ways to mitigate the stress that causes the acceptance of this behavior.

The COR theory was important to this research because it offered a possible explanation to understand why people perceive violence as an acceptable behavior when it would otherwise be deemed unacceptable. Researchers (Canetti et al., 2010; Johnson et al., 2009; Littleton et al., 2009; Littleton et al., 2011) have conducted several quantitative studies to identify relationships and associations between religion and the acceptance of violence, but in this research, I uncovered additional connections to other, secular considerations to help explain why religious adherents would find violence acceptable.

### **Nature of the Study**

I conducted this study using a case study approach, which “involves the study of a case within a real-life contemporary context or setting” (Creswell, 2012, p. 97). In this research, I attempted to shed light on the way attitudes, perceptions, and beliefs of a specific population of Muslim religious adherents are formed and maintained. This approach allowed for a comprehensive examination of individual aspects of a select group in order to “understand a specific issues, problem or concern” (Creswell, 2012, p. 98). In this situation, a case study approach was advantageous in identifying the most significant factors that affect an adherent’s perceptions toward violence. A case study design also allowed me to examine critical relationships between loss, identity, religion, and other potentially important factors.

## **Phenomena and Key Concepts Being Investigated**

I studied the attitudes, perceptions, and beliefs of select Muslims living in Western Michigan. Specifically, I studied those beliefs that place importance on violence and the acceptability of using violence. In the research, I attempted to better understand the factors, both religious and secular, that have the most influence on those attitudes, perceptions, and beliefs. Because the research was conducted in the United States, the impact of American culture was also an important consideration along with other factors such as social, political, and economic influences.

I identified three major categories for use in the data collection and analysis. The first major category provided data I used to answer the questions concerning the theoretical framework, the COR theory. I analyzed the data to differentiate several types of resources including material, social, political, and economic resources.

Following identification of these resources, I made an assessment to determine the influence each of these factors has on an individual's perception of violence. Specifically, I attempted to demonstrate how threats to or losses of these resources affect the perceptions of violence of some religious adherents. Additionally, the impact of a threat to an individual's identity was also factored into the analysis of the collected data. Individual and group identity was examined to determine how the threat to or loss of these factors affects perceptions of violence.

The second major category that I used in this research addressed the role of religion in a person's perceptions of violence. For example, religion can serve as the primary reason for an adherent to feel that violence is an acceptable behavior (Falahi, 2009; Ibrahim, 2009), or it can serve as the primary reason that a believer advocates peace over violence in specific situations (Van Pelt Campbell, 2011; Walsh, 2011). In addition to being the primary reason for a person's attitude toward violence, religion can also be used as a secondary or supporting reason influencing an individual's attitude toward violence (Huber, 2011, Kippenberg, 2010; Post, Ali, Henderson, Shanfield, Victoroff, & Weine, 2009).

The last category I used to guide the research design was the set of data that served to illustrate the relationships and associations between the factors previously discussed. In this research, for instance, the influence of religion alone did have some impact on the perceptions of adherents toward violence, but when combined with a threatened social or economic loss, the attitude often changed.

By gaining a better understanding of the factors that influence this group of religious adherents, policy makers and planners will be better equipped to develop plans and policies to interact with people from different cultures. In addition to identifying and describing a society's sacred practices, religious beliefs can also affect its morals, norms, and daily rituals. Religion can in some cases complement societal norms, and in others can contradict those ethical standards. Understanding what affects the attitudes of

religious adherents to act consistent with or counter to their beliefs can help policy-makers and planners develop better-informed plans for international or intercultural engagements.

Nations like Myanmar (Burma), Saudi Arabia, and Iran incorporate their religious beliefs into the official functions of the governmental systems. Other nations like the United States, France, and the United Kingdom have attempted to separate religion from their state functions. Whether a society's religion is more like the former or the latter, their religious beliefs will certainly have some level of impact on the attitudes of the people within that society. Considering that over 83% of the world's population self-identifies as being an adherent of a religion (Global Religious Landscape, 2012), the results of this research have potential applicability to much of the world's population. Those factors that influence the perceptions of religious adherents can be sacred or secular, and understanding the interactions and influences of both kinds of factors is critical to developing a comprehensive engagement strategy.

Violence today is a limiting factor in many international or intercultural interactions. It restricts humanitarian aid in the event of a man-made or natural disaster, and it restrains interactions between different cultures. If mitigations cannot be incorporated to ensure the security of the participants, exchanges may be reduced or eliminated completely. Understanding how a religious adherent perceives violence as well as the reasons for those perceptions can help policy makers improve interactions



between members of different cultures and lessen the provocations that often end in violence.

### **Methodology**

I planned to use face-to-face interviews as the primary data collection method. If this strategy did not yield sufficient participants or if face-to-face interviews became impractical, I would use the Walden University's participant pool as a secondary option. Because I was able to identify a sufficient number of participants during data collection, the participant pool was not used. Given the sensitivity of the topic and the potential resistance that I predicted in finding participants, convenience sampling was the only viable option for selecting participants from the local Muslim population. To gain a reasonable number of participants, I recruited two key communicators to facilitate the participation of Muslim adherents.

Brief surveys were conducted to collect demographic information and general information on an individual's beliefs. I used the results of the surveys to qualify individuals to participate in the research, and these results had no impact on the questions included in the interviews. Although surveys are generally used when conducting quantitative research, in this situation I used the questionnaire to ensure potential participants met specific requirements for the research.

I transcribed and coded the interview data using NVivo. The data were categorized into concepts that I then used to identify patterns and trends and to develop

potential theories. The survey responses were also input into NVivo and used as an additional source of information. After all of the data had been consolidated and analyzed, I determined that the results were sufficient to produce logical theories.

### **Operational Definitions**

*Abrahamic religions:* Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are considered the Abrahamic religions because each acknowledges the significant role of Abraham, the father of Isaac and Ishmael. Whether he be the father of a people or a prophet of God, Abraham is an important historical figure and provides a point of commonality for these three religions (Lubar Institute, 2013).

*Adherent:* An individual who identifies with a specific religious belief, group, or tradition. An adherent may or may not be a member of a specific denomination but may simply maintain similar beliefs (ARDA, n.d.).

*Attitude:* A generally long-standing way of thinking or feeling, which is often reflected in actions or behaviors (Attitude, 2014).

*Beliefs:* The acceptance that an idea, notion, or statement is true, or the acceptance of the existence of an object or entity (Belief, 2014).

*Christianity:* A monotheistic religion that “views sin as a core human problem that can only be absolved through the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the Son of God” (ARDA, n.d., para C).

*Fundamentalism:* The belief that humanity has been given the teachings that will guide them to salvation and those teachings must be followed precisely and completely (Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 2004).

*Hinduism:* One of the world's oldest religions still in existence today. Hindus believe in one Supreme Being, whose being pervades the world as it destroys and recreates the world in an unending cycle (Hinduism, 2008)

*Identity:* The way an individual perceives him or herself as part of a racial, ethnic, religious or other social group (Sen & Wagner, 2009).

*Islam:* A monotheistic religion whose adherents view their beliefs as not only a religion but also a way of life. Muslims comply with their holy text, the Qur'an, which is said to be a collection of the exact words of God. Muslims also follow the Five Pillars, which serve as the basis for their behaviors.

*Monotheism:* Belief in the existence and supremacy of only one God and that all in existence is God's creation (Wainwright, 2013).

*Orthodox:* Refers to an interpretation of religious doctrine using a conventional or traditional reading (Orthodox, 2014)

*Perception:* The way people understand elements in their environment, or how people comprehend the way events occur (Perception, 2014).

*Polytheism:* A belief in and worship of more than one god, contrary to monotheistic beliefs (Polytheism, 2015).

*Practicing*: A descriptor of an individual who observes the philosophy, teachings, and rules of a specific belief or religion (Practice, 2014).

*Religion*: A belief system of faith and worship (Religion, 2014.)

*Secular*: Those things, including attitudes, activities, and behaviors, that are not religiously or spiritually based (Secular, 2014)

*Stress*: “The brain’s response to any demand” (Adult Stress, n.d., para 1). This can manifest in individuals as a wide variety of symptoms from quickened pulse and faster breathing to depressed or malfunctioning immune, digestive, and reproductive systems.

*Terrorism*: “The unlawful use of force and violence against persons or property to intimidate or coerce a government, the civilian population, or any segment thereof, in furtherance of political or social objectives” (CFR, 2010, para 0.85).

*Values*: “Core beliefs that guide and motivate attitudes and actions” (Definitions of Values, 2009).

*Violence*: The intentional use of physical force or aggression with the intent to damage, hurt, maim or kill (Violence, 2014) but for the purposes of this research this definition was limited to physical force or aggression against *another person*.

### **Assumptions**

I made several critical assumptions when developing the design for this research. My primary assumption was that the results of this study would not be representative of the global population of Muslims. According to recent statistics on religious adherents,

Muslims number close to 1.6 billion across the globe (Global Religious Landscape, 2012). Given the small sample size that I used for this research, it was not reasonable to expect the results to be representative of the larger population. Additionally, this research sample was limited to a specific geographic area, so the vast quantity of cultural factors that would affect the perceptions of the religious across the globe were not taken into consideration. This case study was neither designed nor intended to produce results that would represent the wider population of Muslims.

I also made assumptions about the samples taken from the target population. The first assumption concerned the level of religiosity among the participants. I accepted that the individuals in the study shared a similar level of religiosity. None would be atheists or anti-theists and the participants would all be active participants in regular religious activities. Because the participants were members of a local mosque that is known to be moderate in its approach, I determined that it would be reasonable to assume a moderate religiosity for the group of participants. Additionally, an assumption was made that the Muslim participants would be members of the Sunni denomination. This assumption is also valid because the participants were selected from a mosque that adheres to Sunni practices.

The next assumption concerns socioeconomic status. I made the presumption that the entire sample population would be comparable in socioeconomic status (SES), based on income, occupation, and education. Additionally, I assumed that the participants' SES

would be average or close to average for Western Michigan and specifically Kalamazoo and Calhoun Counties. For this area, the average person would be a homeowner, with at least a high school diploma, and make approximately \$44,000 a year (U.S. Census, 2014 a; U.S. Census 2014b).

I made a third assumption about the sample population, based on where they lived, and subsequently their access to information. I predicated this assumption on the idea that the participants had lived in the area long enough to have assimilated to the societal norms of the area. Additionally, because of their SES the participants should have also had access to similar media, including cable television, radio, and internet as well as social networks such as friends, family, co-workers, and religious organizations. Lastly, I understood that the participants were generally-law abiding and had the ability to effectively communicate in English.

These assumptions were necessary to identify the participants as members of a culture-sharing group. While the participants shared a religious belief, this aspect of their lives did not, in itself define this collection of people as a culture-sharing group. The assumptions made about socioeconomic status, assimilation, and accesses were all important to understanding the societal influences that affected the perceptions of the participants.

While there is no specific quantity of commonalities that determines or defines a culture-sharing group, a collection of people must share some attributes to be considered

a culture-sharing group. For this research, the participants' religion, English proficiency, and interaction locations were verified and other attributes such as socioeconomic status, residence, and accesses were assumed to be similar.

### **Scope and Delimitations**

This research offers insight into the factors that most influence the perceptions and attitudes of a Muslim adherent. Scholars debate the influence religion has on a believer, with some supporting the position that religion allows a person to accept violence and in some cases, to behave violently themselves (Ibrahim, 2009; Mani, 2012; Vail, 2010). In contrast, other researchers take the opposing position that religion influences a person to advocate peaceful behaviors (Van Pelt Campbell, 2011; Walsh, 2012). Others still argue that religion can influence an adherent to promote either peaceful or violent behaviors depending on the situation (Kippenberg, 2010; Malka & Soto, 2011).

The intent of this research was not to join the existing discussion on whether religion has an inherently positive or negative influence on individuals, but to understand how religion, along with other factors affects the beliefs and attitudes of religious adherents. My goal in conducting this research was to better understand the complexities involved in the development of perceptions, specifically those perceptions that recognize violence as an acceptable or an intolerable behavior. In this research I examined the

effect religion has on an adherent's attitudes toward violence and to better understand if religion, alone can shape these attitudes.

The scope of this study varied significantly from earlier studies in that previous research to examine perceptions of religious adherents had been conducted primarily using quantitative approaches. Additionally, this earlier research involved those who had endured a significant level of stress, whether the stress be a specific traumatic incident or years of suffering caused by war or other conflicts. In much of the previous work, researchers surveyed participants to understand the relationship between the stress endured because of trauma and a particular response. Few scholars have conducted research that would allow the participants to articulate the reasons, rationales, and interactions as they understood them, to explain the relationship between religion and attitudes toward violence.

In this case study I included significantly fewer participants than previous research, initially planning on a minimum of five and a maximum of ten adherents, which I predicted would provide sufficient information to develop a theory. Additionally, I selected participants from members of a specific religious community in the Western Michigan area, primarily Kalamazoo and Calhoun Counties and I used coding to identify themes and similarities within the collected data.

The participants could either be male or female, as gender was not a critical consideration for this study but for future research it may be a discriminating factor and



they were selected from members of the Sunni sect of Muslims. I identified this requirement in both the initial conversations and the demographic questionnaire.

The age of the participants was also not a limitation as long as the participants were adults and not minors. The research was open to elderly participants or participants over the age of 65, which according to the Walden University Institutional Review Board is a vulnerable population (Research Ethics Review, 2010), but this population was not deliberately solicited for this study. Additionally, there was no requirement or criteria based on political affiliation, as political alignments were not addressed in the study

The intent of the research was not to produce results that are generalizable across the wider population of Muslim adherents or across other religious groups, but to offer insight on some of the possible ways that some believers are influenced. Although the responses in this research may be similar to responses from adherents living in other countries, the cultural influence of living in America is an important consideration. The cultural influence of living in a predominantly Christian nation and specifically living in the Western Michigan area would have a significant impact on the perceptions of the participants. As a result, the results of this research would not be as applicable when generalizing across a wider, more diverse population.

Because I attempted to examine how cultural norms and other influences affect the perceptions of religious adherents, I recruited individuals that were generally average, economically, religiously, and socially for the Western Michigan area according to the

data collected by the U.S. Census Bureau. For this reason, those considered wealthy or destitute were not included in this study. Also, I did not consider atheists, anti-theists, and fundamentalists as average for this research and would have excluded them from the study. Additionally, those who were visiting and did not live in the Western Michigan area were not included in the study to allow for greater consistency in the quality of factors that influence the participants.

As far as the inclusion of vulnerable populations, I did not intentionally recruit minors, residents of a facility, the mentally or emotionally disabled, subordinates, clients or potential clients, those in crisis or the economically disadvantaged (Research Ethics Review, 2010). Because potential participants may include individuals whose first language is not English, participants were screened to ensure they were fluent in English and could fully comprehend the questions and accurately communicate their responses. If a potential participant was not fluent in English, I would have excluded that individual from the study.

While the scope of the research served to establish boundaries for the study, I imposed additional constraints based on pragmatic reasons of limited resources and access to participants. For example, acknowledging the difficulty in determining religiosity, those self-identified Muslims who did not actively participate in religious activities were not be selected to participate in the research. By deliberately selecting

participants who attended a specific mosque, those who identified themselves as religious adherents but did not actively participate in religious events would have been eliminated.

Using the COR theory as a theoretical framework did not constrain the research, but the theory provided focus to the study. Hobföll's definitions of specific resources allowed me to categorize resources that the participants identified during the interviews. A critical step in the data analysis was to identify and classify resources using Hobföll's 1989 research. If a resource, as defined by Hobföll could potentially has value to a participant, I did not exclude it from the study.

This research is potentially significant because there are few studies that address the association between relevant secular factors and violence among the followers of Islam. Recently many researchers have either examined the broad relationship between the Abrahamic religions and violence (Baldwin, 2012; Huber, 2011; Kippenberg, 2010; Lusthaus, 2011) or studied the relationship between Islam and violence (Joll, 2010; Sirseloudi, 2012). While the research to understand the association between religion and violence is important, there exists a potential gap in the research to understand the role religion plays in the perceptions toward violence and how it fits in with other secular factors.

There exists another potential gap in qualitative research that examines the role of religion in the perception of violence. Many of the researchers studying this topic have used a quantitative approach to examine the relationship between religion and violence.

Much of this quantitative work addresses the *nature* of the relationship between variables and few of the studies go beyond this to address the reasons why the relationships exist as they do. In this study, I used a case study approach to examine the many factors that are critical to forming and maintaining perceptions. I also attempted to address the often-complex relationships that contribute to forming perceptions and attitudes in a religious adherent.

The overwhelming majority of the world's population acknowledges some level of religious belief. According to the Pew Research Group's 2010 study "The Global Religious Landscape," over 83% of the world's population identifies with a specific faith, leaving 16.3% of the world who does not associate themselves with a particular religion (Global Religious Landscape, 2012). Within that 16.3% figure of the Religiously Unaffiliated, many declare a belief in a God or higher power, and some even practice religious rituals although they claim no formal association with a particular religion or belief (Global Religious Landscape, 2012). With this research I attempted to fill an existing gap in the literature by examining how religion, in conjunction with other secular factors affects perception of a religious adherent.

Also, as globalization becomes more important in almost every aspect of modern life it becomes increasingly important to understand the different cultures of the world. Whether the situation be a non-governmental organization responding to a humanitarian crisis, or a company building a manufacturing facility, or a military unit conducting a

tactical mission, the need to understand the attitudes of different societies is critical. The need to understand a society's attitudes toward violence can be critically important in certain circumstances.

The results of this study may be used to help public and private organizations as well as individuals to recognize the importance of understanding cultural norms of other societies and to better understand the role religion plays in influencing those norms. By demonstrating an understanding of another individual's way of life, the opportunities for improved business and personal relations are improved. Understanding other cultures may also allow nations to cooperate and collaborate more effectively, with potential to decrease tension and conflicts within and between countries (Basedau et al., 2011; Cliteur, 2010a).

### **Limitations**

There were several limitations that must be acknowledged with this study. These limitations included issues with applicability/transferability and bias due to the sampling strategy and concerns with dependability and credibility of the results.

#### **Transferability and Bias**

Because the research was conducted using a case study methodology and a convenience sampling strategy, the obvious weaknesses in this research were the inability to generalize based on the results and bias. The sample size for this study combined with the means of selecting participants would make generalizing the results across a wider

population problematic. Participants selected using convenience sampling should not be used to generalize across a broader audience because the sample was neither random nor representative.

Additionally, there was potential for inherent bias with using convenience sampling because the reasons the participants were selected were not always evident or impartial. The times, locations or associates used to select participants may also have had an indirect impact on the results of the study. An example of this would be if participants were chosen because of their availability during specific hours during the day. This strategy would have eliminated those individuals who worked during those hours and may have resulted in selecting more retired or unemployed participants, who may have had different perceptions and attitudes than their working counterparts. One way to address this bias was to clearly and accurately identify how the participants were selected and identify those factors that may have influenced the results. Although a random or a purposeful sampling strategy would allow for less bias than a convenience sample, circumstances limited the options requiring a convenience sample to be used for this research.

Additionally, bias may have been introduced into the study through the data collection and analysis process. The wording of the questions and interpretations of the responses may have also reflected biases. To address these biases, I enlisted the

assistance of an objective individual, who could impartially view the process to identify evidence of potential bias.

### **Dependability and Credibility**

The dependability of the research was slightly difficult to manage with this study, as the factors that affect an individual's perception can frequently change and are often difficult to accurately identify. Additionally, truthfulness of the participant was also a concern for this research, but through in-depth conversation some contradictions were identified and addressed. Ultimately, if a participant is unwilling to be completely forthcoming, or cannot clearly articulate the reasons for his or her attitudes and perceptions, the results may not accurately reflect all of the factors that influence how an individual thinks or forms beliefs. The results of this research were heavily dependent on the participant's willingness and ability to provide accurate and honest responses.

Lastly the instruments used in the research, specifically the questions posed to the participants did facilitate generally credible results because questions that were repeated or reworded and reiterated identified inconsistencies in the responses of the participants. By identifying any inconsistencies, additional questions could be asked to resolve any conflicts.

### **Significance of the Study**

Within the agencies and organizations of the federal government that regularly engage populations from different cultures, there are policy makers that need accurate

information about the people they interact with. Decision-makers base their choices on the most accurate information available and the results of this research will hopefully add another consideration for those who bear the responsibility of making those often-difficult choices. This research provided conclusions that include options and considerations that have only been superficially examined in this context.

### **Summary and Transition**

Attempting to understand how and why an individual develops and maintains a specific attitude toward violence is a complex endeavor but the consequences of not understanding this process could potentially yield disastrous results. In this case study I did not provide results that can be easily applied across the wider population of religious believers, but in my conclusions, I identified factors that could influence how critical attitudes and perceptions are formed within a specific population.

Much of the existing literature focuses on the influence of religion on perceptions and not many studies sufficiently address other factors that may also influence the attitudes of religious adherents. Recognizing that religion plays a key role in the formulation of an individual's perceptions, understanding the way religion interacts with secular factors is worthy of research and may result in information that will aid organizations as they send their personnel abroad. Specifically understanding the impact of a resource loss to an individual may offer some insight to understanding how perceptions toward violence are formed and preserved. The COR theory provided this



research with a coherent outline to frame the study and to identify resources that have value to individuals and may influence their perceptions.

In Chapter 2 recent studies examining the relationship between religion and violence as well as literature exploring how religion positively or negatively influences behaviors are summarized. Additionally, I discuss studies conducted using the COR theory in this chapter. In Chapter 3 the methodology of this research is explained, specifically the means of collecting and analyzing data from individual interviews and the processes put in place to reduce bias. Lastly, in this chapter I summarized the steps that were taken to protect the participants involved in this research.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### **Introduction**

Following the attacks of September 11, 2001, many Americans quickly came to the realization that not only did they know little about the group that organized the attacks, but also that on a wider scale they had little understanding of the culture of the people of the Middle East. As globalization increasingly extends America's reach across the world, the need for decision-makers in governmental organizations to better understand the world's many different cultures also grows (Aly & Striegher, 2012; Fettweis, 2009).

Individuals working with federal agencies like the State Department and the Department of Defense who frequently interact with people from different cultures have a critical need to understand not only the traditions and values of those they engage with, but also the beliefs and attitudes that make up those cultures. An important aspect of understanding a society's culture is identifying the belief system or religion a society adheres to and understanding the influence that religion has on the attitudes and perceptions of its adherents.

My intent in the literature review was to examine recently published literature to better understand how scholars see the role of religion in religious adherents' perceptions of violence and to identify relevant gaps. In much of the existing recent literature, researchers have frequently looked for a causal relationship between religion and the

acceptance of violence or peace. Political and social factors have also been identified as contributors to religious violence, and several researchers have discussed how group and individual identity affect how individuals perceive violence. In this review, I also examined relevant research to identify the factors that scholars understand to be the most influential on an adherents' perceptions of violence.

The review began with an examination of studies in which researchers have used the theoretical framework I selected for this research, the COR theory. I reviewed eight studies that incorporated this theory, examining various phenomena were summarized to better understand how the COR theory had been previously applied, and to appreciate the range of conclusions that have resulted from the research.

In the next portion of the review, I examined how researchers have used different methodologies to study similar phenomenon in the field. Badahdah and Tiemann (2009), for example, used case studies to examine how religion affects the way Muslims choose a mate, while other researchers (Nayback-Beebe & Yoder, 2012; Yechezkel & Ayalon, 2013) conducted case study research to identify reasons why violence occurs and why it is endured. Additionally, in this portion of the review I assessed how ethnographic research has been used to study many of these same phenomena. Ethnography was used by both Critelli and Willett (2012) and Lee (2010) to examine how Islam influences the perception of violence among Pakistani Muslims and Black Muslims in the United States, respectively.

I then explored articles on the relationship between religion and violence (“religious violence”) and those on the relationship between religion and peace. In this portion of the review, I examined elements of religious beliefs to assess their impact on peaceful or violent behaviors. In these articles, religious directives interpreted from holy texts were the primary motivators for either violent or peaceful actions. Included in this examination was research by Sukma et al. (2011) that showed how Indonesian and Malayan Muslims objected to religious violence, and a study by Cliteur (2010b) who argued that specific scriptures in the Qur’an direct Muslim adherents to commit violent acts. Taking a third position on the issue, Post et al. (2009) argued that religion can serve to advocate both violent and peaceful actions.

In the next section of the review, I examined literature on the political and social causes of “religious violence,” which often manifest as terrorism. In this portion of the review, I examined religion as either a single factor or a justification for behaviors that ultimately results in a political or social change within a society. In these articles, researchers discussed behaviors that are primarily motivated by a reason other than religion. Ginges et al. (2009), for example, examined reasons why both Muslims and Jews would support suicide attacks to achieve specific political and social goals in the Palestinian Conflict.

Lastly, I examined literature on the relationship between religion and individual and collective identities. Authors like Aly and Striegher (2012) and Schäuble (2011)

focused on simply describing the many different ways that religion can influence an individual's or a group's collective identity, while others like Stăiculescu and Stan (2012) and Chirot (2011) posited that religion creates an in-group/out-group situation that encourages violent actions.

### **Literature Search Strategy**

Initially I accessed policy and administration databases in the Walden University library to find articles about religious violence focused on the impact the behaviors had on public policy and politics in a society. Three databases I accessed were Political Science Complete, Business Source Premier/Complete, and Political Science Complete: A Sage Full-Text Collection.

Next, I queried the military and security databases to find relevant articles that addressed the subject of religious violence. Since the attacks of September 11, 2001, the notion of religious violence has gained significant interest in the defense, security, and intelligence communities. I queried the Military and International Security and Counter Terrorism Reference Center, the Military and Government Collection, and the Homeland Security Digital Library databases.

In order to find articles that addressed individual behaviors, attitudes, and perceptions, I queried the Walden University's available psychology databases including PsycINFO, PsycARTICLES, and Psychology: A SAGE Full-Text Collection. Lastly, I accessed two multidisciplinary databases, ProQuest Central and

Academic Search Complete, to find any articles that may have been overlooked in the other searches. I found the majority of the articles concerning the theoretical foundation used in this research in the multidisciplinary databases.

To find additional relevant articles, I used a series of keywords in a variety of combinations, depending on the number of potential articles in the selected database. For example, I would generally begin with a search using the terms *religion* and *violence* and, based on the results, would adjust by either adding more terms or reducing the number of terms until I had a list of no more than 20 articles. If the search included a Boolean system, I could also remove non-relevant articles by inserting terms after applying the “not” function. For example, if my initial search resulted in several articles that involved violence against women and focused on domestic abuse, I could remove those articles by inserting the term *women* after the “not” function. The keywords I used in these searches were: *religion*, *religious*, *violence*, *religious violence*, *terrorism*, and *conservation of resources*. In total, I conducted approximately 25 different keyword searches in the various databases to collect the requisite material.

In addition to using keywords to identify relevant articles for the literature review, I used additional criteria to limit the search and ensure the information facilitated an appropriate level of scholarship. To ensure the articles would still be relevant when the dissertation was completed, I limited the search to articles that had been published in

2009 or later. This would provide relevant information for the study, yet still be relatively timely when the dissertation was finally completed.

In the past 10 years and largely because of the 9/11 attacks, there has been a significant increase in research on the subject of religion and violence. While some authors have focused their efforts on examining the various religious texts to determine the cause of religious violence, others have chosen to conduct research, mostly quantitative, to better understand the relationship between religion and violence. In all cases, though, the published information has included critical information to better understanding the relationship between religion and the conduct and acceptance of violence.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The COR theory of stress (Hobföll, 1989) focuses on an individual's response to stress, and specifically stress caused by the loss, perceived loss, or threat of loss of resources. This model is based on the assumption that people "strive to retain, protect, and build resources and that what is threatening to them is the potential or actual loss of these valued resources" (Hobföll, 1989, p. 516). Resources in this context can mean material resources or psychological resources, and responses can vary from depression and despair to implementing gain strategies to rebuild the lost resources.

Hobföll (1989) developed the COR theory because he found that the models of stress that existed in the late 1980s only offered a weak link to research that was being

conducted at the time. The COR theory provided a more substantial and comprehensive model to explain specifically what individuals will do and will not do as a result of experiencing stress.

Hobföll (1989) proposed that psychological stress can best be understood by examining how individuals perceive their wealth in terms of resources, both psychological and material. The theory further holds that individuals endeavor to “retain, protect and build resources” (Hobföll, 1989, p. 516). Additionally, the theory proposes that in order to mitigate a potential loss of resources, those individuals who have a limited ability to protect or rebuild their resources may resort to “loss-control strategies that have a high cost and poor chance of success” (Hobföll, 1989, p. 519) such as violence against those who threaten their resources.

The COR theory attempts to describe what individuals will do in order to gain resources as protection against a potential loss and what they will do when faced with a loss or threat of loss of resources (Hobföll, 1989). Furthermore, Hobföll (1989) associated stress with an actual loss, a perceived loss, or the threat of a loss of resources, and included four categories of resources: object resources, conditions, personal characteristics, and energies. Lastly, Hobföll discussed coping strategies and the relationship between the appropriateness of these behaviors and the level of stress that the individual is enduring.



While some scholars would advocate that religion can be the root cause of violent behaviors, there is sufficient evidence to suggest that in many cases, religion is not the underlying cause, but merely a convenient and ready-made rationalization for condoning or accepting the conduct of violence. As an integral part of a society's culture, religion can be used as a broadly understandable and sustainable framework to justify or explain behaviors that are often contrary to a society's standards, morals, or norms.

Through the COR theory, Hobföll strives to explain why people react to external stimuli as they do, and he identifies observable behaviors that can result from stress caused by loss or a perceived loss. Only by understanding the root cause of the behaviors can those actions and attitudes be appropriately addressed to reduce or eliminate the acceptability of violence.

Hobföll's theory can also be critical to understanding why individuals in a religiously-based society would perceive violence as an acceptable or an unacceptable behavior. Whether there be a threat to a material or psychological resource, the COR theory can help to explain why a religious adherent would accept or reject violent behaviors.

Recently, researchers utilizing the COR theory have conducted quantitative inquiries in their attempts to identify relationships between a violent act or traumatic event and resultant behaviors or attitudes (Canetti et al., 2009; Canetti et al., 2010; Johnson, Canetti, Palmieri, Galea, Varley, & Hobföll, 2009, Littleton, et al., 2009). In this

study I built on the existing quantitative research by investigating and identifying additional reasons that may cause individuals to develop approving or disapproving attitudes and perceptions toward violent behaviors.

Researchers have also examined how the COR theory can help to explain the reactions of victims of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Littleton et al., 2009; 2011). Specifically, the relationship between PTSD and a psychological resource loss was examined in the context of the university shootings at Virginia Tech (Littleton et al., 2009) and Northern Illinois University (Littleton et al., 2011). Furthermore, researchers have used the COR theory to examine how coping strategies can impact PTSD symptoms after an individual experiences a traumatic event (Kuo, 2011; Walter & Hobföll, 2009). The researchers examined how *cultural* coping mechanisms could reduce symptoms of PTSD (Kuo, 2011) and how the reduction of the stressors affected PTSD symptoms (Walter & Hobföll, 2009). Building on the previous works of these authors, I examined factors such as the relationship between an event-driven stressor and how an individual perceives violence in my study.

Additionally, researchers have examined how religion mitigates long-term effects of trauma, like the Holocaust, specifically exploring how religion affects an individual's worldview and psychological functioning after a prolonged trauma (Palgi, Shira, & Ben-Ezra, 2011). The results of this study indicated that religion was critical to an individual's

ability to recover after a resource loss because the support networks present in the religious community served an important function in the healing process.

In recent quantitative studies, researchers examined the relationship between an individual's religious beliefs and their support for violent acts (Canetti et al., 2010; Johnson et al., 2009). In 2010, Canetti et al. concluded that religion was less important than a perceived social injustice in determining support for violence while in the 2009 study, Johnson et al. identified several factors that were more influential than religion when discussing reasons for support of political violence. These researchers collectively identified a view that religion may not be as important as previously believed when attempting to understand how perceptions and attitudes toward violence are formed.

### **Review of Literature Related to Key Variables and Concepts**

In the next portion of the chapter I identified and described recent research that relates to this study. Specifically, in this section I described recent research that was conducted using different methodologies and different variables, but addressing many of the same issues that were addressed in this study.

### **Review of Similar Research using Different Methodologies**

Although I conducted this research using a case study design in order to focus on a specific, bounded situation, this topic could also be and has been examined using other research designs.

**Review of case study research.** Case study research is used to “develop an in-depth understanding of a single case or explore an issue or problem” (Creswell, 2012, p. 97). Using a case study design, I examined several factors that influence how an individual’s perceptions of violence are formed. Previous researchers have used case studies to study similar issues, such as identifying when violence is occurring (Carvalho, 2014), why violence occurs (Stăiculescu & Stan, 2012), and why violence is tolerated (Nayback-Beebe & Yoder, 2012; Yechyhezkkel & Ayalon, 2013).

Additionally, researchers have used case studies to examine the often-complex relationship between an adherent and his or her religion. For example, researchers have studied how religion can impact major life decisions, like choosing a potential mate (Badahdah & Tiemann, 2009). Other researchers examined how religion enabled the formulation of group and individual identities which in turn, facilitated a need to protect the in-group, often through violence (Stăiculescu & Stan, 2012). Kars, in his 2009 manuscript used case studies to examine how four religious scholars used the concept of “distance” to describe their relationship with their beliefs. This methodology is suitable for conducting a deeper inquiry into a limited situation to better understand the relevant factors and their relationships (Creswell, 2012).

**Review of ethnographic research.** Researchers have also used other qualitative designs, like ethnography to examine the influence of religion on an individual’s perceptions and behaviors. Ethnographic research has been used to examine the way an

individual's beliefs influence how that person perceives violence (Critelli & Willett, 2012; Fuist & Josephson, 2013; Lee, 2010; Schäuble, 2011) and to better understand how individuals respond to a traumatic loss (Zraly & Nyirazinyo, 2010; Wexler, 2014).

Socio-cultural factors, including religion, that affect an individual's resilience and ability to cope with trauma were examined in a study with Rwandan genocide-rape victims (Zraly & Nyirazinyo, 2010) and in research with Alaska Natives who had historically been denied their culture (Wexler, 2014). Schäuble (2011) also used an ethnographic design to study how society reacts to traumatic events, but in her work, she examined how a society applies religion to specific locations to create "sacred spaces", which memorialize Croatian massacre victims and serve to create places of great importance and healing to this society.

Other researchers have chosen to use an ethnographic design to examine how religion created and reinforced communities within a society. Lee (2010) studied the role Islam played in creating a community around a mosque that serves a primarily African American community. She employed this methodology to understand how Islam appeals specifically to this population and to identify how the Black Muslim community positively influences an inner-city society. Additionally, researchers used ethnographic research to better understand how religion can influence the way individuals interpret boundaries in intergroup relations (Fuist & Josephson, 2013). In this 2013 study the researchers queried adherents from several different faiths to determine how religion

affected the way they categorized others and how they saw themselves in relation to others.

While these scholars identified positive or neutral effects of religion, other researchers have suggested that religion could also serve as a negative influence in a society. Researchers used an ethnographic approach to examine social norms in Pakistani society and the relationship between religiously-based customs and violence against women (Critelli & Willett, 2012). Using an ethnographic design allowed the researchers to better understand the complex social, political and historical environment that allows women to become victims of violence in this primarily Muslim nation.

The interpretation of a variables like groupings or boundaries can be influenced by several factors and can fluctuate as the understanding of the individual changes. To most effectively gather and analyze the information necessary to evaluate these concepts, research requires an in-depth exchange rather than a one-sided questionnaire. In many cases, ethnographic research methods can best facilitate the required exchange of information to understand these complex concepts and to better explain why people behave as they do.

### **Variables Affecting Perception of Violence**

There were four critical concepts that I examined in this research: the relationship between religion and violence, the effects of religion on individual and collective identities, the formation of an in-group/out-group situation and the way religion was used

to justify or legitimize violence for secular purposes. A fifth variable, the credibility of information sources, specifically religious texts, was also an important factor in understanding whether an adherent accepted or rejected violence.

The relationship between religion and violence has been a contentious subject and researchers would often take one of two positions: that religion promotes peace (Van Pelt Campbell, 2011; Walsh, 2012) or that religion facilitates violence (Falahi, 2009; Ibrahim, 2009). A third faction in this debate including Huber (2011), Kippenberg (2010) and Post et al. (2009) supported both positions and argued that religion can be used to either facilitate peaceful or violent behaviors in its adherents. In conducting this research, I did not attempt to determine which position had more merit, but I investigated the conditions under which religion was used for peace and those conditions under which religion was used for violence to understand the factors that have the most influence on an individual's perceptions.

One consequence of a religious society is that individuals would often form identities, individually and collectively as a result of the shared beliefs (Basedau et al., 2011; Gates & Steane, 2009; Ginges et al., 2009). While a shared identity through religion could strengthen a society by providing a sense of unity (Schwartz et al., 2009), this notion of an identity based on religious beliefs could also be problematic and potentially lead to violence if either the individual or the group perceived their identity to be threatened (Sen & Wagner, 2009; van Lieke, 2009).

Researchers have also suggested that an individual's perception of violence was affected when an in-group/out-group relationship existed, whether it was formed due to religion, race, ethnicity or other variables. Within religious cultures, an in-group and an out-group were formed when individuals saw their religion as the only true religion and others as false religions (Canetti-Nisim, Halperin, Sharvit, & Hobföll, 2009; Mani, 2012; Reader, 2012; van Liere, 2011). While this alone may not have caused violence, it often established a mindset in which the out-group was often dehumanized and became vulnerable to a lower standard of behavior from the in-group (Ginges et al., 2009; van Liere, 2009).

Additionally, there was a viewpoint that religion may not directly cause violence, but may be used to justify or legitimize a violent action (Sen & Wagner, 2009; Lusthaus, 2011) especially when the violence is a result of political or social motivations (Sheikh, 2012). Religion has been used to provide a framework which can be easily understood by a devout audience and to rationalize politically-motivated violence (Çınar, 2009; Cinoğlu, 2010). Isolating and identifying the roles of religion, politics, and social causes in conflicts was helpful to better understanding the reasons religious adherents accepted or rejected violent acts.

Understanding the importance of the credibility of sources, especially the credibility of the Qur'an was also critical to this research. Researchers like Ibrahim (2009) discussed the different ways the holy texts of the Abrahamic religions were



interpreted by their believers. In this discussion, Ibrahim (2009) suggested that the Christian and Jewish texts were *descriptive* and explained past events while the Muslim holy text was *prescriptive* and dictated how Muslims today should behave even today. Couple this with Cliteur's divine command theory (2010a; 2010b) in which believers were bound by the literal interpretations of their religious texts and obligated to comply with the written words, and it became clear how some Muslims might understand violence differently than their Christian and Jewish counterparts.

**Relationship between religion and violence in current research.** The research I examined in this portion of the literature review was categorized into three general themes: articles that discussed the influence of religious texts, articles that suggested religion could be used to facilitate peace and/or violence and articles that discussed the reasons that religiously-based organizations were significantly more violent than nationalistic or politically-based organizations. Although each of these positions contained significant differences, they all attempted to define the nature of the relationship between religion and violence.

***Positive and negative influence of texts on perceptions.*** Because religious texts provide guidance and direction to followers of numerous religions, they have also served to provide explanations for the way adherents perceive violence. The three Abrahamic religions, Christianity, Islam and Judaism are often examined together as monotheistic religions with a common background. Many passages found in the holy texts of the Bible,

the Qur'an, and the Tanakh are generally recognized to contain numerous references to violence. The differences in the texts are minimal but the intent of the scriptures, whether they be descriptive or prescriptive and whether the adherent subscribes to a literal translation of the text will impact how violence is perceived.

Esias Meyer, in his examination of violence in the Old Testament discussed the violent passages in the holy texts of the monotheistic faiths through the writings of three religious scholars: Regina Schwartz, Jan Assmann, and Gerlinde Baumann. In his evaluation, Meyer (2011) did not argue the existence of violence in the Old Testament, but he suggested that religion can also serve as a positive influence to counter the violent acts found in the holy texts of the Abrahamic faiths.

Although he did not fully support the proposals of Schwartz and Assmann, who suggest that “monotheism as portrayed in the Bible is, in itself inherently violent” (Meyer, 2011, p. 17) Meyer indicated that Baumann’s position may be the most viable in providing solutions to the violence in today’s society. Gerlinde Baumann, according to Meyer advocates contextualizing the references and striving to understand the historical meanings of the texts. These seemingly contrary viewpoints reflect the difference between advocating a literal translation of the texts and being willing to contextualize the information found in scriptures.

In the 2009 article by Ra’anan Boustan, Alex Jassen, and Calvin Roetzel, the authors examined violence in Christian and Jewish scriptures, specifically discussing the

ways religion is used to frame and legitimize violent actions. Fundamentalists, striving to comply with a literal interpretation of their religious texts, would often apply the contents of religious texts authored thousands of years ago to modern situations. An example of this is the passage in Deuteronomy to destroy the Canaanites and how this directive has been applied in modern times to Irish Catholics, Native Americans, Palestinian, and other enemies of the Israeli state (Boustan, Jassen, & Roetzel, 2009).

Other researchers like Raymond Ibrahim (2009) compared the three Abrahamic religions, examining the attitudes toward violence as indicated by the violent passages in each of the holy texts. He discussed the existence of historical violence in Jewish and Christian texts and compared them to the edicts or passages that *direct* or *command* violence in Qur'anic texts. In the author's conclusion, he suggested that all three Abrahamic religions contained violent passages, but only the Qur'an commanded its adherents to conduct violence today (Ibrahim, 2009).

In his review, Ibrahim (2009) also discussed how the three Abrahamic texts guided their adherents and shaped their attitudes toward violent acts. Specifically, he provided references to specific passages from each of the texts that could influence an adherent's attitude toward violence. Although this article only included one source of information (religious texts), to some believers, their holy text may arguably be the most critical source of information in shaping perceptions on violence.

In his 2010 *Forum Philosophicum* article, Paul Cliteur also argued the existence of an important relationship between religious texts and violence. Cliteur not only suggested that the relationship between religion and violence existed but he also argued that when violent passages from the holy texts were combined with those who subscribe to the notion that these texts are the true word of God; the response can often be violent.

Cliteur (2010b) in this article described the divine command theory (DCT), in which religious adherents are obligated to comply with the commands and will of God, regardless of man's laws and societal norms. Applying the DCT to violent passages in holy texts, specifically the scriptures of the Abrahamic religions, can lead to the belief that violence is acceptable behavior. This examination of the DCT addressed the way religion affects perceptions and attitudes of religious adherents toward violence.

While numerous researchers have debated the intent and impact of religious texts on followers of the three Abrahamic religions, in recent years, the association between violence and the text of the Qur'an, specifically has been a frequently-discussed topic. I examined well-known verses such as Sura 9:5 (the Verse of the Sword) and 4:34 (concerning the dominion of man over woman) in this portion of the review as well as the idea that the Qur'an should be interpreted in the context that it was written (Falahi, 2009).

Obaidullah Fahad Falahi discussed religious violence in Islam and posed an atypical position in his article on Qur'anic verses that deal with violence. In addressing the relationship between the Prophet Muhammad and his polytheistic tribesmen, the

Qurayshite mushrikūn, the author attempted to interject historical context “to remove the confusions and misunderstandings created by some selective readings of the ayat of the Qur’an” (Falahi, 2009, p. 71).

One of the verses that the author discussed is the well-known Verse of the Sword, Sura 9:5. This verse, which is frequently cited by Muslim extremists and terrorists, advises “wherever you encounter idolaters, kill them, seize them, besiege them, wait for them at every lookout post” (Qur’an 9:5, Oxford World’s Classics). The position of the author is that this was a message intended for the Prophet concerning the polytheistic Qurayshites and not meant to be an enduring directive for future generations (Falahi, 2009).

Because the Qur’an is often seen as the enduring and literal word of God passed down to believers through the Prophet Muhammad, many adherents are hesitant to interject historical context into their interpretation of the text. Understanding when an adherent would accept a literal translation of the holy text versus incorporate historical context was critical to understanding the factors that influence an adherent’s perception of violence.

In Rachel Scott’s article about Qur’an 4:34, she discussed this much-debated passage from the Islamic holy text. This passage not only explained man’s authority over woman but also directed physical punishment for those women who did not conduct themselves appropriately. This passage, which advised men to beat their wives if they

were disloyal or behaved inappropriately, could not be questioned because according to many Muslim scholars the Qur'an, as the word of God, should not be read contextually or situationally (Scott, 2009).

This was one of many passages that outwardly appeared to advocate and even direct physical violence against others, whether the others be Muslims or non-Muslims. In many Islamic cultures, a literal translation of their holy text is a much more commonly accepted idea than among their Christian or Jewish counterparts (Scott, 2009), as the Qur'an is arguably the most important text many Muslims will have.

Expanding the examination of faiths and beliefs beyond the monotheistic religions only changed the discussion slightly. The Hindu text, the *Ramayana*, for example, is much like the Qur'an in that it includes references that would advocate violence against a woman for disobeying a man (Bradley, 2010). Walsh (2012) on the other hand, proposed the less frequently cited position that religion is a proponent for peace rather than violence and that "violence, intolerance, and supremacist perspectives" (are) "unfortunate, unintended consequences" (p. 39).

Tamsin Bradley, in her 2010 article discussed how religion was used to facilitate a male-dominated Indian society which often resulted in violence against women. This article focused on the influence religion had in this Hindu society, specifically examining the way religious texts affected the way society perceived the male-female relationship.

Bradley (2010) discussed how religion indirectly contributes to violence against women through the way it influences Hindu culture. In the Hindu epic, the *Ramayana*, the relationship between men and women was illustrated in the actions and behaviors of Rama and his dutiful and faithful wife, Sita. In Hindu culture violence is the mechanism that was often used to enforce the obedience and faithfulness of women (Bradley, 2010).

Additionally, Bradley (2010) suggested that because religious beliefs were passed down through the holy texts, which are interpreted “by an elite group of religious leaders, who are usually male” (p. 362) females have limited ability to interpret the texts to their benefit. This article not only discussed specific Hindu texts and passages that contribute to the acceptance of violence, but it also discussed several different sources of information that may have contributed to the attitudes of Hindus toward violence.

Paul Cliteur in his book *Freedom of Religion*, discussed how religion itself is not only violent by nature but that modern religion has recently manifested itself as fundamentalist and often more violent than in previous times. Cliteur (2010a) did not limit his position to the monotheistic religions, as many authors do, but he examined Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, and other world religions. He also acknowledged that while some adherents may have seen religion as a peaceful influence, he refuted the argument that peace was the only outcome of religion.

Cliteur (2010a) examined the motivations of the religious terrorist acknowledging the divine command theory, in which God’s commands supersede directives, instructions

and guidance by man, even if that guidance exists in the form of a law. Cliteur suggested that *religious fundamentalism*, which at best condones, and at worst supports religious violence was a critical element in the discussion when trying to understand the relationship between religion and violence.

Thomas Walsh in his 2012 article took a contrary position from that of many of his contemporaries in that he advocated the idea that religion, although it had contributed to violent actions has also been an instrument of peace across numerous fields and activities. Walsh (2012) argued that religion's role in today's public affairs had advanced peaceful interactions more than violent ones through "calls for non-violence, unselfishness, forgiveness, reconciliation, and just war theory" (p. 35).

This article was one of the few that extensively discussed how religion was used to shape perceptions of adherents toward peace instead of violence. While other articles superficially touched on the peaceful consequences and effects of religion, Walsh (2012) discussed in depth how the role of religion had changed to become a less violent influence on its adherents. Walsh (2012) in this article listed several religions, including Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, Jainism, Judaism, Sikhism, and Buddhism which through their sacred texts advocated peace over violence.

Like his colleague, Walsh (2012), George Van Pelt Campbell (2011) proposed that religions offered their followers peaceful solutions as opposed to the violence caused by fear and anger. Van Pelt Campbell suggested that globalization may have contributed



to the fear and defensiveness that often resulted in violence and cited Christian scriptures that addressed peaceful responses to this fear. The author (2011) continued to quote specific passages in the Old and New Testaments that supported his premise that the religion of Christ promoted peace, not violence.

This examination of the Christian Bible focused primarily on the New Testament, only referencing passages in Genesis of the Old Testament and not addressing the numerous passages that would seem to advocate violence. Despite acknowledging the rise of “religious violence” resulting from globalization, Van Pelt Campbell argued that “these religious resources contribute to the common good by delegitimizing violence and promoting human flourishing” (p. 49). He, like Walsh (2012), suggested that religion is not the cause of the violence seen today, but the solution to it.

*Situational influence of texts on perceptions.* An equally compelling argument in the debate to understanding how religious texts affected adherents is the position that these sacred writings could be used to advocate either violence or peace, depending on the specific situation. In the literature found to support this position, the three monotheistic religions were examined, but much of the recent efforts focused specifically on Islam and how the Qur’an influences Muslims. Additionally, supporters of this point of view (Bouhana & Wikström, 2010; Kippenberg, 2010; Vail, Rothschild, Weise, Solomon, Pyszczynski, & Greenberg, 2010) have proposed several theories that would explain this situational relationship between religion and violence.

Noémie Bouhana and Per-Olof Wikström, in their 2010 article attempted to apply the Situational Action Theory (SAT), generally relevant to criminal activities, rather than to acts of terrorism. Their proposition was based on the belief that there was no workable framework for terrorism and that the SAT was well-suited for understanding terrorism, organizing knowledge about the subject and framing research about this specific kind of violence (Bouhana & Wikström, 2010).

Through the SAT the authors proposed the notion that moral norms inform an individual's perceptions and decisions, and in this case, would contribute to the explanation for how people perceive terrorist acts (Bouhana & Wikström, 2010). Cultural considerations such as religion, tradition and customs would also be important factors in understanding how terrorism might be perceived as a moral action. In arguing the merits of this organizational tool, the authors also discussed how religious radicalization, religious fanaticism, and general religiosity contribute to an individual's moral position on terrorism and terrorist acts in addition to non-religious considerations such as education, employment and criminal history.

Kippenberg (2010) in his article about the Thomas-Theorem discussed the relationship between religion, particularly the monotheistic religions, and violence advocating that the relationship was not objective and consistent, but subjective according to the person or people involved and dependent on the specific situation. The author also discussed the actions and behaviors of religious groups that some would have

considered cults or terrorist organizations and argued that dismissing their behaviors as not genuinely religious may be a mistake. Kippenberg (2010) instead endorsed a position that examining the actions in context may produce more positive consequences.

The author compared the law enforcement responses to the Branch Davidians at Waco, the Peoples Temple at Jonestown, and the Freemen of Montana arguing that when religious groups were dismissed as terrorists, cults or fundamentalists and little or no effort was given to understanding the group's concerns, the results were disastrous. Kippenberg (2010) suggested that when officials worked to contextualize the behaviors of the religious groups, it would be possible to reach mutually agreeable resolutions.

The Terror Management Theory (TMT) as described by Vail, et al., (2010) is a theory that attempted to explain how religion alleviates the fear caused by the human awareness of death. The authors argued that the anxiety caused by the fear of death and the unknown after life ends was mitigated by religion which served to offer not only an afterlife, but a means to achieve or earn that afterlife. Assuming that the TMT was valid, an individual's anxiety about death may influence his or her religiosity.

This level of religious devotion, may also in turn have affected how an individual perceived violence as a valid response to potential threats. Research has been recently conducted suggesting that "attendance at religious services...is strongly related to violent defense of one's worldview" (Vail et al., 2010). This research also indicated that an individual's anxiety about death was reduced when a member of another religion dies,

suggesting that the threat posed by adherents of other faiths can be reduced by violence against members of that group (Vail et al., 2010).

In their 2011 article explaining the results of their research with Indonesian Muslims, Sukma et al. discussed the results of their research in which they queried Muslim Indonesians about their attitudes on internal and international acts of terrorism. The results indicated that most Muslim Indonesians would be considered moderately religious and would not support the terrorism as a form of jihad. Additionally, the research indicated that a majority of those queried also rejected the notion that those who perished while conducting terrorist acts are martyrs (Sukma et al., 2011).

In determining their level of religiosity, the respondents were questioned about their tolerance for believers of other faiths. While most surveyed indicated that they would not object to living with adherents of other religions or allowing non-Muslims to teach in public schools, most of the respondents rejected the notion of having another religious group build a religious facility in their neighborhood (Sukma et al., 2011). Although this survey did not provide information on what would provoke a violent response, it did provide a single reference point for understanding what would be acceptable, or conversely a threat to this Muslim audience.

This survey also provided valuable information about sources of information that the respondents found to be credible. The article reports that “most of the respondents believed the news reported in the national and international mass media” (Sukma et al.,

2011, p. 33) and about half surveyed felt the national printed media was responsible in reporting the news. Although this survey discussed how the national and international media were perceived it does not include sources that communicated verbally and more intimately among the population.

Post et al., (2009) discussed several commonalities found among suicide terrorists, focusing on the terrorism associated with militant Islam. The authors attempted to explain why suicide terrorism is often condoned and in some cases encouraged by religious leaders and provided reasons that Islam is especially suitable to facilitating suicide terrorists.

Despite the many prohibitions in the Qur'an and other holy texts against suicide terrorism, it was still in certain situations considered to be an acceptable behavior. Specifically, for Muslims, *jihad*, which is translated to mean *struggle* or *strife*, was also understood to command the devout to "take up the sword against those who take up the sword against Muslims" (Post et al., 2009, p. 16).

The idea of a defensive *jihad* involved "taking up the sword" or committing violence in defense of those who threaten Muslims (Post et al., 2009). This notion of perceiving a threat which would justify violence, may also be explained through the COR Theory. In acknowledging the potential of a threat to Muslims, it may have been a rational interpretation of *jihad* and a reasonable response in this situation to take up arms and commit violent acts, including suicide terrorism.

Wolfgang Huber in his 2011 article discussed the relationship between religion and violence by examining three different propositions on the subject. Specifically, Huber (2011) examined the monotheistic religions as they existed in South Africa and discussed whether religion leads to violence, whether religion leads to non-violence or whether the relationship between religion and violence are contingent. Ultimately the author concluded that the most convincing characterization of the relationship would be contingent.

The author's examination of how religion may lead to violence revealed factors that can influence an individual's perceptions of violence. For example, Huber (2011) argued that the exclusivity of monotheistic religions affects a person's attitude on violence. Particularly notable among fundamentalists groups, religion facilitates a truth that is often lost in the complicated and blended world which results from globalization.

***Influence of religion on severity of violent actions.*** In addition to conducting critical examinations of select religious texts to determine if the religious influence leads to peace or violence, scholars such as Henne (2012), Fettweis (2009) and Reader (2012) have also examined the impact religion has on whether the members of an organization would be willing to engage in violence in support of their cause. Results of these studies indicated that for a variety of reasons increased religiosity or even a stated religious goal produced a more violent conflict (Shaw, Quezada, & Zárate, 2011; Vail et al., 2010).

Peter Henne's 2012 article explained the results of a quantitative study in which the researcher examines the influence religion has on attacks conducted by suicide terrorists. In his conclusions, the author suggested that religiously-motivated organizations conducted attacks that were more severe than those organizations that did not include religion as a motivation (Henne, 2012).

Given the conclusion that these religiously-driven organizations conducted more lethal attacks, implications can be made about the perceptions toward violence within these organizations. The question remains, though, as to how these acts were perceived by those outside of the organization. Additionally, it was unclear how including religion facilitated more severe attacks. The two questions in this case that should have been raised included one that compared the level of violence conducted to the level of violence accepted and one that identifies why different levels of violence are accepted by adherents.

Christopher Fettweis, in his 2009 research, offered a historical view of the terrorist group Al-Qaeda and suggested that terrorists could be categorized into two distinct groups, nationalist and ideological terrorists. He argued the goals or objectives of a terrorist organization would dictate the choice of target, employment means and strategies (Fettweis, 2009). A terrorist with nationalistic goals, for example, who strived to gain independence or autonomy from an existing government, used limited strategies

whereas an ideologically-driven organization leaned toward more brutal strategies that were often seen as irrational (Fettweis, 2009).

Fettweis (2009) also argued that while an ideological terrorist organization could be religiously-based, the people involved might have a wide range of motivations. In examining Al-Qaeda and other religiously-based terrorist groups, he explained that these types of organizations are not unknown in history and the religiously-based terrorist organizations of today are simply reincarnations of terrorist organizations that have existed for centuries.

Although the article did not explain how religion was used to justify or condone violence it did explain why a religiously-motivated organization would employ more extreme measures than a nationalistic terrorist organization.

Ian Reader in his 2012 article examined the Japanese cult Aum Shinrikyo and the 1995 sarin gas attack of the Tokyo subway. Reader (2012) attempted to explain why this organization would conduct such a lethal assault on innocent victims and compared this attack to the attacks on the Pentagon and World Trade Center in September of 2001. This article discussed how Aum Shinrikyo, as a religiously-grounded organization, would feel less constrained by conventional moral standards as they “claim spiritual and moral imperatives to destroy existing society” (p. 192). The claim of guidance or a directive from a higher authority to conduct the violence was another commonality that many violent religious organizations share.



Moira Shaw, Stephanie Quezada, and Michael Zárate, in their 2011 article discussed the results of their quantitative research in which the relationship between religion and support for violent warfare was examined through the lens of moral certainty. The results of this research suggested that religion could be used to achieve greater moral certainty which led to an increased support for violent warfare.

This research initially identified a positive relationship between religiosity and moral certainty, specifically, when religiosity increased, so did moral certainty (Shaw et al., 2011). Additionally, the researchers determined that greater moral certainty, when associated with religion, as opposed to another reason, (e.g. a geopolitical purpose) led to increased support for violent warfare. Understanding how moral certainty affects a religious adherent's perception of violence could be critical to understanding how religion influenced those attitudes and perceptions. Additionally, the credibility of an information source could affect how well the information was accepted by the adherent and had the potential to influence the level of an individual's moral certainty.

In Lucien van Liere's article about the influence of religion in India, the author examined violent conflicts in Indonesia between Christians and Muslims. Ultimately, he suggested that "religions are not the primal cause of conflict but are fueling up existing ethnic or separatist conflicts" (van Liere, 2009, pp. 246-247). He also discussed how religion is used by each of the groups to vilify and dehumanize the other, magnifying the intensity of the conflicts in that nation.

In the article the author discussed three elements that contribute to the conduct of violence in Indonesian conflicts: the hot place, the cycle of vengeance, and dehumanization. Religion is potentially involved in two of the three elements described, specifically the hot place and dehumanization. The hot place, which included the notion of a hot date was similar in concept to the sacred time described by Ron Hassner in which a specific location (or date) was selected for its importance to or feelings it invoked from an audience and dehumanization was often a result of an in-group/out-group aspect to many religious beliefs (van Liere, 2009). These elements of violence as noted in this article, which were intended to explain the actions of the aggressor were similar to factors identified as having influence on a religious audience's perception of violence.

In van Liere's 2011 article, he discussed how a series of riots between 1999 and 2001 on the Indonesian Island of Maluku, started out as a conflict based in economic, political and social reasons then was subsequently framed in religious terms, changing the nature of the conflict by increasing the violence and lethality of the struggle.

Van Liere (2011) suggested that using religion to frame the conflict helped people to empathize with the struggle. "As a result, traditional theological language was used to indicate the victimhood of the in-group and to legitimate violence toward the out-group" (van Liere, 2011, p. 323). The religious framing of the riots, even though it was not the original basis of the conflict gave people a familiar context to identify with and it also fueled the need to inflict violence on the out-group.

**Political and social causes of violence in current research.** “Religious violence” or violence conducted in the name of religion is often a justification or a means to legitimize violence conducted for reasons other than ideology (Basedau et al., 2011; Mani, 2012; Sheikh, 2012). Frequently, violence is conducted in the name of religion to promote nationalism (Sen & Wagner, 2009) or legitimize state violence (Lusthaus, 2011; Moten, 2010). Another common reason for conducting “religious violence” is to end a perceived social injustice (Gates & Steane, 2009) or to correct a disparity in resources (Chirot, 2011). By framing the conflict in religious terms, not only can the conflict be easily understood but it provides a sustainable motivation for people to support the cause (Lusthaus, 2011).

*Religion as a justification or rationalization for the conduct of violence.* In his 2010 article Hüseyin Cinoğlu argued that terrorist organizations have used religion, particularly Islam, to justify their violent acts. The author theorized that there are four basic ways that religion is used to guide the actions of terrorist organizations: to legitimize violence, to alleviate negative consequences of alienation, to absolve the group from acquiring widespread approval, and to assist in the identification in potential targets for attack (Cinoğlu, 2010).

The author did not propose that the primary objective of the terrorist organization was to truly protect religion or in this case, Islam, but he suggested that religion is merely exploited for the group’s purposes. Cinoğlu (2010) also posited that although the

interpretation of Islam used by terrorist organizations is significantly different from the one used by mainstream Muslims, many of these terrorist groups had considerable support from moderate Muslims. This article discussed how religion is used by organizations to legitimize violence in the minds of other adherents, whether they be supporters, followers, or adversaries.

In his 2009 article, Bekir Çinar examined terrorism today, through the lens of historical, political, social, economic, ideological, and religious motivations but ultimately identifies terrorism as a result of an injustice or injustices in a state's political system. While these other factors may influence or affect an organization's method of addressing their grievances, Çinar (2009) concluded that the core reasons for conducting terrorism are political injustices.

Çinar (2009) also suggested that "religion *per se* is not a direct cause of terrorism, but people can find justification for terrorism in religion" (p. 111). The author argued that religion can be used to frame the struggle in a way that an audience can understand it in order to garner support, but is not the basis for the action (Çinar, 2009). The author also suggested that religion can make violent acts palatable to a religious audience, but he neglected to explain specifically why this occurred. Although this article acknowledged the feasibility of using religion to justify violent acts, it did not provide specific factors, or reasons why a religious audience would accept violence.

Mona Sheikh, in her 2012 article about the use of religious justifications by the Pakistani Taliban agreed in concept with Cinoğlu (2010) and Çinar (2009). Between 2007 and 2011, the author examined a variety of Taliban communications focusing on the religious justifications for the violence conducted by this group. One conclusion that Sheikh drew from this research was that the Taliban's use of religion to justify their actions would "pave the way for extraordinary action, i.e. violence, suspending the possibility of negotiation and dialogue" (Sheikh, 2012, p. 439).

Sheikh (2012) also suggested that religion, in this case Islam, was used to frame the narrative that was conveyed through the Taliban's communications. In many of the materials examined the author noted that Islam was portrayed as being threatened, specifically through threats to mosques and seminaries and through threats to sharia law (Sheikh, 2012). This notion also aligns with Hobföll's COR theory in which violence is justified when critical resources are threatened.

In an explanation of the theory of the four waves of terrorism, Leonard Weinberg and William Eubank argued that the world is presently in the fourth wave of terrorism, having endured three other waves of terrorism, starting almost a 100 years ago. The previous three waves of terrorism involved political aims (anarchy, national liberation, and national self-assertion) and the fourth is defined as one in which religious radicalism frames the resistance movements (Weinberg & Eubank, 2010).

Weinberg and Eubank (2010) explained that nationalism was the commonality across all four waves and that religious radicalism was only an aspect of this last period. They also suggested that the religious violence was not limited to a specific religion but has been committed by Muslim, Sikh, and Hindu adherents as well as members of cults like the Aum Shinriyko and Heaven's Gate.

This article suggested that this inclusion of religious justifications for violent behavior was an element of this wave of terrorism and would in time end, like the other waves. This also supposed that the perceptions of and attitudes of adherents toward violence were limited to this wave and would also change. Understanding how this wave came to pass and what would ultimately influence it to end may help researchers and scholars to better understand why people have perceived violence as they do.

***“Religious violence” conducted for social or political reasons.*** According to Matenia Sirseloudi in her article about violent radicalism among the Turkish Diaspora in Germany, there were three main factors that influenced this population's vulnerability to religious radicalism. These three primary drivers of radicalism included the religious movement in Turkey, the role religion played to the immigrant community, and the occurrence of a personal crisis. Additionally, an individual's status as a first or second-generation immigrant could significantly influence whether members of this community would be vulnerable to the draw of religious radicalism (Sirseloudi, 2012).

Sirseloudi (2012) noted that one of the ways Islamist activism manifested itself was through *Jihadi Islamism*, or armed jihad. She posited that this type of activism was based on a notion that Islam was threatened and violence must be used to defend Islam against its enemies. These enemies could be “corrupt” regimes, such as Egypt or Saudi Arabia or global enemies like Israel and the United States.

This rationale for defensive violence was rooted in religion and in many ways, could be explained through the COR Theory. The perceived threat is to the *ummah* or the global community of Muslims and as a result would provoke a violent response to defend the community from the enemies that would try to destroy them.

In Moten’s 2009 article about the ways different states perceive terrorism, the author examined the concept of terrorism, comparing the way in which many western nations define the idea with the way many Muslims see terrorism in the world today. The author also suggested that what western nations call *religious violence* is a reasonable response by Muslim populations to U.S. and U.K.-led aggression into Muslim lands (Moten, 2010).

To illustrate this point, Moten (2010) suggested that the U.S./U.K. activities in the Middle East are less about weapons of mass destruction or Middle East security and more about the attempts of western nations to remove Islamic governments and install those that would “acquiesce to U.S. dominance of Middle Eastern and international affairs” (p. 52). The article also suggested that the Muslim response to these attempts at

marginalizing or replacing Islamic governments would be considered terrorism, due to the impracticality of waging a conventional war against the world's only remaining superpower.

Moten (2010) also discussed the humiliation and resentment that many Muslims felt over the American actions in Iraq, the U.S. presence in Saudi Arabia, and other atrocities either conducted by or backed by the United States. This psychological loss may have been for many, sufficient to evoke a violent response, such as terrorist acts against those forces occupying traditionally Muslim lands.

Jeffrey Haynes, in his 2009 article discussed the influence of transnational religious organizations on the international order. In this article the author focused specifically on two transnational religious groups: the American Evangelical Protestants and al-Qaeda and he discussed how they have conceptually and empirically influenced the international order through their roles in international relations (Haynes, 2009).

This article included a discussion on not only how these organizations affected international relations and international order but also it contained a possible explanation for how religious organizations perceived international order. In particular, the article explained how a U.S.-led international order may be an unacceptable solution to some Muslims (Haynes, 2009). In this article Haynes also examined how Wahhabism and the philosophies of Sayyid Qutb led to the 1998 *fatwa*, which declared *jihad* against



Americans and Jews and authorized the killing of members of these two groups (Haynes, 2009).

Haynes (2009) examined statements made by captured al-Qaeda operatives as well as intercepted communiqués from an African al-Qaeda affiliate that articulated their concerns about the Muslim lands that America had occupied, the wealth that Americans had stolen and the humiliation Muslims had endured due to American actions. This article, through these perceived losses, examined some of the reasons and justifications for the al-Qaeda terrorist activities in Africa.

In Cavanaugh's 2011 article the War on Terror is examined and ultimately the author suggested that this conflict was less of a war between secularism and religion and more of a conflict between two different ideas of a state social order. After the 2001 attacks, many Americans considered this terrorist act to be an example of religious violence conducted between an extremist religious organization (al-Qaeda) and a secular nation (the USA). Cavanaugh expressed his disagreement with this position.

The author argued that despite American claims that religion and church are separate entities from the state functions, the identity of the nation was more deeply entrenched in religion than the citizens of our nation acknowledged (Cavanaugh, 2011). Cavanaugh (2011) cited the comments of then-President George Bush as he linked piety with 9/11 and President Obama's references to "God", "hallowed ground" and those who were "sacrificed" in the attacks on September 11.

Cavanaugh (2011) also referenced a 2001 *New York Times Magazine* article in which the author, Andrew Sullivan proposed that monotheism contributed to terrorist acts, but Cavanaugh rebutted this idea with the notion that the real enemy of Islamic fundamentalism is secular fundamentalism. Secular fundamentalism, posited Cavanaugh, segregated religion from politics and could be perceived by Muslims to have marginalized Islam, thus creating the conflict.

In Daniel Chirot's 2011 article, the author examined the background and rationale for religious violence through the books of several noted authors in the field, specifically, Mark Juergensmeyer, Eli Berman, Roxanne Euben and Muhammad Qasim Zaman. Chirot (2011) discussed Juergensmeyer's contention that a secular, modern state could give rise to an extremist element and Berman's argument that the impetus for religiously-based terrorism was economically driven. He also recommended Euben and Zaman's publication to those who would be interested in learning about Islamist extremism (Chirot, 2011).

In examining these three books, Chirot (2011) discussed several theories to explain why religious violence occurred, including a threat of material or psychological loss (such as land, identity or honor), divine command, and as a response to a threat to their religion. Chirot (2011) examined several potential reasons for religious violence yet eliminated none.

This article discussed several different ways that a threat or a perceived threat to an individual's resources could potentially facilitate a violence response from a religious audience (Chiot, 2011). These behaviors, exhibited by members of various religions across the world could be examined and possibly explained through the COR theory of stress.

Tim Krieger and Daniel Meierrieks, in their 2011 article discussed causes of terrorism, specifically focusing seven different factors of transnational terrorism: economic deprivation, socioeconomic and demographic strain, political and institutional order, political transformation and instability, identity and cultural clash, global economic and political order, and contagion. The authors examined the origins of transnational terrorism as well as the targets of transnational terrorism in their pursuit to identify relevant factors that contributed to transnational terrorism (Krieger & Meierrieks, 2011).

The discussions of economic deprivation as well as the examination of socioeconomic and demographic strain and identity and cultural clash were all potentially relevant to the research that was conducted. These factors could be studied using the COR Theory with material resources as well as psychological resources being threatened to provoke a violent response. For example, Krieger and Meierrieks (2011) discussed several different studies that have considered the effects of poverty and few opportunities for advancement reaching no consensus, as the results appeared to conflict with each other.

Poverty, inequality, education and fewer opportunities were some of the factors that the authors (2011) suggested may have influenced the growth and existence of terrorist activity, which contributed to understanding how threatened resources affected a person's perception of violence.

Donald Gates and Peter Steane, in their 2009 article introduced the concept of a *political religion*, in which a religious ideology was linked with a political cause, often resulting in violence or combat to achieve the goals of that cause. The authors also associated political religion with fundamentalism and terrorism in recent events such as the Mumbai, London, Bali, and Madrid bombings (Gates & Steane, 2009).

The authors reiterated the common theme that religious violence was inherently linked to political objectives and that the resultant violence often stemmed from secular or political goals (Gates & Steane, 2009). The article touched on many different religions but focused on Islamic fundamentalism and described this group of Muslims as “a more extreme and recent manifestation of politicized religion” (Gates & Steane, 2009, p. 315).

Gates & Steane also proposed that terrorism can also be considered a type of spirituality in which violence is the righteous response to an evil enemy. The researchers (2009) argued that political religion links spirituality with social inequalities which, when combined create an environment that easily facilitates violence.

In the 2010 article by Christopher Joll, the author discussed the religious influence on violence occurring between Buddhists and Muslims living in southern

Thailand. The author argued that any conversation about religious conflict in southern Thailand must also include a discussion about unemployment, politics, education and the local economy (Joll, 2010) as all of these factors influence religious violence in the area.

The author also discussed issues raised by COR theorists when he claimed that Muslim resistance in Thailand came about as a result of Thai government interference in Islamic matters (Joll, 2010). In protecting their religious culture, the Muslims began a reform movement which attempted to 1) regain control of Islamic institutions from the Thai government and to 2) strengthen these weakened and fragmented institutions (Joll, 2010). The author also suggested that religious violence was often a result of a complex political environment that raised questions of legitimacy for both the Thai government and many of the Islamic institutions.

In this article the author discussed theories suggesting that Islam was central to the violence found in southern Thailand as well as ideas that Islam had no role in the violence but in the end, he summarily rejected both extremes (Joll, 2010). The conclusion that Joll reached was that religion's role was to frame or justify the conflict and it was not a primary driver for the violence.

In the 2011 article Jaco Beyers examined the role religion plays in a society where conflict is present between influential groups. Religion, explained Beyers, can be the cause of conflict between the authorities of a civil society and its citizens, particularly when religious leaders compete for power with the civil authorities. Additionally, religion

can be the cause of conflict between different elements of a society, as they struggle for influence within a population.

Although the author focused on conflict rather than violence, many of the reasons identified as causes of conflict are the same ones identified by other authors as reasons for violence. For example, Beyer (2011) suggested that competition for authority and control amongst religions can lead to conflict, as can “limited resources available to society and religions” (p. 6).

In this article Beyers (2010) suggested that the struggle for adherents and authority could have acted as a catalyst to incite conflict or potentially violence in a society. The conflict between religion and civil society or between the different elements of a society could have caused a religious group to perceive a threat, whether that threat was real or not. This conflict in turn may have caused such a threat that an adherent would have felt that violence was justified to protect their resources. Beyers explained how religion can be used in shaping perceptions and he also addressed how people responded to the threat of violence.

In the 2013 article by Nil Satana, Molly Inman, and Johanna Birnir the authors proposed that the exclusion from governmental activities of ethnic minorities who have different religious beliefs than the majority population will invite the use of terrorist tactics. Religious differences alone, the authors noted, do not normally facilitate the use of these extreme tactics, but when combined with exclusion of an ethnic and religious

minority from the government, violent activities are often the result (Satana, Inman, & Birnir, 2013).

In this quantitative study the authors combined the two factors of ethnicity and religion, so conclusively identifying the impact of religion, alone on the propensity toward violence would be difficult to do. Of note is the fact that political exclusion of the ethnic/religious minority was associated with terrorist activities which supports the COR theory but did not sufficiently explain whether or not religion contributed to the acceptance of violence over other factors such as ethnicity.

This research did not explicitly speak to a perceived loss of resources, but it suggested that a perceived relative deprivation or a denial of resources could also incite a religious adherent to violence. This situation expanded the scope of the COR Theory to considering adherents who experienced stress because they felt that their resources did not equal those of the majority, instead of only including adherents who experienced stress because of a change in resources, specifically a loss.

*Effects of religious and political motivations combined.* Malka and Soto (2011) analyzed the results of a quantitative study in which the attitudes of religious Americans toward torture of suspected terrorists were examined. The intent of the research was to better understand the relationship between religiosity, political alignment, political discourse and attitudes on torture. The results indicated that overall, religious Americans did not support torture of suspected terrorists and that high religiosity was not a

significant factor in determining if a person would or would not support torture of terrorism suspects.

In this study the researchers focused on a specific situation in which violence would be directed toward a suspected terrorist, which informs my research by providing a possible condition that would prompt religious adherents to find violence unacceptable. The results of this research suggested that high religiosity when combined with a conservative political alignment increased the individual's willingness to accept torture (Malka & Soto, 2011). In this situation, political alignment was identified as a potential factor in understanding when an adherent accepts violence.

Mark Juergensmeyer (2010) discussed the conflict between religious traditions and secular nationalism as nation-states strive to identify the basis for the authority of their political system. The author suggested that both religious and secular national constructs provided the nation-state with order, coherence, and meaning and offered the leadership a clearly understandable authority to rule (Juergensmeyer, 2010).

When faith was used as the foundation for a political system, it was often unclear whether religion was truly the reason a state conducted violence (e.g. God's will or to protect the religion) or if religion was being used as a justification to commit violence and the ultimate goal was not religious (e.g. power, money, resources). Although intertwining religion and politics has been at the very least, cumbersome for many world leaders the notion of religious nationalism had the potential to serve both peaceful and



violent ends for a religious constituency. For a religious audience, political goals could serve as a reason or rationale for the commission of violence, which speaks to both the central question in this research, discussing the role religion plays in the justification of violence.

Faisal Devji, in his 2009 article offered a unique perspective and insight on the rationale behind Islamic martyrdom. Devji (2009) suggested that humanitarianism drives the militant actions of al-Qaeda as the nations of the world search for order in today's global society. The author cited the communications of al-Qaeda who "routinely invoke(s) the plight of suffering Muslims in exactly the same way that humanitarians do of victims in general" (Devji, 2009, p. 175) to support his position.

He also quoted speeches of al-Qaeda leaders Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri in which they encouraged Muslims to stand against Western aggression as did Muhammad the Prophet and his family (Devji, 2009). The al-Qaeda leaders, or militants, as they are referred to by the author, also describe Muslim martyrdom as a victory blessed by Allah in which the martyr will receive immortality in the afterlife.

Much of the verbiage of the al-Qaeda leaders spoke to the shame, humiliation, and degradation inflicted upon the *ummah* (Muslim community) by the western nations (Devji, 2009). This perceived psychological loss was frequently and constantly mentioned as the reason for the violent actions taken against the United States and its allies.

In a 2012 article about the perceptions of terrorism in a Muslim nation, Kamarulnizam Abdullah, Rizal Sukma, Ma'ruf Jamhari and Mazilan Musa discussed the results of a quantitative study in which support for violence and terrorism was examined amongst a group of Muslims in Malaya. The results indicated that religion and ethnicity both had a bearing on the level of support for political violence conducted in Malaya while gender, race, and occupation additionally influenced an individual's perception of terrorist acts (Abdullah et al., 2012).

The results of this research also indicated that politically-inclined individuals would support politically-motivated violence and the more religious individuals would support religiously-based terrorism (Abdullah, et al., 2012). This research did eliminate education as a factor to determine support for violence, as the results indicated that the attitudes toward violence of less educated individuals differed little if any from the attitudes toward violence from people with more education.

Abdullah et al. (2012) explained that religious individuals would support terrorism if it was religiously-motivated, like their politically-inclined counterparts would support politically-motivated violence but offered little connection between the support and the motivation beyond the aggressiveness or passion of an individual. In this article the author addressed the role of religion in understanding motivations and perceptions.

In 2013, Ron Hassner published an article explaining the importance of "sacred time" and discussed how religiously significant dates influenced the conduct of war.

Specifically, Hassner (2013) discussed how these sacred times affected motivation, vulnerability, constraint, and outrage in combatants and civilians. Of the four potential consequences of initiating a conflict the potential attacker would weigh *motivation* and *vulnerability*, which are positive effects for the attacker, against the negative effects of *constraint* and *outrage*, to determine the course that would offer the greatest benefit (Hassner, 2013).

The author also posited that even though many of today's discussions about religion and violence address the actions and behaviors of extremists and fundamentalists, the way moderates interpret sacred times has a greater influence on combat nowadays. Additionally, he argued that the extremists conducting violence constituted a small minority of the acts of war and that more discussion should have been directed at understanding how war conducted during sacred times affected the attitudes of the moderates.

My research addressed how factors such as sacred time or space, affected the perceptions of Islamic religious moderates. This article provided examples of how religion could provide significant meaning in the minds of adherents to a specific date through the idea of a "sacred time."

**Identity and violence in current research.** In examining the relationship between religion and violence, several theories have been developed linking religion, identity and the willingness to accept violent actions. Some theories concerned violent

reactions when an individual's identity is threatened, and others concerned the way religious adherents behaved toward those not in their group, whether the group was a socioeconomic, ethnic, or religious collective.

*Religion and collective identity.* Religion, in a society could serve the purpose of creating a sense of community and contributing to the development of a collective identity (Dingley, 2011). If the ideals of that society were threatened, violence may serve as a means to restore the threatened status (Dingley, 2011; Sen & Wagner, 2009). In this situation threats to a society's collective identity could originate from internal or external sources and so the actions, which served a specific purpose, were not necessarily directed at any particular individual or organization.

James Dingley in his 2011 article discussed religion from a functionalist perspective suggesting that religions served the critical purpose of providing order for a society in addition to affording individuals with a collective identity and a sense of community. Dingley (2011) additionally suggested that when these ideals were threatened, religion was often used as the rationale for violent acts to restore the threatened condition.

The article discussed how perceived threats to the traditional order could often result in a response that was not constrained by the normally accepted rules of a society (Dingley, 2011). For example, the establishment of Israel was seen by some as an attack on the Muslim community and as such, retaliation against Israel would be tantamount to

a holy war. Additionally, “because it is holy, the normal earthly rules can be called off, so enabling any tactic, such as suicide bombers, and against all targets, civilian or not, because all are engaged in opposing the attack on Allah” (Dingley, 2011, p. 331).

In the article by Ragini Sen and Wolfgang Wagner about fundamentalism in post-Ghandi India, the authors discussed how *Hinduvta*, the ideology that advocated Hindu or Indian nationalism, has affected the Indian culture. They explained how three of the major Hindu sacred texts, the *Mahabharata*, the *Ramayana*, and the *Bhagavad Gita* each included several instances of violence and they discussed how these texts were often used to rationalize the violent acts of Hindu fundamentalists (Sen & Wagner, 2009).

This research was significant because many articles have been written to discuss how Islam, Christianity or Judaism influenced violent behaviors and this was one of the few articles that assessed the causes of religious violence seen in Hindu history and within Hindu culture. The authors examined how Hinduism has been transformed from a faith to an ideology by fundamentalists, justifying social or political goals for Indian society.

Some of the factors that the authors identified as contributing to violence in India were the erosion of a Hindu or Indian identity and an increasingly secular society. To some Indians these two situations may have created an environment in which Hindus felt that their religions or Hindu way of life was threatened and so a viable response was violent action.

Religion and conflict in Sub-Saharan Africa were examined in a 2011 article in which elements of religion were discussed as factors that contributed to violent conflict. The authors argued that religion could be a significant factor influencing armed conflict if conditions such as *religious politicization* or tense relationships between different religions existed (Basedau et al., 2011).

In this article the author discussed specific ways that religion might have influenced violent behavior such as how religion helped to form an individual's identity, how the supernatural or transcendental nature of religion justified extreme acts such as violence and finally that religious adherents may have interpreted guidance from their Supreme Being as directing them to conduct violence (Basedau, et al. 2011). This quantitative research attempted to identify which religious factors are most influential in facilitating violence, potentially through armed conflict. This article examined religious factors that influence a society's decision to engage in armed conflict.

***Religion and consequences of in-group/out-group.*** Another widely held theory concerning the relationship between religion and identity involves the idea of acceptable actions in a situation involving an in-group and an out-group. The in-group/out-group notion suggests that when a conflict arises, members of the in-group would be more inclined to accept violence to defend their possessions or status against members of the out-group (Lusthaus, 2011; van Liere, 2011; Trisk, 2011). Unlike the situation involving the restoration of a status quo, this situation involves the dehumanization or vilification of

a specific group of people, who are perceived as different, or unlike the in-group (Reader, 2012; Schwartz et al., 2009).

Schwartz et al. (2009) discussed the role of cultural, social, and personal identity in terrorism, specifically religiously and ethnically-motivated terrorism. They argued that the confluence of a cultural identity that was collective or fundamental in nature, a social identity that was based on an in-group threatened by an out-group premise, and an authoritarian personal identity would best facilitate violent terrorist activity.

The authors in this article discussed the importance of a cultural identity that can be classified as *collectivist* and was influenced by an *absolutist* religion. In an absolutist religion, adherents believed that the only true religion was theirs and all others were false (Schwartz et al., 2009). This notion of being the only true religion often led to an *us versus them* mentality where the believers of different religions were often threatened by another group's beliefs and behaviors.

When examining an individual's social identity, the broad notion of *us versus them* became more relevant to an adherent's daily life and an in-group and an out-group were formed (Schwartz et al., 2009). It is at the level of an individual's social identity where out-group members were dehumanized (e.g. referred to as "infidels" or simply "the enemy") and the perceived threat was clearly identified by religious leaders, family members, and peers. This article not only addressed the in-group/out-group concept, but

it also addressed the role religion played in formulating perceptions through collective identities.

Janet Trisk (2011) examined the argument that adherents of monotheistic religions were more prone to acts of violence and discussed the writings of noted scholars Regina Schwartz, Laurel Schneider and Grace Jantzen on the topic. Trisk (2011) addressed Schwartz' references to the violence found in the Hebrew Bible and how scarcity of resources from land to God's goodwill drove the actions of the descendants of Cain. She also noted Jantzen's observation that the true idea of monotheism lay not in the fact that there was only one God, but with the idea that God only conferred His goodwill on one people, His chosen people (Trisk, 2011).

In addition to addressing religious motivations for conducting violence, Trisk (2011) also argued that monotheism was a critical factor in understanding religiously-motivated violence. According to Trisk (2011) monotheistic religions facilitated an identity for the chosen people, giving rise to the idea that all others were not chosen and as a result would be considered less than human.

This in-group/out-group notion of good vs bad was an argument that was commonly heard when discussing the reasons why adherents of monotheistic religions were more prone to perceiving violence as acceptable. Additionally, scholars discussed the idea that God protected the oppressed, often with violence, as another reason why monotheism would facilitate the acceptance of violence (Trisk, 2011).



In the 2009 article by Daphna Canetti-Nisim, Eran Halperin, Keren Sharvit, and Stevan Hobföll, the authors reported the results of their quantitative study in which they examined how psychological stress produces exclusionist political attitudes. The results indicated that exposure to psychological stress, (caused by exposure to or experiencing terrorist acts) led to a feeling of a perceived threat which in turn led to exclusionist attitudes toward the minority population (Canetti-Nisim et al., 2009). The study was conducted with 469 Israeli Jews and it measured their attitudes toward the minority population of Palestinian citizens of Israel (PCI).

The notion of a perceived threat was one of the principal elements of the COR theory. The perceived threat posed by the PCIs was directly linked to the negative feelings and exclusionist attitudes experienced by the Jewish Israelis (Canetti-Nisim, et al., 2009). This exclusionist attitude could also be linked to dehumanization and ultimately the commission of violence against this group.

In this situation exposure to stress (terrorist acts) did not directly cause the religious audience (Jewish Israelis) to develop exclusionist attitudes toward the PCIs, but when mediated by psychological distress and perceived threat the relationship between exposure to terrorism and exclusionist attitudes became clearer (Canetti-Nisim, et al., 2009).

In the 2012 article by Anne Aly and Jason-Leigh Striegher, the authors disputed the notion that religion is a critical factor in radicalization and argued that individuals

became radicalized through a four-phase process in which religion played a much lesser role than many would believe. They examined this four-phased model using the background and experiences of Jack Roche, Australia's first convicted terrorist.

The authors argued that religion is an element of each of the four phases but is, in the case of Jack Roche, only one element of a larger set of political and social goals. Aly & Striegher (2012) theorized that religious factors when combined with social, political, and economic factors would have considerable influence in the radicalization process but alone, would not have the same effect on the individual becoming radicalized.

In the examination of Jack Roche's radicalization Aly & Striegher (2012) described how religion, specifically Islam, was used in the radicalization process as a source of identity and "as a vehicle for group bonding, a moral template for constructing in-group/out-group boundaries" (p. 859). While this examination focused on Islam and Roche's involvement with the Jamā'ah Islāmiyyah, elements of this case were potentially applicable to other religions and other violent organizations.

Rama Mani in her 2012 article examined the role of religion in violent conflict. Specifically, Mani (2012) discussed the role of religion throughout man's history and proposed what its role could be in the future, either as an instigator of violence or a proponent of peace. The author acknowledged that religion has been used as a motivator for peace, but it has also been the cause and impetus for violent behaviors between cultures and societies (Mani, 2012).

Mani (2012) discussed several ways that religious fundamentalism serves as an effective framework and justification for violence. The author did not focus on a specific religion but discussed fundamentalism across many different religions and the ways that it served as a medium to violent behaviors more so than more moderate versions of religious beliefs. The article touched on several commonly held beliefs such as the view that religion facilitates an in-group/out-group notion in which the out group is inferior and could be subjected to actions that one would not commit with those of the same faith.

In the 2011 article by Jonathan Lusthaus about the legitimization of violence by national governments, the author argued that religion played a significant role in state violence even if the nation was outwardly secular. Religion, Lusthaus (2011) suggested, permeated cultures despite the stated religiosity of a national government. Based on this theory Lusthaus concluded that religion played a role in the conduct of and legitimization of state violence.

There was a common theme throughout this article that examined narratives and holy texts of the three monotheistic religions in that religion facilitated violence by creating an in-group that is worthy of God's goodness and an out-group that did not follow the true word of God (Lusthaus, 2011). The author discussed how religion and religious rhetoric affected the actions of the United States, Iran, and Israel, where the governments claimed various levels of secularization.

The antagonistic positions that the governments of these three nations took were often facilitated by religion, whether the basis was an interpretation of the holy text, the religious framing of a conflict or position, or the in-group/out-group model produced by religions (Lusthaus, 2011). In the article, the author argued that while a primary role of religion is to justify a conflict or attitude, religion also influenced the conduct of adherents during conflict.

In their 2009 article, the authors Ginges et al. discussed the results of their quantitative research, specifically four studies, in which they examined the relationship between religion and support for suicide attacks. The four studies primarily involved Palestinian Muslims and Israeli Jews, but they also included Indonesian Muslims, British, and Mexican Christians, Indian Hindus, and Russian Orthodox (Ginges et al., 2009).

The results of this research suggested that when dehumanization and identification with the group conducting violence was combined with more frequent attendance at religious services, support for suicide attacks increased (Ginges et al., 2009). This would seem to indicate that religious attendance, dehumanization, and identification with specific groups were all important factors in understanding how adherents perceived violent acts.

Recognizing that this research focused on perceptions of an extremely violent behavior, specifically suicide attacks, the results could offer critical information to my research on what factors affected attitudes and perceptions of violence. Examining

religious attendance and membership in a religious group could be important to understanding how an adherent perceives violence.

### **Summary**

The main sections of this literature review examined three major themes describing reasons that an adherent might support or oppose violence. The first major section of the review includes articles that discussed the nature of the relationship between religion and violence. While some researchers cited specific passages in holy texts to support their argument that religion is a primary reason behind an individual's support for violence (Boustan et al., 2010; Cliteur, 2010b, Falahi, 2010; Meyer, 2011), others took a slightly different position, maintaining that religion was intended to be a rationale for peaceful actions (Van Pelt Campbell, 2011; Walsh, 2012). Religious texts, these authors claimed, were misused and misinterpreted by those who would commit or condone violence in the name of their beliefs. Proposing a third position in this spectrum, scholars like Kippenberg (2010) and Huber (2011) suggested that religion was a generally neutral concept that was used situationally, for both violence and peace. Also, included in this section of the review were articles that discussed the way religious influences made violent actions more severe, especially among religiously-based organizations (Fettweis, 2009; Reader, 2012).

In the second major section of this literature review I examined political and social causes of what is often referred to as "religious violence". This portion of the

review included articles in which religion served as a justification to committing violent acts (Basedau et al., 2011; Mani, 2012; Sheikh, 2012) and in some cases, religion was even used to rationalize violence conducted by a state when the primary reason for violence is secular (Lusthaus, 2011). Researchers have also contended that religion could also serve as a secondary or tertiary reason to justify violence when coupled with a loss or perceived loss, such as a threat to a nation's boundaries (Hayes, 2009; Moten, 2010). In this section of the literature review I attempted to distinguish primary reasons for the acceptance of violence from secondary or support reasons for the conduct of violent acts.

The third major section of this literature review included articles in which researchers examined the relationship between identity and religious violence. Several authors (Gates & Steane, 2009; Schwartz et al., 2009; Sirseloudi, 2012; van Liere, 2011) suggested that religion was a critical part of a culture such that it facilitated the formulation of individual and group identities in adherents. Taking this idea a step further, other authors argued that a group identity led to the creation of in-groups and out-groups, distinguishing acceptable religious groups from unacceptable religious groups (Canetti-Nisim et al., 2009; Sen and Wagner, 2009; Stăiculescu and Stan, 2012; van Liere, 2009). This alienation of those who adhere to other religious beliefs was often the cause of religious violence as well as a reason for the acceptance of violence conducted against the out-group.

Accepting that some form of relationship exists between religion and the way adherents perceive violence, the exact nature of the relationship has not been clearly articulated in recent literature. Specifically, there has been disagreement on whether religion is the cause for adherents to accept violence or whether religion is the basis for adherents to behave peacefully and in a non-violent fashion. Additionally, if a causal relationship does not exist between religion and violence, then the question arises about how that relationship should be characterized.

What still needs to be studied is the way that religion is interpreted and incorporated into an adherent's understanding of which behaviors and actions are acceptable and which are not. The importance and credibility of the holy texts should be studied along with how an adherent resolves conflicts between his or her beliefs and the social norms of a society. Only by understanding the individual's reasons and rationale can we truly begin to understand how these attitudes are formed and how they can ultimately be changed.

This research, through an in-depth examination of the opinions and views of Sunni Muslims in Western Michigan, offers insight on the role religion plays in the formulation and maintenance of perceptions of violence. This research, unlike previous research, weighed the importance of an individual's identity against the importance of other social influences to determine which factors have the greatest impact on an individual's perception of violence. This research also examined those situations in which

religion was a primary driver for the way an adherent perceives violence and those situations where religion served as a secondary justification for the acceptance or opposition to violent acts.

Additionally, much of the previous research on this topic that used the framework of the COR theory, was conducted with quantitative research. Through inductive (qualitative) methods, specifically a case study design, this research may fill an existing gap by providing a deeper examination of the most relevant factors that affect how an individual perceives violence.



## Chapter 3: Research Method

### **Introduction**

The intent of this case study was to identify and analyze critical factors that influenced the perceptions of violence of Sunni Muslims in Western Michigan. Recognizing that culture, in general, and religion, specifically, plays a significant role in how these perceptions are formed, the role of religion in the formulation and preservation of perceptions was of critical importance in this study. Further, I investigated how secular and religious factors interacted to influence the attitudes of the adherents about violent actions.

In this chapter, I discuss the selected methodology and explain the specific processes that I used in the study. Specifically, I explain why I selected a case study as the research design, and then I discuss my role as a researcher, the research setting, and the sampling strategy. Additionally, I also explain how the data were collected and analyzed, the procedures that were in place to ensure the participants were appropriately protected, and finally how the results were presented.

### **Research Design and Rationale**

The central question for this research was: What factors influence how Sunni Muslims from Western Michigan perceive acts of violence committed against another person? The three supplementary research questions that support a comprehensive response to the central questions were: (a) What role does religion play in the perception

of violence by a religious adherent? (b) What sources of information most influence an individual's attitude on violence? (e.g. religious texts, formal religious teachings, family, school news, other sources) (c) How do threats of perceived or actual loss affect how a religious person perceives violence?

The central phenomena I explored in this study were the beliefs and perceptions of Sunni Muslims living in Western Michigan. Specifically, I examined how this group of religious adherents perceives violence and whether they understand it to be acceptable or unacceptable in certain situations. The factors I examined included not only religious influences, but also secular influences on religious individuals. In addition to examining the individual factors that influenced perceptions, I also attempted to identify and better understand the relationships and associations between these factors to appreciate how these interactions affected individual perception.

When determining whether to conduct this research using quantitative or qualitative research methods, I took several factors into consideration. First, I considered that the intent of the research was not to prove or disprove an existing hypothesis, but to explore, from the perspective of the participants, the potential factors that may have an influence on how religious adherents form perceptions. The decision to pursue the research using a qualitative method was made to identify a wider range of potential factors or variables that might have influence on an individual's perceptions.

Several of the previous studies that used the COR theory to examine the relationship between religion and violence were conducted using a quantitative approach, but those studies focused more on refuting or validating an existing hypothesis. Because I explored different factors that influence perception, I determined that an inductive approach was more appropriate.

Once I identified the approach, I considered several different qualitative designs. The first option was to conduct the research using ethnography, but this design was rejected because the intent was not to understand the entire culture of a population, but to better understand a single aspect of a culture, specifically how individuals in that society perceive violence. I considered other qualitative designs and eliminated them because they also were less appropriate to achieve the goals of this research. For example, I considered but excluded phenomenology because the study was not intended to describe a specific experience but to understand how life experiences and influences are interpreted and translated into attitudes, perceptions, and beliefs. I also considered grounded theory, but determined that it was not the most effective design to address the complexities an individual's perceptions. So, it, too, was eliminated as an option.

I selected a case study design because it allows for an in-depth examination of a specific group of participants, limited to a specific time and location (Creswell, 2012). Additionally, a case study is well-suited to exploring a population to better understand not only what influences a culture, but also to understand how and why those factors have

the influence they do. Because I could examine a breadth of factors including religious, economic, political, and other social influences on an adherent's perceptions of violence, I determined that a case study would provide necessary and critical limits for the research.

### **Role of the Researcher**

The qualitative researcher's role includes several different tasks. In traditional qualitative research, the researcher can serve as a complete observer, a complete participant, a participant as an observer, or a nonparticipant/observer as a participant (Creswell, 2012). For this study, I openly collected data but was not directly involved with the activities. Thus, I was a nonparticipant observer.

In qualitative studies, the researcher also serves as the collection instrument, so the opportunity for researcher bias to affect the results is greater than with a quantitative study. Fink (2000) described seven distinct functions that the qualitative researcher performs, from determining what will be studied and how it will be studied, to reporting the results of the research after it is complete. Because this case study involved understanding and interpreting an individual's perceptions, those stages where researcher bias could most affect the results were carefully planned and conducted. Specifically, my role in the *designing*, *interviewing*, and *analyzing* steps was critical to minimizing bias in this study.

In the *designing* stage, the selection of the population and development of the interview questions were important to reducing the likelihood of bias because of my experiences. I was responsible for drafting the interview questions and demographic questionnaire. Additionally, I administered the interview questionnaire after having it peer reviewed by another PhD candidate.

In this study, I alone collected and analyzed the data to reduce variation in the interpretation. I was also responsible for transcribing the contents of the conversations and to transferring the data (both transcribed and audio files) into the program I used to store the data. I was also solely responsible for conducting the analysis on the gathered information. The analysis was conducted in two stages, with the first stage of coding performed to identify patterns from the words used by the participants and the second stage of the coding performed to identify conceptual similarities, which require interpretation on my part. Lastly, I was responsible for ensuring that the data were properly secured to protect the privacy of the participants.

### **Personal and Professional Relationships**

The participants who contributed to this research had no professional relationship with me. Any potential participant who was at the time in any kind of senior-subordinate or instructor-student relationship with me would have been eliminated from the study. In terms of personal relationships, there was the potential for a participant in this study to be my associate, colleague, or acquaintance. In order to participate in the research, though,

the relationship between the participant and me could not be one where one person had influence over the other, and any such relationship would have to be clearly identified prior to collecting data.

### **Managing Bias**

Like much of the research conducted using qualitative methods, there were several opportunities for the introduction of bias to this study. One place in the process where my bias may have entered the study was during the drafting of the interview questions. In order to reduce bias when wording the questions, I had an objective, non-participating colleague review the draft prior to finalizing the questionnaire.

Another place where my bias could have been introduced into the study was in the data analysis stage where the results of the interviews were coded and interpreted for meaning. Again, I used an unbiased peer to ensure the data were interpreted consistently and according to the intentions of the participants.

### **Ethical Issues**

This research complies with the three ethical principles of *beneficence*, *justice*, and *respect for persons*, as outlined in the Walden Institutional Review Board (IRB) application (2010). As such, I appropriately addressed any ethical issues prior to data collection. Because of the sampling strategy, some issues commonly faced by researchers were not relevant in this study. For example, as previously mentioned, if a potential participant had a professional relationship with me, they would not have been allowed to

participate, thereby minimizing the risk of perceived coercion to participate.

Additionally, the participants could select the location of the interviews. This minimized the risk of an unwanted intrusion of privacy. Lastly because there were no physical requirements in this research, the risk to the participants' health was also minimal.

The greatest ethical concerns in this research involved the privacy of the participants and the security of the data collected. As discussed in Chapter 1, I allowed the participants to provide input into the selection of the location for the interviews to minimize or reduce undue psychological stress and to facilitate the collection of honest and frank information.

In order to reduce the possibility of an unintended disclosure of confidential information, I took several measures to secure the collected data. The digital data were secured on a laptop that is protected with a password, and I kept a backup copy of the data on an external hard drive that was physically secured in a safe. Any hard copies of the data collected during this research were also stored in the locked container.

In the original data collection plan, all of the interviews were to have been conducted in a public facility like a library or a religious facility such as a church, mosque, or temple. The interviews were to occur in a location where the content of the conversation could not be overheard by others, such as a private room in a library or an isolated space in a religious facility. The ideal location would also allow the participants to be comfortable and to feel secure in providing their honest input. The location would

provide the participants and me privacy and should allow me to conduct the interviews without distraction or interruption.

The theory behind the requirements of the location was that the more secure the participant felt, the greater the probability of gathering honest and open input. The sensitivity of the topic was also an important concern because some people may have been hesitant to offer frank input. These procedures should have increased the comfort and confidence of the participant, thus increasing the credibility of the information. These procedures also supported the requirements to comply with research ethics.

### **Methodology**

The processes used to collect and analyze the data for this research are defined in this section. The rationale for the sampling strategy, an explanation of the instrumentation used in this study as well as data collection and analysis plans are also articulated in this portion of the chapter. Additionally, issues of trustworthiness and ethical procedures are discussed as they pertain to this research.

#### **Selection of Participants**

The population that was studied in this research included Sunni Muslims living in the Western Michigan area. Only adults were included in this research and there was no age limit to participate beyond the minimum age of 18 years. Elderly participants (those over the age of 65) were not be intentionally recruited, but they were not eliminated if their age was the only potentially disqualifying factor.



The level of an adherent's religiosity was an important consideration as the participants should have been neither self-proclaimed extremists nor atheists. All of the adherents were moderate in their beliefs, although specific criteria to definitively define "moderate" were not identified. For this reason, if the participant self-identifies as closer to moderate than fundamentalist or atheist in the demographic questionnaire or in discussion, he or she would be considered a viable candidate. There was also no means to verify the religion, sect, or school of a potential participant, so the way the individual self-identifies his or her faith was accepted to be accurate.

SES and access to information were also considerations for this research, but factors such as gender and political affiliation were not important in this study. The intent was to include participants that represented the average individual for the area. Potential participants would have been rejected due to a significantly high SES or limited access to information, but neither gender nor political affiliation, as discriminating factors, was addressed or identified in this research.

In determining the sample size for this research, several factors were considered. The first question to be addressed was to identify if the intent was to include many participants gaining little information from each (breadth) or if the intent was to include few participants gaining a lot of information from each participant (depth) (Patton, 2002). Because the intent of the research was to better understand many factors and how they

interacted, the most appropriate approach would be to examine this topic in depth, indicating a smaller sample to be used in this study.

Another consideration in determining the sample size for this research was to identify the point where adding more participants would yield little new information, or achieving the point of redundancy. While it is generally understood that there are no standard rules and no fixed number of samples that is appropriate for any approach or study (Patton, 2002), there are guidelines that can help a researcher to achieve the point of saturation, which would help to determine a reasonable starting point.

The last considerations for determining the sample size were the approach and the data collection method used in the research. For this study, a case study approach was taken so potentially one person could be a reasonable sample size for this study. The number of samples for this research could have also extended as high as 2500, which is the number of self-identified Muslims in Western Michigan, specifically Kalamazoo and Calhoun Counties (Association of Religion, 2010). A more practical and realistic sample size would be based on the data collection method, interviewing key informants, which would dictate a sample size of five people (Nastasi, n.d.). For this research, the plan was to interview five to ten participants, understanding that if each interview revealed significantly new information, more participants may have been necessary to reach the point of saturation.

As previously mentioned, saturation or redundancy is achieved when no new information is gained by interviewing additional participants. The standard of achieving saturation is an ideal that provides researchers with a rationale to determine an appropriate sample size, but it may not be practical when considering environments in which there are limited resources (Patton, 2002).

Because of the sensitivity of the topic, a constraint for this research was the willingness of potential participants to discuss this issue in depth with one who does not share their faith. Muslims in the United States may be hesitant to discuss their feelings about violence with a non-Muslim. For this reason, achieving saturation may not have been a realistic option due to a potential reluctance of the local Muslim population to participate.

Although the actual characteristics of the sample could not be accurately described until the participants were chosen, I identified several expected characteristics in anticipation of the selection. Given the time constraints to recruit for and conduct the interviews, I predicted that the participants would either be retired, unemployed, self-employed or employed only part time, as people who are employed full time may not be available to participate. Additionally, I anticipated that the gender of the participants would be evenly divided between male and female participants.

Lastly, I expected that the participants would be either immigrants or first-generation Americans. Because many immigrants retain their culture after having come

to the United States, including their religion, it is likely that Muslim participants would be ethnically Middle Eastern or African. For this reason, it was important to also screen participants for English comprehension.

I identified, contacted, and recruited participants through a variety of means. The primary means of identifying Muslim participants was through contacts at the religious facilities. Additionally, I identified participants through social or commercial interactions. Contacts at a local university in several different departments could also facilitate introductions to key contacts and individual participants. Once a participant was identified, the individual might also serve as a key communicator in order to identify and recruit other participants. Contact for all of the potential participants was made face-to-face or over the phone in order to pre-screen for eligibility and to explain the intent and purpose of the research. I had planned to use the Walden participant pool as a backup to identify and contact participants for this research, but in the end, it was not required.

### **Instrumentation**

The data collection instruments in this research consisted of two questionnaires and equipment used to record the interviews. The first of two researcher-developed questionnaires was a form used to collect limited demographic information to confirm the eligibility of potential candidates. Information such as the individual's religion, age, and place of residence were identified with this form to ensure that participants were suitable for this research. Using this questionnaire I screened for the previously mentioned

criteria, so those not meeting the requirements would have promptly been excluded. The questionnaire could be completed in a variety of ways, including face-to-face with the researcher or it could be completed by the potential participant and sent to or otherwise given to the researcher to determine if the potential participant met the eligibility requirements.

I used the second questionnaire as the primary data collection instrument to conduct the interviews. For this research, the interviews were semi-structured, with this questionnaire being used as a guide to elicit responses in broad areas. Because of the sensitivity of the subject, I anticipated that some of the participants would prefer to engage in one-on-one interviews rather than discuss the issue in a group setting. For this reason, no focus groups were conducted during this study. If the Walden participant pool had been utilized, both the demographic questionnaire and the interview questionnaire could be completed through the website.

Lastly, scripture from the Muslim holy text, the Qur'an, provided the researcher with background information to develop questions for the interview. Recognizing that to many Muslims, any version of the Qur'an not written in the original Arabic would be considered a *translation of the Qur'an*, I found and used a reputable version, the Oxford World's Classic translation of the Qur'an for this research.

The data collection instruments, as described were ultimately sufficient to answer the research questions. The central research question was adequately answered through

semi-structured interviews, which were used to facilitate a wide range of responses. While structured interviews would have provided a more consistent set of responses, the nature of semi-structured questions allowed me to gather a wider range of responses, restricted only by the participants and not limited by the knowledge of the researcher. This allowed me to produce a more comprehensive list of relevant factors that influenced perception.

The three secondary questions addressing the role of religion, sources of information and threats of perceived loss were focused in areas that provided a general direction and a starting point for the discussions. Although I expected the interviews to address information not explicitly mentioned in the three sub-questions, the three areas covered by these supporting questions facilitated conversation into topics critical to this research. What was unclear at the outset of the study was the importance of: the role of religion, the source of the information and the threat of loss in influencing an adherent's perceptions of violence.

The basis for the data collection instruments used in this study were the Qur'an and the literature sources identified in Chapter 2. I developed the questions to elicit a wide range of responses to explain what influenced an individual's perceptions of violence. Religion, as discussed in several articles was one of the factors that was being examined in this research, but it was not the only potential influence that may have affected perception. The literature offered several different perspectives on the influence

of religion and several of them were examined in this research through the interview questions.

I also expected additional factors discussed in the literature such as threats to identity, material resources and psychological resources to emerge as potential factors that affected an adherent's perceptions. The basis for one series of questions in the questionnaire is the COR theory as described in several of the articles summarized in the literature review.

Another consideration identified in the literature, source credibility, was also examined in this study and was an important factor in the development of the data collection instruments. A portion of the questions addressed how the credibility of a source of information affects perception, which was again based on information gained from the review of the literature in Chapter 2.

Content validity for the interview questionnaire was established through peer review of the developed questionnaires with the support of an unbiased and impartial colleague. Because there was no subject matter expert to identify if the instrument was effective in eliciting the range of existing factors that affect an individual's perceptions, an unbiased peer was used to aid in establishing the effectiveness of the instruments. Recognizing that individual perceptions and factors that influence them, could not be accurately predicted before the interviews, definitively establishing content validity of the instruments was difficult.

Prior to actual data collection I assessed the interview questions for content validity to the extent possible, specifically to determine if the questionnaire would be adequate to gather all of the relevant information that exists. If the questionnaire did not allow me to consistently gather the information necessary to sufficiently answer the research questions, I would have to modify the instrument prior to data collection and reassess it until the relevant information could be gathered.

Because I developed the questionnaire using open-ended queries, the instrument was sufficient to elicit the required responses to answer the research questions. The interview questionnaire addressed how the credibility of sources, the threat of loss, and religion affected an adherent's perceptions. The questionnaire also provided the participants with the opportunity to respond to generally-worded questions discussing any other relevant factors that would justify the commission of violence.

For this research one instrument was used to elicit the information required to answer all of the research questions. A single questionnaire was developed to use in individual interviews. The intent of the questionnaire was to provide discussion starters and not to serve as a set of fixed and unalterable questions that must be unfailingly followed during the interviews.

### **Data Collection Procedures**

The two primary methods of data collection for this research were an examination of relevant artifacts, specifically the Muslim Qur'an and face-to-face or phone/Skype



interviews. If face-to-face/phone interviews could not be conducted, the university's participant pool would have been included as an alternative data collection method. The information gathered from the religious text was used to develop the interview questions and was also to help provide background on potential cultural influences experienced by these populations.

For the primary research question as well as the supporting sub-questions, I collected data primarily in worksites or other public locations. Given the sensitivity of the topic and recognizing that some participants may not be comfortable in one of these locations, additional consideration was given to participants who preferred to provide their information in a less public forum. For example, participants who preferred to conduct the interview in a study room in a library or a dining area in a restaurant could certainly be afforded consideration for their request.

I conducted all of the data collection for this study, which included interviewing all of the participants for this study. No external resources were used to collect data for this research and no archival data sources were used beyond the religious texts previously mentioned that provided background information.

The original plan was that data collection events would be conducted over a period of approximately three weeks. The intent of this research was to conduct five to ten individual interviews, scheduling an interview every other day. Each interview was expected to last approximately one hour. This would have allowed sufficient time to

prepare for the upcoming interview as well as to allow time to transcribe the interviews. With this timeline I also assumed that participants would be available at this interval. In the questionnaire there were only ten questions, so the possibility existed that the engagements would have lasted less than the expected 60 minutes. In order to gain sufficient information to answer the research questions, I anticipated that I may have to include additional questions, beyond what was listed on the questionnaire.

I documented the interviews using a hand-held audio recorder, if the participants did not object to the interviews being recorded. If the participants were not comfortable with the recording, hand-written notes would be the data collection instrument for that particular interview. The data, whether recorded digitally or through hand-written notes, were transferred to a laptop, which was password-protected and to a backup device which was secured in a locked container. I also maintained a copy of the transcribed interview on the laptop and on the external backup drive. Following the data transfer, the recorder was cleared of all information. Because of the sensitivity of the subject, no video was collected of the interviews. Observation was not used to collect data, but observation of participant non-verbal behaviors during the interviews was a consideration to ensure that participants were comfortable during the process.

If the university participant pool had been used to collect data, the information would have been recorded through the website. The data collection instruments

previously identified would have been used if the data collection was conducted through face-to-face interviews or the Walden participant pool.

If during the conduct of the study it became too difficult to enlist a sufficient number of participants in the area identified, I would have considered other options. One of the alternatives was to extend the data collection period and another option was to extend the recruitment area to other counties in Michigan. If these situations were to occur, some of the assumptions previously identified, specifically assumptions about access to information may no longer be applicable to this research. This intent, these assumptions, and this process were applicable to all four of the research questions for this study.

After the completion of each interview I thanked the individuals for their participation and asked if they had any questions about their input or the study in general. The participants were then advised that they could change any of their responses and asked at that time if they would like to do so. Additionally, the participants were also informed that they could be sent a transcription of their comments to ensure the analysis accurately reflects their input as well as a summarized copy of the study following the completion of the research if they wished.

The last step in the debriefing process was to remind the participant of the information contained in the Consent Form, specifically the contact information of the

researcher and the contact information for participant advocates at the university and to finally offer them their gift certificate.

Following the interviews, the only planned contact with the participants was to provide them with their transcribed comments in order to verify accuracy of the analysis and to provide them with a summary of the study results, if requested. No follow up interviews were planned, although if the participants identified errors in the analysis of their interview, additional questions may have been required to elicit a more accurate representation of the participants' intent.

Additionally, if a participant requested to revisit his or her responses or requested to discuss the analysis or the results of the research, this request would be honored to the fullest extent possible. There were no other situations that would require an additional interview with the selected participants.

### **Data Analysis**

The data collected from the individual interviews was sufficient to answer all of the research questions, including the central question and the three secondary questions. Following the data collection, I conducted data analysis to identify patterns, trends, and themes among the statements of each of the participants. The responses were examined and evaluated to identify relevant information for the study's research questions.

A critical topic addressed in the interview questionnaire was the issue of how the credibility of information affects an individual's perceptions. In this portion of the

questionnaire, the participants initially identified those sources of information that they believed to be the most credible. Afterwards they discussed why these sources were considered to be more credible than others. During the analysis of the collected data, I identified any similarities and common sources identified by the participants.

Another major theme that was examined in this research was the concept of loss and how either loss or perceived loss affected an individual's perceptions. In the questionnaire I included questions that addressed threats to loss of material items, energies (money, time), and identity. During the analysis, I examined each of the resources identified by the participants but focused on the importance of identity and understanding what responses a threat to an individual's identity would elicit.

The last major area in the questionnaire addressed an individual's attitudes towards his or her religion and how the adherent understood religion to condone or condemn violence. Specifically, the participant was asked what they understood their religion to teach about violence and whether or not they believed it to be appropriate to commit acts of violence to preserve his or her faith.

Coding was the primary means to identify the most meaningful themes, patterns, and trends when conducting the analysis of the data gathered from the individual interviews. While some coding categories were identified prior to data collection, I deleted some categories and generated others during the data analysis process after the actual data were collected.

For this research, one of the proposed categories for coding the data was *Religion Influences Identity*. This grouping was intended for those statements made by participants demonstrating that an individual's religious beliefs or teachings had some effect on how a person perceives themselves. This code was not to identify whether the influence had a positive or negative impact on an individual's identity. The intent of this code was simply to identify those statements that suggested that religion could have an effect on how a person saw him or herself.

Another coding category *Religion Supports Peace*, was intended to identify those statements made by participants that indicated their religious beliefs would support peaceful behaviors. This category was intended to be used with those statements that show that religion advocates peace, and not necessarily with those statements that demonstrated that religion supports violence.

For this research, I used the software package NVivo from QSR International during the data analysis process. The audio files from the interviews were transferred to the file created for this research and then transcribed using the functions included in the research software. The transcribed interviews were then used to identify patterns and themes among the different statements.

Prior to conducting data analysis, I also used the software to organize and assist with coding the articles for the literature review. By organizing and coding the articles in the software, it was significantly easier to identify patterns in the data collected. The

information gained from the coding also provided insight into the statements made during the interviews. For example, while analyzing the articles used in the literature review, I identified the pattern of political and social causes for justifying violence. This insight allowed me to better understand the complexities of an individual's attitudes and perceptions, which were invaluable when interpreting the data collected from the participants in the study.

During the data analysis process the intent was to identify commonalities and similarities among the statements made by the participants. Discrepant cases, by definition are statements or positions that are dissimilar from the majority of the information gathered. For this reason, once a statement was identified as being discrepant or unlike any other statement, I checked it against other discrepant statements to see if there were similarities within this group. If there were no similarities among the discrepant cases they were noted and considered for mention when the results were summarized.

A discrepant case, in itself could be significant even if it described a diverse view. For this research, patterns and trends formed the basis for the majority of the discussion but considering the small sample size, it would be less than responsible to wholly dismiss a position simply because it was dissimilar from the others. Mentioning discrepant cases as opposing or contradictory ideas was certainly a consideration for this study because presenting a wide variety of positions generally adds credibility to research.

### **Trustworthiness**

In evaluating the trustworthiness of a qualitative study, many researchers have determined that the customary criteria used for assessing quantitative research are inappropriate for use with qualitative work. The traditional characteristics of validity, reliability, and objectivity, used in quantitative work, are generally less appropriate for qualitative work, but the characteristics of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability are more often the guidelines used by qualitative researchers (Creswell, 2012).

Credibility in a qualitative study involves establishing that the results of the research measure what was intended and additionally that the results are valid from the perspective of the participants (Trochim, 2006). For this research triangulation, peer review, and saturation were used to increase the credibility of the study results.

Triangulation involves comparing the results of different sources of data to determine commonalities and differences. For this study, the different sources of information were the results of the interviews. The archival data or the material taken from the Qur'an, which was critical to the interpretation of the collected data, was also considered a distinct source as it influenced triangulation. Achieving saturation, which occurs when no new, relevant data arise, was also a strategy to increase the credibility of the results. Lastly, peer review was employed in order to reduce the bias and increase the objectivity of the analysis.



Transferability in qualitative research addresses the ability to generalize the results of the research across a wider audience or to other settings or contexts (Trochim, 2006). For this research, the transferability of the results would ultimately be the responsibility of the person attempting to generalize the information, but an accurate, thorough and detailed description of the processes and content can provide critical information in making that decision (Trochim, 2006).

For this research transferability would be dependent on the clarity, accuracy, and ability to comprehensively articulate the context of the research, including the scope, limitations, and assumptions. By ensuring that the context of the research is clearly and accurately explained, the researcher would have fulfilled the obligation to anyone who requires the information to make a determination on generalizing the results of the study.

Dependability in qualitative research is much like reliability is in quantitative research. This quality describes to what extent the results are repeatable and with qualitative studies, dependability specifically describes how well the qualitative researcher has accounted for the setting and any changes that may occur within that setting. Additionally, the researcher should discuss how any changes affect the way the study was approached and conducted (Trochim, 2006).

In this chapter, I describe the conditions and setting for each of the interviews as well as any changes in conditions that occurred over the time period that the data were collected. These changes included significant changes in the social, economic or political

climate that affected the community in Western Michigan. While a major event like the 9/11 attacks could significantly influence how people perceive violence, a less important event like a federal shutdown also could influence the perceptions of potential participants.

Confirmability, in qualitative research describes whether the results of a study could be corroborated or validated by another researcher. The degree to which the results can be confirmed by a source external to the research is important in establishing trustworthiness of the data (Trochim, 2006). Because the procedures used in qualitative research differ so significantly from the processes used in quantitative research, the traditional quantitative goal of objectivity, or remaining detached from the data so as not to influence it is not viable with qualitative studies (Objectivity, 2013).

For this research, I enlisted a colleague in the doctoral program to corroborate the results of the study which were documented and included in the analysis. The peer researcher identified instances where contradictions or errors existed in the analysis as well as examined the data collection and analysis procedures to identify inconsistencies or examples of bias.

The concepts of inter- and intracoder reliability involve implementing procedures to ensure the consistency of coding during data analysis. Intercoder reliability involves two researchers independently coding data and subsequently gaining consensus on the results while intracoding reliability speaks to the consistency of the way a researcher

codes data (van Den Hoonaard, 2008). This data collected in this study were only coded by one researcher so of the two concepts, intracoder reliability was a consideration while intercoder reliability was not.

Specifically, for this study, I addressed intracoder reliability by ensuring the coding structure as well as the application of the various categories was consistent and uniform. As an additional measure to ensure consistency an objective, I received support from a peer researcher who verified the consistency of the coding process. This fellow researcher was not required to code all of the data, but was asked to check the existing coding to ensure the uniformity of the work.

### **Protection of the Participant's Rights/Ethical Procedures**

All research that involves human subjects must receive the approval of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) prior to data collection to ensure that appropriate measures will be taken to protect the welfare of the participants. The IRB examines the proposed research to weigh the risks against the benefits of the study to ensure any potential risks are "reasonable in relation to anticipated benefits" (Endicott, n.d., slide 5). The board also examines the procedures of the research to ensure it conforms to the relevant laws, regulations and ethical standards (Endicott, n.d.).

The three ethical principles that guide the IRB in their endeavors are: *justice*, *beneficence*, and *respect for persons*. These three principles address the requirements for the researcher to ensure the benefits and burdens of the research are fairly distributed, to

maximize benefits and minimize potential harm to participants and lastly to protect those participants who may be particularly vulnerable (Endicott, n.d.). Prior to giving their approval to conduct any research the IRB examined the proposed research procedures to identify situations which may unnecessarily put the participants at risk or situations that would violate applicable laws or regulations.

All research that involves the collection of data from humans, including pilot studies requires IRB approval. Research that is exclusively hypothetical or literature reviews do not require approval from the IRB but interviews, surveys, and even research that conducts analysis on data collected by another source requires IRB approval (Endicott, n.d.). Additionally, once the IRB has given their approval for research to be conducted, if a change must be made to the procedures the proposed change must also be approved before the research can continue. Because of the criticality of protecting the participants, any researcher should not, and I did not begin data collection without the approval of this board.

During the conduct of the research the university IRB approved my proposed study prior to the collection of any data (#07-16-15-0327771). The IRB reviewed the plan to conduct the research to ensure that all legal, ethical, and regulatory requirements were addressed prior to the collection of any data (Endicott, n.d.). The IRB also weighed the risks associated with the research and ensured that the risks did not outweigh the potential benefits that might be gained from the conduct of the study.

The IRB examined the collection instruments, the planned measures to ensure the confidentiality of data collected, the proposed means used to protect the privacy of the participants, and they ensured that all participants were provided with sufficient information to be able to make an informed decision about participating in the study (Endicott, n.d.). Once the IRB approved the proposed plan, data collection began. If for any reason I would have needed to deviate from the approved plan after receiving IRB approval, the IRB would have been informed and I would have made a follow-on request to alter the original plan. No changes to the approved plan could be made without the consent of the IRB.

When recruiting research participants, it was important to ensure that the recruitment materials and processes were clear, candid, and not coercive. The participants were made aware that participation was completely optional and were advised that they had the ability to refuse to participate or to end their participation at any time, especially if the participants were members of vulnerable populations (Endicott, n.d.). Informed consent, which is a process conducted prior to data collection, was critical in ensuring that potential participants had an opportunity to gain the information needed to make a decision on participation (Endicott, n.d.).

For this research, the primary means of recruiting participants was through the use of key communicators. Additionally, participants were not to be recruited from any of the groups identified as vulnerable populations, although it is possible that a key

communicator might have referred a potential participant who may have been a member of a vulnerable population. Key communicators were advised of the criteria and requested to exclude members of vulnerable populations, but ultimately individuals from these groups may have been selected to participate if membership in a vulnerable group was not known.

An important aspect to the ethical principle of Respect for Persons involves the idea that participant inclusion in the research must be completely voluntary (Endicott, n.d.). If during the conduct of the research a participant expressed a desire to end his or her involvement with the study, the participant would have been allowed to do so without any coercion to be involved further.

Additionally, significant events that occurred during data collection would have been reported to the university either for action or for information. For example, if during the conduct of data collection an unforeseen risk arose, or if an already approved process needed to be changed, I would have been required to submit a request for Change in Procedures Form (Endicott, n.d.). Or if a participant had become highly upset during data collection the IRB would have been made aware of the incident through an Adverse Event Report (Endicott, n.d.) These reporting mechanisms ensured the protections afforded the participants would remain in place even if the situation or process significantly changes.

I, as the researcher documented one agreement with each of the participants during this study. The Adult Consent Form outlined in general terms the procedural requirements as well as some risks and benefits of participating in the study. Additionally, the Consent Form identified my role as the researcher, my contact information, and contact information for the university representative who could address participants' rights issues.

The Confidentiality Agreement was a contract made to reinforce the importance of not improperly disclosing the information that was collected from the participants. The Confidentiality Agreement identified my obligations, as a researcher to prevent disclosure of the information provided by the participants (Endicott, n.d.). During this study I did not employ an outside entity to perform transcription duties, but if an external service had been used, the individuals performing those duties would be required to sign a Confidentiality Agreement also.

The demographic questionnaire for this research included requests for personal information, specifically the participants' names, phone numbers, and e-mails. Due to the sensitivity of the topic, though, the participants were not required to provide this information. The participants were advised that neither their involvement in the study nor the analysis would be affected by their decision to include or exclude their personal information. Participants were further advised that without the personal information only

follow ups, including the accuracy verification of the transcribed interviews would not be possible.

Because personal information was being requested from the participants, the data collected were considered confidential versus anonymous. While it is important to protect any data collected during research, the criticality of securing confidential information that contains the personal information of the participants is even greater than securing the anonymous data collected from participants.

Minimizing the risk that participants were exposed to during the conduct of research was a key consideration in this study. This reiterates the importance of the ethical principle of beneficence (Endicott, n.d.). I included steps to ensure the security of the collected data, to reduce the risk of loss of personal information. A data breach in this study may not have caused a risk to the physical health of the participants, but a data loss could certainly violate the privacy of the participants who provided information to this research.

As previously noted, the collected data were maintained on a password protected laptop. I secured a backup copy of the data on a storage drive that was maintained in a locked container. The interviews were recorded, when the participants allowed, using a digital recorder. After the digital files were transferred to the laptop where they were organized and transcribed, the audio files were deleted from the recorder. The raw data



will be maintained for the required five years and afterwards the digital data will be deleted, and any paper copies will be burned or shredded.

There were no additional ethical considerations to be addressed when developing the plan to provide appropriate security for the collected data. By ensuring the privacy of the participants during the data collection process and by protecting the data after the collection was complete, the relevant ethical issues should be addressed. During the conduct of the research no individuals from protected groups were recruited. For this reason, the data collected did not require additional protections beyond the ones that were previously described. Additionally, because of the kind of data that were collected there was no need to provide additional security measures beyond the ones previously identified. For example, if the research had included protected health data, additional security measures would have been considered (Research Ethics Review Application, 2010), but in this case the existing measures were sufficient.

The participants each received a small token of appreciation for their participation, specifically a \$10 gift certificate to a local store, but that gesture would neither influence the quality of the data nor the procedures for securing and protecting the data. The minimal value of the gift certificate precluded any real chance that the token would have a significant impact on the outcome or the need to secure the data any differently than what was already planned.

### **Exploratory Study**

An exploratory or pilot study was not conducted as part of this research.

### **Presentation of the Results**

Tables, graphs, and charts are effective tools to illustrate distinctions within or changes in large quantities of data. Because of the small number of participants that were included in this study, tables, charts, and graphs would be less effective in illustrating the conclusions drawn from this research. Depending on the results, it was originally anticipated that a bar graph, either vertical or horizontal would be appropriate to compare the number of times a specific factor is identified as influencing an individual's perceptions. Ultimately a scatter chart was used to illustrate the results of the study.

Discrepant cases were addressed using a four-step process. The first step was to verify the accuracy of the information provided. The digital files as well as the transcribed files were checked to ensure that an error hadn't been made in documenting the words and phrases correctly. The second step was to verify the interpretation of the information. Discrepant cases were checked in context to ensure that the participant's intent had not been misunderstood.

If a discrepant case could not be rectified or aligned with other data through these procedures, the plan including enlisting the support of an objective peer to verify that the discrepant case was truly discrepant and not an interpretation error. The objective peer then followed the same two steps described above; first confirming the accuracy of the

transcribed files then validating the accuracy of the interpretation. If after the completion of these four steps the discrepant case remained significantly different from the other data, the results would be noted as an inconsistency and entered into the results as an irregularity.

### **Summary**

Chapter 3 describes the methodology that was used in this research. The chapter describes the design that was used to conduct this research as well as the rationale for selecting a case study design. This design, over other qualitative or quantitative designs facilitated thorough and in-depth responses to the research questions outlined in previous chapters.

Additionally, in this chapter I describe the sampling strategy that was used to select the participants for the study. Recognizing that convenience sampling is one of the least desirable strategies to employ, it was ultimately the most practical strategy to use because of the sensitivity of the topic. Bias and credibility are significant considerations for any research that includes convenience sampling, so I put mitigation strategies in place to address these issues.

In this chapter, the procedures for conducting data collection and data analysis were also described. The primary strategy for data collection was to conduct face-to-face interviews, recording the conversations using a digital recorder. In the event that face-to-face interviews could not be conducted the alternate plan was to gather data through the

university's participant pool. The criteria for selecting the participants and the questions asked would have remained the same regardless of the data collection method.

The plan for data analysis is also discussed in Chapter 3, explaining how coding was used to identify patterns and themes in the responses provided by the participants. Identifying the consistencies and similarities in the participant responses facilitated the formation of theories that would eventually lead to answers for the research questions.

Lastly, in Chapter 3 I discuss the importance of protecting the participants in the study and explain what processes will be emplaced to ensure those who contribute to this research are safeguarded from harm. In this chapter, the recruitment procedures are explained as well as the processes to ensure the security of the data that is gathered.

In Chapter 3 I also provide descriptions of the intended processes and procedures that were used in the research, but Chapter 4 is where the actual conduct of the study is discussed. Data collection and analysis, coding and identification of patterns, as well a summary of the findings are discussed in this chapter. In Chapter 4 I confirm the use of strategies identified in Chapter 3 and I identify when deviations were made, explaining the rationale for changing the intended process. Lastly in Chapter 4 I address how the findings answer the research questions.

## Chapter 4: Results

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this case study was to identify the factors that had the greatest influence on the attitudes of Sunni Muslims from Western Michigan toward violence. My intent was not to examine or assess the specific attitudes and beliefs of this population of Muslims toward violence, but to examine the *factors that impact the way* an individual perceives violence. The factors included in this research were not limited to religious influences, but also included secular considerations. Additionally, the factors were not limited to a specific application of violence such as terrorism, domestic violence, or violence against women, or to a specific location such as violence domestically or abroad.

The central question for this research was: What factors influence how Sunni Muslims from Western Michigan perceive acts of violence committed against another person? The three secondary research questions that support a comprehensive response to the central questions are: (a) What role does religion play in the perception of violence by a religious adherent? (b) What sources of information most influence an individual's attitude on violence? (e.g. religious texts, formal religious teachings, family, school, news, other sources) (c) How do threats of perceived or actual loss affect how a religious person perceives violence?

The population of Muslims in Western Michigan is a relatively closed group, and access to participants was an obstacle that I expected to encounter. Prior to beginning data collection, I developed a plan to gain access to qualified participants using a key communicator who had some credibility with Muslims in Western Michigan. Unfortunately, this key communicator was, in the end, unwilling to facilitate this research citing “red flags because [I was] associating Islam with violence.” Other key communicators with access to the population were also unwilling or unable to facilitate interviews for the research. This unexpected delay with key communicators caused data collection to last significantly longer than expected. The anticipated timeline to collect data for this research was originally 1 month, but data collection lasted almost 2 years.

At various points in the data collection process, I considered changing the eligibility for participants. One idea was to allow Shi’a Muslims to participate in the research. I rejected this option because of the difficulty with changing the proposal. As the data collection process approached the 1-year mark, I requested that the Walden University IRB extend permission to gather data, which it granted. Two key communicators were ultimately able to assist me in getting access to a sufficient number of participants to reach saturation. The research, conducted as a case study, complied with the original constraints outline in the proposal, but took significantly longer than expected.

## Overview

I did not conduct a pilot study for this research, but in hindsight, it may have been helpful in identifying specific obstacles to data collection. Given the proposed protocol for this study, specifically the small number of participants that would be required, there was no indication that a pilot study would be required to test the recruitment methods or the adequacy of the research instrument. Additionally, because the research instrument had been peer-reviewed, I did not expect that it would not yield the results to answer the research questions. What I did not anticipate was the unwillingness of the population to discuss this topic. Because of this unwillingness to participate, I had to identify additional key communicators to get the required number of interviews.

I conducted the study in the western portion of Michigan. Interviews were conducted in a variety of settings across the area, and in all cases, specific locations for interviews were selected by the participants. All interviews were conducted privately, one-on-one, in locations that offered the participants sufficient privacy to speak freely. The first seven interviews were conducted face-to-face, and the last four were conducted over the phone or with Skype. None were conducted over e-mail.

All of the participants were Sunni Muslims living in Western Michigan. Two of the participants were native-born Muslim-Americans, but all of the participants spoke and understood English sufficiently well to participate in the study. Some of the participants have lived in the United States their entire lives, and others immigrated to the United

States and are presently working in the country. At least three of the participants are in the United States temporarily to study. All of the participants had earned at least an undergraduate degree, and more than one had earned a terminal degree in their field. At the time of the study, all of the participants were employed full-time or were full-time students.

Prior to conducting each interview, I discussed the research with participants and had them complete the consent form and demographic questionnaire. Each participant was provided with a copy of the questionnaire, and after providing sufficient time to review the questions, I began the interview. I collected data using private on-on-one interviews. All of the participants agreed to allow me to document the interviews, but one requested that the interview not be recorded with a digital recorder, so only notes were taken with that participant. I used notes and audio recordings to document all of the other interviews.

I conducted this research using qualitative research methods and analyzed data using data analysis software to assist in the identification of patterns and trends. I transcribed and coded the recorded interviews in NVivo. The notes for the single interview that was not recorded with the digital recorder were also documented in NVivo and subsequently coded. The same nodes or categories that I used in the literature review were initially used to identify patterns in the interviews. I then examined the coded interviews to identify patterns and trends. After the initial examination, I determined that



the initial categories were insufficient and thus revised the categories to facilitate better understanding of the data.

Recognizing that the trustworthiness of qualitative research depends on reducing or eliminating bias, I had both the questionnaire and the conclusions drawn peer-reviewed by a colleague and fellow doctoral candidate. The questionnaire was also approved by the Walden IRB prior to its use. Triangulation, which I used in the questionnaire and in the interpretation of the results, was additionally used to increase the trustworthiness of the research. Saturation was also a consideration in increasing the trustworthiness of the research in that little new information was uncovered by the last interview conducted.

During the interviews, the concept of violence was not limited to a specific reason or application of violence such as terrorism or violence committed in a particular location or under specific circumstances. At the beginning of each interview I stated the definition of violence I used for this study: “The intentional use of physical force or aggression against another person with the intent to cause injury, death or psychological harm.” As I described in Chapter 3, open-ended questions were used to elicit responses that were not constrained by a specific location, purpose, or circumstance.

In this research, I found that the participants’ perceptions of violence were influenced by their religious beliefs, their identity, and their confidence in the justice system. All of the participants interviewed expressed that their attitudes about violence

were aligned with their religious beliefs. None expressed a disagreement with their religious teachings or communicated a difference between their actions and their religious doctrine. Additionally, slightly more than half of the participants who stated that violence would be justified in self-defense or in defense of their family identified primarily with their family. Six of the 10 participants identified primarily with their family over other associations. Lastly, faith in the justice system influenced how some of the participants perceived the need for violence. Faith in the justice system was important because a participant who expressed a strong belief in the justice system was less inclined to find violence to be acceptable. Additionally, several of the participants mentioned that Islam required adherents to follow the laws of the nation they lived in and would only condone violence in self-defense.

During the interviews, several national and international media outlets were identified as credible sources of information, but the influence of news on the participants' perceptions of violence could not be determined.

### **Setting**

Western Michigan University (WMU) is a public university with an enrollment of almost 24,000 students and over 4000 faculty and staff (Western Michigan University, 2016). Given WMU's location in Kalamazoo, Michigan, which has a population of approximately 76,000 (U.S. Census, 2015), a large portion of the local population has ties to WMU as either employees, alumni, family members of employees, or students.

I conducted a case study focusing on the population of Sunni Muslims in Western Michigan. The participants for this research were members of or associated with a single mosque in the western portion of the state. This mosque is an influential part of the community and provides a wide variety of services to the local Muslim and non-Muslim population. In addition to prayer services and Sunday school, the mosque hosts a large collection of important Islamic references and offers Islamic classes to the community. This mosque has been serving the Muslim and non-Muslim community of Western Michigan for many years.

### **Demographics**

This case study included ten participants. Everyone met the requirements outlined in the proposal, specifically, all were Sunni Muslims living in Western Michigan, who spoke English well enough to understand and respond to the questions without a translator. All had regular access to a wide variety of information sources, including internet, social media, TV, and radio.

Additionally, although not a requirement of the research, many of the participants had an association with WMU, either as alumni, employees, students or family of WMU employees. All ten of the participants were college graduates, having earned at least an undergraduate degree, while the three participants were had earned a terminal degree in their field. Four of the participants were graduate students at the time of the study. The

level of education for this population was unique and undoubtedly had an influence on the results of the research.

Two of the participants were native born, while eight were born outside of the United States. The specific citizenship status of the foreign-born participants is unknown and was not discussed, but all of the participants in the study were either full time employees or full-time students. Eight of the participants were men and two were women.

### **Data Collection**

For this case study, 11 participants were interviewed but only ten were included in this study. One interview had to be excluded because the interviewee was later identified as a Shi'a Muslim and not a Sunni Muslim.

Only one data collection instrument, the 10-question survey, was used to gather data for this research. The interviews for this study spanned a period of almost two years between September 2015 and August 2017. I conducted the first interview on September 29 with a subsequent interview being conducted three-months later in December 2015. The third interview followed four months after this in April 2016 and three more were completed in late June and early July. Following a review of Chapters 4 and 5 it was determined that additional interviews would be required. The last four interviews were conducted between June and August of 2017. The interviews were conducted in a variety of locations in Western Michigan. The average interview lasted approximately 15

minutes, with the longest taking approximately 33 minutes to complete and the shortest taking less than six minutes.

All of the participants, except one approved the use of a digital recorder for the interviews. Additionally, in all of the interviews hand-written notes were taken to ensure the critical points of the responses were captured, in case the digital copies of the interviews were inadvertently damaged or destroyed. So, for this research nine interviews were recorded with a hand-held digital recorder and one interview, which wasn't recorded with a digital recorder was documented only with hand-written notes. I transcribed the recorded interviews and then the recorded files and transcriptions were uploaded onto a laptop.

There were no significant variations from the plan presented in Chapter 3, but one minor variation concerned the location of one of the face-to-face interviews. The original plan was to allow each participant to select the interview location to ensure that they would be comfortable holding the conversation, particularly considering the sensitivity of the topic. The caveat was that the location had to be a public place and that interviews should not be conducted in an individual's home. In the case of this participant, he requested, through my key communicator to conduct the interview in his home. At the time he was not feeling well, but still expressed interest in participating in this research. All of the other face-to-face interviews were conducted in public locations.

During the data collection phase of this research, it was significantly more difficult than anticipated to get Muslim participants to discuss their viewpoints on the acceptability of violence. Due to the inherent sensitivity of the topic, I had anticipated some resistance or difficulty, so I recruited key communicators to help facilitate identification of potential participants. During data collection, though, the level of unwillingness or inability of the key communicators to assist with engaging participants was not expected. Ultimately two additional key communicators were recruited and were able to provide viable contacts for the research. One key communicators identified three participants and the second key communicator identified seven, totaling ten participants.

Additionally, external factors during this period, specifically terrorist activities of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and political statements made against Muslims also may have exacerbated challenges to recruiting potential participants.

### **Findings of the Interviews**

In the first interview, the factors that most influenced this participant's perception of violence were identity, religious beliefs, and confidence in the justice system. This participant identified a single condition for which violence would be acceptable, self-defense, which included the defense of his immediate family. Specifically, the participant stated, "if someone intrudes into your house...to (commit) violence, then you have every right to self-defense." With this participant, there seemed to be a strong correlation between his identity as a member of his family and his acceptance of the use of violence.

When asked how he self-identified, the participant indicated that he identified with his family over race, ethnicity, or nationality and the one condition that would justify violence is the defense of his family.

He also indicated that he found information from his family to be the most credible over any media source or community organization. His family was clearly critical to his identity and his perception of when violence would be justified. As far as the credibility of other sources of information, the participant did not identify any additional single source that influenced his perceptions, but discussed the importance of corroboration between source and balance of reporting.

When asked what his religion advised about violence and when it would be acceptable, he stated that Islam, as he understood it would not condone violence under any circumstances. This participant also indicated that Islam also directs its followers to follow the laws of the nation in which the adherent lives. "Islam says that you have to abide by the law...whatever U.S. laws are, I have obligated to observe those laws." Along those same lines, when discussing self-defense and when violence was justified, he differentiated someone coming into his house to commit violence and self-defense against violence committed outside of the house. If violence were committed outside the house, "then you have to ask the law enforcement to come." In discussing the conflicts between Muslim sects, this participant noted that, "what they're doing against Shi'a, Sunnis, it is totally forfeited. They are out of their mind. They're interpreting their

religion for their own benefit.” This participant seemed to take guidance from his religious beliefs but his identity and his confidence in law enforcement seemed to have greater influence on how he perceived the acceptability of the use of violence.

For the second participant, religious beliefs and identity were both influential in determining if violence would be justified in a particular situation. When this participant was asked how he would best describe himself, he responded that he identified with this faith first then his family second. When asked what Islamic teachings advised about violence, the participant stated, “from my understanding, it’s basically only necessary, it is only perhaps justified in terms of oppression...and if it’s violent oppression then we must oppose it violently.” So, this participant indicated that Islam would allow a violent response, or a defensive reaction to violence, but according to Islamic teachings, violence would not be acceptable without a precipitating action.

In discussing the credibility of information sources, even though the participant identified that religion was influential in determining the acceptability of violence, the participant did not identify the mosque, Qur’an or imam as being influential sources of information. In fact, when asked about information sources, the participant did not refer to any community sources but stated, “I do watch a lot of new programs and if I am on the internet, then again, I usually am on the internet for factual information, for news information, or biographical information.”



During this interview, the participant's general position on violence was that it could be justified, in specific situations. For example, threats to the participant's reputation, status or money would not justify a violent response, but an immediate threat to the participant's family would be justification for violence. Additionally, a response to perceived aggression or oppression, could also justify violence. Although not specifically stated, the implication of resistance to aggression or oppression would include violence committed outside the home.

For the third participant, the acceptability of violence was less dependent on how he self-identified, but on what he described as his "duty to protect" his family, which aligned with his religious beliefs. He also made an argument for the acceptability of violence to facilitate social change, as it has been used in American history.

During the third interview, the participant identified more than one situation in which he felt violence would be acceptable, specifically in defense of his family and in order to effect change. This participant spoke of defending his family and home, and that violence would be acceptable if someone were "threatening your family...or harming your family.... or they're entering your space and your privacy." In this case, he suggested that violence would not only be justified, but an obligation or a responsibility because as he stated, "once you have a family I believe you really have a duty to protect them." He also indicated that fighting for a societal change would be an acceptable rationale for violence, which would potentially include violence outside the home. He

found that historically societies have resorted to violence to affect change, so based on this, he too would find violence to be acceptable if it was necessary to facilitate change and to correct an injustice.

When addressing a religious justification or support for the conduct of violence, the participant stated that he did not “associate as being a Muslim.” In his words, “I come from a very religious family, so it kinda turns you off towards religion a lot.” When asked what Islam taught as far as violence and when it would be acceptable, he indicated that his religion would allow violence only as a last resort and in most situations the teachings of Islam required adherents to behave in a peaceful manner. This does align with the participant’s other responses, although he implied that Islam was less of an influence in his perceptions and attitudes.

For the fourth participant, the single factor that influenced his position on whether violence was acceptable was not his religion nor his identity, but his unwavering belief in the American justice system. When asked the general question about the circumstances when violence would be considered acceptable his response was, “I find the use of violence...cannot be explained under any circumstances...there is a justice system that a person can resort to, to solve any issues.” When asked about circumstances where violence would not be considered acceptable, the participant reiterated his position stating that “living in the jungle or something” would be the only situation that would permit the use of violence. The participant further stated that, “you know in the modern society...I

mean definitely there is a fair justice system. You don't see any reason for the use of violence." For this participant, violence inside the home or outside the home would be difficult to justify, due to the existing system of justice.

The rationale for this position did seem to be supported by his religion, also. According to this participant, the Qur'an offered guidance to societies so that they could develop their individual systems of justice. His understanding of his religion was that Islam directed adherents to follow the laws and edicts of the justice system of the country in which they resided. As he further explained, the Qur'an did not give explicit guidance about the justification of violence, but that it gave general guidance for societies to develop systems that would provide justice for their citizens.

This participant also self-identified with his family before other groups, but there was not an obvious correlation between how the participant self-identified and his beliefs or ideas on the acceptability of violence. Additionally, this participant identified national and international media sources as being more credible than other sources, such as family, friends or neighbors, again reinforcing the idea that his identity as a family member was less critical to the formulation of his attitudes on violence.

During the fifth interview, the participant was ambiguous about identifying specific justifications of violence, frequently using terms like "generally", "typically", "it depends", "not sure", "I guess", and "I think". Eventually this participant specified that violence would be justified in self-defense or to protect his family. This statement

coupled with the fact that this interviewee self-identified with family first, would imply that his identity had some influence on whether he would support violence in a given situation. Like many of the other participants, self-defense and the defense of family were two of the few reasons that would justify violence.

This participant's position on violence also seemed to have a basis in religion as he stated that the Qur'an allowed for violence in situations of self-defense. He articulated that according to the teachings of Islam "violence is typically not acceptable" but if someone were threatening his life, then his religion would find it acceptable to respond with violence. During this interview, there was no specific mention of location, so there could be no determination of whether this participant felt violence would be justified inside the home, outside the home, or given a specific application of violence, such as terrorism.

When asked about the credibility of information this interviewee, like some of the other participants indicated that there was no single source of information that would be more credible than any other. The participant stated that determining credibility of a source would be dependent on "the track record over time" and that he would not be inclined to blindly accept information without conducting some additional research on the topic or event.

Lastly when asked whether threats of loss or perceived loss would justify violence, the participant indicated that threats to an individual's reputation, money or

material resources were not a justification for violence. Even a threat to his religion, or his ability to practice his religion would not be a reason to be violent, as there were other options available, such as educating others or continuing to practice in secret.

For the sixth participant religious belief, identity, and confidence in the justice system were all considered influential factors in understanding her perceptions toward violence. When asked how she identified herself, this participant stated that she identified most with her religion first, then her nation, then her city. When asked what she understood Islam to advise adherents in terms of supporting or opposing violence, she suggested that Islam would only condone violence when it was necessary to preserve one's life. She also indicated that protecting her children would be a reasonable justification for violence. This participant would continue to explain that this threat to life could not be a long-term perceived threat, but that only an immediate, direct threat to one's life would justify a violent response.

In terms of identifying credible sources, the interviewee indicated that credible information could be corroborated by other sources and should not be news that is paid for. For example, she mentioned that people who commented on YouTube videos were credible because their opinion was not paid for. This participant also emphasized the importance of simply not accepting what was presented but that each individual should form his or her own ideas based on numerous sources.

Unlike the other participants, when discussing justifications for violence, this participant made the point to differentiate violence from war. War as she explained it, was formal and defined. War, as it was described has flags and formal leadership. According to this participant, violence is acceptable and understandable during war. She also added that war did not involve civilians. An example she gave to illustrate this idea was the situation involving ISIS. The implication was that the violence conducted by ISIS was not justified, even though some might consider it, or describe it, as a war.

For the seventh participant, identity, religion and **a lack of** faith in the justice system seemed to shape his perceptions of violence. Like several of the other participants, family was critical in defining this participant's identity. This participant also identified "the friends you make and the relationships you make" as being important to who he is as a person.

In terms of how he understood his religious teachings, this participant expressed that Islam would only allow violence in self-defense, but when describing self-defense, he discussed people who were "defending their homes and livelihoods" and differentiated these acts from violence. He also described how some people may respond with violence when they feel helpless, specifically "they feel there's no other option" and there existed "no law to enforce justice." So, in this case, the lack of a strong and fair justice system contributed to a situation in which there was justifiable violence (self-defense).

In discussing the sources that he found to be the most credible, this participant described a process of comparison and analysis of several different media outlets to determine which sources were the most credible. Acknowledging the existence of bias in both online resources (social media and traditional media) and religious institutions, the participant concluded that research and corroboration were key to identifying credible sources of information.

To illustrate how a loss or threat of loss might justify violence, this participant raised the issue of the Israel-Palestine conflict. The loss of land or the threat of the loss of land had, according to this participant, prompted the Palestinians to “defend themselves or get their land taken away.” He also suggested that the “family (would be) hurt by that” (the loss of land). Defending one’s land was, in this situation, characterized as self-defense and not violence.

Like several of the other participants, identity and religion served as critical factors in determining if violence would be acceptable in a given situation for participant number eight. During the interview, this participant indicated that he self-identified primarily with his family and discussed how violence would be justified in cases of self-defense. To support this position, this participant cited a verse from the Qur’an, saying “fight in the way of Allah those who fight you but don’t try to transgress...indeed that God or Allah doesn’t like the transgressors”. His interpretation of this statement was “religion...they all the time I think that they urge, approve self-defense.” From this

participant's point of view, Islam supported the idea of violence in self-defense, which also contributed to the premise that religion was in fact an important consideration in the characterization of violence as acceptable or unacceptable.

This participant also made the distinction between violence and self-defense several times during the interview, despite the broader definition of violence provided at the beginning of the discussion. The participant made statements to clarify the distinction between the two concepts, "let's say first we differentiate between self-defense and violence" and "We have to differentiate my point between self-defense and violence." while reiterating that Islam allowed for self-defense, but disapproved of violence (transgression).

In terms of media sources, this participant, like many others, discussed the credibility of the media outlet (e.g. BBC or CNN) rather than addressing the medium (e.g. radio, TV or social media). The means of reception was less important in terms of credibility than the organization(s) responsible for the information. This participant identified the history and reputation of the media outlet as being critical factors in determining the credibility of sources.

For participant number nine, his perceptions of violence were not clearly aligned with his identity, but his attitude toward violence was connected to his religious beliefs. In the discussion on self-identification, this participant indicated that he didn't align with a racial, ethnic, national, or familial group; this participant self-identified as a human.



When asked what an appropriate response would be if someone were to challenge this identity and to treat him as less than a human, he responded that he would consider violence if the perpetrator was another person, but he would “not fight the government. Absolutely.”

When asked in general, about justifications for violence, this participant mentioned that defending one’s family or defending those who had been wronged would be a valid reason for a violent response. Situations in which people were being harmed “without any right” or “without any reason” could also prompt a violent response. Additionally, this participant mentioned that “silly reasons” were not enough to be violent, but that defending his home or other property against someone with ill intentions would be acceptable.

When discussing what his religion taught about violence, this participant mentioned that in disputes, Islam required several steps before resorting to violence. As he understood it, his religion required adherents to be “more patient (and to be) more respectful, but at the end of the day...you shouldn’t be a weak person.” He also mentioned that Islam advised that “the last solution is going to fight.”

When discussing his religious teachings, this participant also mentioned that his faith required adherents to go to the police before resorting to violence. Because this statement was made in the context of religious teachings, and no other statements were made about the willingness or ability of the police to protect its citizens, it was difficult to

make a connection between this individual's perceptions of violence and his faith in the justice system.

For this last participant, her religious beliefs were the only considerations that could be connected to her perceptions of violence. In this case, identity was difficult to isolate because this participant self-identified as a Middle Eastern individual, and there was significant overlap between her ethnicity and her religion. Faith in the justice system was not stated as a consideration in determining if violence would be acceptable, but this participant did include immediacy as a factor in judging if violence was warranted in a situation, justifying violence as an "instantaneous" response.

This participant also indicated that violence would be justified in self-defense or in defense of her family, a view commonly expressed during the interviews and aligned with her religious teachings. In addition to these two conditions, the participant also suggested that violence may be understandable in cases where a person is experiencing "intense levels of pain" although she fell short of stating that violence, in these cases would be acceptable. To illustrate her view, the participant offered an example: a situation in which a child had been assaulted and the mother took revenge on the perpetrator. In this case, she said, "I could understand that. I mean, she couldn't take that pain...So, I understand it. I don't encourage it, if she talked to me before, I will not encourage her, but it happened, and I think I understand it."

In terms of explicit guidance from her religion, this participant responded, “I don’t see it as a violent religion” but she did acknowledge that some people would take phrases out of context and use them to commit violent acts. This participant’s suggested that the religion advocated peace, but some people interpreted and/or implemented Islam to support violence.

### **Research Results**

The intent of this research was to identify the factors that most influenced how an individual perceived violence. Although the research focused on religious influences, credibility of sources and perceived threats, any factors that had an influence on the way violence was perceived would and should be considered. In this case the reliance on law enforcement and the protection of the American justice system were factors that were not initially considered, but based on the purpose of the research, should not be considered “discrepant” or “non-conforming”. It is simply “unexpected”.

In three of the interviews participants specifically stated that they would rely on the American justice system to protect them and to protect their families and that violence on their part would not be necessary or in one case, even imaginable. Their confidence in the existing system to provide this critical support is an important factor in whether they perceived violence to be acceptable or not. On the other hand, in one interview, a participant described a situation in which violence would be acceptable and a factor in that case was that there was “no law to help enforce justice.”

	Align with Religion	Identity				Loss/Perceived Loss			Protecton of Self-Family	Belief in Justice System
		Family	Muslim	City	Other	Material Items	Status, Money	Religion		
Interview #1	●	●							●	●
Interview #2	●	●	●					●	●	
Interview #3	●			●					●	
Interview #4	●	●								●
Interview #5	●	●							●	
Interview #6	●		●	●					●	●
Interview #7	●	●							●	●
Interview #8	●	●							●	
Interview #9	●				●	●	●		●	
Interview #10	●				●				●	

Figure 1. Reasons that influence perceptions about violence.

### Data Analysis

For this research, the initial coding scheme included the same categories that were used in the literature review. The topics that were most applicable to the data that was collected were: *Identity (family)*, *Religion Supports Peace*, *Religion Supports Violence*, *Religion Influences Identity* and *Justification of Violence*. Although the literature did not always fit into a single category, when coding the interviews there was significant overlap in the categories. For example, a participant, when asked what Islam says about violence responded that, “religion says be peaceful and you should find different ways to find your way out of a problem, for fighting is the last resort.” This statement could be coded as *Religion Supports Peace*, *Religion Supports Violence* and *Justification of Violence*. The distinction between the statements that would fit into the *Religion Supports Peace* category and the *Religion Supports Violence* category became increasingly less clear when coding the interviews.

The *Justification of Violence* category was also not as useful during this phase of the process. The purpose of the research was to identify the main factors that affected an individual's perception of violence, so a significant portion of each interview could be classified as Justification of Violence. This category quickly became meaningless because it could be applied to most of the interviews.

The categories that ultimately emerged during the data analysis process were: *Religious Identity, Family Identity, Belief in Justice, Protection of Self-Family* and *Alignment with Religion*. These categories were broad enough to allow for grouping yet specific enough to facilitate differentiation of the data.

Because all of the participants identified with a specific grouping, (e.g. family, religion, city, etc.) the coding category of *Identity* did not provide sufficient differentiation, much like the original category of *Justification of Violence*. When the data were analyzed, two categories emerged as the most prevalent among this population: religion and family. Over half of the participants identified most as a member of their family and two of the ten identified most as members of their religious community. The categories of *Religious Identity* and *Family Identity* were created to categorize findings for these two groups. Two of the remaining participants identified most with a city, but throughout the interviews made no other reference to these cities, so it was difficult to identify how this factor impacted the individuals' perception of violence.

Although *Belief in Justice* was originally not anticipated as a factor that would have influence on an individual's attitude on the justification of violence, this category ultimately emerged as an important category in this study. A third of the participants openly expressed confidence in the American justice system, reducing the need for or the justification of violence. What was not explored in these interviews was the idea that law enforcement personnel conducting activities that would be considered "violent".

*Alignment with Religion* was not one of the original coding categories but emerged as a significant consideration during the data analysis. In all of the cases, the participants attitudes toward violence were aligned with the teachings of Islam. In several cases, participants stated that their personal tolerance for violence was stricter than what Islam allowed. For example, one participant stated that violence would be acceptable "if someone's threatening your family" but Islam would condone violence to "fight for change...(or)...to fight for what you think is right.". Although the individual interpretations of Islam were not all the same, in all cases, the individual beliefs were aligned with, and supported by their interpretations of their faith.

One discrepant case involved a participant who seemed to contradict himself when asked about what his religion taught concerning the justification of violence. Initially when asked under what circumstances Islam would condone violence, the participant emphatically responded that there were no situations where violence would be condoned by his religious teachings. Later in the interview the participant stated,

“Because Islam says that you know if you have harmed a person *without any reason*.” implying that there could be an acceptable reason to harm another person. This participant also stated that “Islam says that you have to abide by the law...whatever U.S. laws are I have obligated to observe those laws” which would allow violence in situations of self-defense. Because the initial negative response was associated specifically with the violence between Shi’a and Sunnis, it was not given as much consideration as the responses that followed.

### **Evidence and Trustworthiness**

The concept of credibility in qualitative research is similar to the idea of internal validity in quantitative research. Credibility is defined as the trustworthiness or believability of the results, which in qualitative research can only be judged from the perspective of the participant (Trochim, 2006). For this study, development and peer review of the collection instrument, triangulation of the data sources and saturation were used to increase the credibility of the results.

During the conduct of the interviews, there were very few deviations from the original questions, which were open-ended and allowed the participant to elaborate as he or she felt was appropriate. Questions were read directly from the interview questionnaire and only reworded if the original question was misunderstood or the participant requested or needed clarification.

The credibility of research results can also be enhanced through the triangulation of data sources (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006). For this research triangulation of sources was incorporated during data collection and data analysis. Participants for this study varied in age, gender, race, ethnicity and nation of origin. Additionally, interviews were conducted in a variety of settings and data collection lasted almost two years.

Commonalities and consistencies were identified during data analysis. Saturation was achieved when no significantly new data were revealed in subsequent interviews.

Transferability in qualitative research can be explained as the extent to which the results of a study can be generalized or applied to a different setting (Trochim, 2006). Ultimately, transferability of research results must be determined by the individuals attempting to generalize the data. In order to do this the researcher conducting the study has an obligation to clearly and accurately articulate the context of the study. This transferability strategy of explaining the context of the study and potential limitations of transferability has not changed.

The transferability of this case study would be limited due to the uniqueness of the participants that were included in this research. Because these interviews were conducted in Western Michigan and focused on individuals living in Kalamazoo and Calhoun Counties, many of the participants were associated, in some way, with Western Michigan University, located in Kalamazoo, Michigan. Due to the unique socioeconomic status of the participants, particularly the education level of the individuals, the results of



this research would not be representative of the broader population of Sunni Muslims in the United States.

The results may be considered transferable to similar communities where there are large populations of well-educated individuals that have had opportunities to travel internationally. Transferability may be a possibility for Sunni Muslims near “college towns” or communities neighboring universities or other institutions of higher learning.

Dependability in qualitative research is comparable to reliability in quantitative research, and it describes whether or not research results would be repeatable (Trochim, 2006). Dependability or repeatability in research often depends on external factors that would affect the perceptions, attitudes or reactions of the participants.

For this case study, data collection occurred between September 2015 and August 2017. During that time, the rise of ISIS in the Middle East and anti-Muslim rhetoric from the Republican candidate for President, specifically Trump’s statement “calling for a total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States” (Trump, 2015, para 1) influenced many in Muslim communities across the United States. The ISIS beheadings and “calls for homegrown terrorism in the West” (John, 2015) coupled with Trump’s divisive rhetoric and subsequent win in Michigan left many Muslims in the state unsettled, disheartened, and feeling threatened (Hijazi, 2016). Because of the influence these external factors may have had on the Muslim community, dependability, or repeatability would be difficult to achieve in this situation.

In qualitative research, confirmability describes the idea that an individual's research can be validated or corroborated (Trochim, 2006). This can be accomplished through an unbiased examination or corroboration of the results. The coding process can also be evaluated to ensure consistency in the research (Van Den Hoonaard, 2008). In this situation, though, the researcher was responsible for coding all of the data collected in the interviews so intracoder reliability was not a consideration for this study.

For this research, a colleague and fellow PhD candidate was enlisted as a peer-reviewer to evaluate the procedures used in the data analysis. The peer-reviewer was tasked to assess the coding of the data in the key categories and to identify any instances of bias or contradictions in the results. I provided the peer-reviewer with the results of the research as well as key quotes from the coded data, which was sanitized to remove all identifying information.

The peer review process resulted in minor adjustments to grammar and word choice to improve clarity and it also identified minor inconsistencies in the chapter. The major conclusions were not challenged during this process although there were discussions about the interpretation that participants felt an "obligation" or "duty" to protect their family.

### **Summary**

In response to the main research question for this study: What factors influence how Sunni Muslims from Western Michigan perceive acts of violence committed against

another person? the data identify identity, religious beliefs, and confidence in the justice system as having the most influence on the participants' perceptions of violence. How an individual identifies, either as a member of a family or a member of a religious group, will affect if he or she supports or condones the use of violence to protect it. For example, for those who identify most with their family, protection of their spouse and children would be sufficient justification for the commission of violence. For those who identify most with their religion, protection of their faith and their ability to practice it are reasons for a violent response if this is threatened.

Additionally, there was a correlation between religious doctrinal support of violence in limited situations and participants' attitudes toward violence. In all cases, an individual's religious beliefs aligned with their attitudes toward violence. The nature and cause of this relationship between an individual's perceptions of violence and their interpretation of what Islam directs is unclear at this point.

Lastly, an individual's belief that the justice system will protect them in situations where violence may occur is also critical to how violence is perceived. If an individual has confidence that law enforcement will provide the necessary protection to what they feel is valuable, violence becomes unnecessary or unacceptable and in at least one case, unimaginable. On the other hand, a lack of faith in the existing justice system could result in a lower tolerance for accepting violence.

The first sub-question to the main research question in this research is: What role does religion play in the perception of violence by a religious adherent? and the data indicate that religion supports the way the participants perceive the acceptability of violence. In all cases the participants either suggested or overtly stated that Islam, as they understood it, would condone the use of violence in specific situations. For example, one participant stated that according to the Qur'an, violence "is only perhaps justified in (response to) ...oppression...and if it's violent oppression, then we must oppose it physically." Other participants expressed how their religion supported the use of violence in self-defense, which supported their acceptance of violence in cases of self-defense.

Three of the participants, when asked what Islam would advise when it comes to violence responded that Islam directed its followers to comply with the laws of the nation in which they lived. This is consistent with a reference to Verse 4:59 in the Qur'an which states, "obey Allah and obey the Messenger and those in authority among you. And if you disagree over anything, refer it to Allah and the Messenger, if you should believe in Allah and the Last Day" (Quranic Arabic Corpus, n.d., para 2). Compliance with the law and deferring to the justice system was also reflected in their attitude toward violence.

In response to the second sub-question that supports the main research question, What sources of information most influence an individual's attitude on violence? (e.g. religious texts, formal religious teachings, family, school, news, other sources) there was a variety of responses. Participants in this study identified their families, social media,

schools, and the news, primarily international news, as credible sources of information. During the interviews, seven of the ten participants discussed the importance of researching news items and looking for corroboration among different news sources. Several of the participants identified getting different international perspectives as a critical consideration in believing information published through the mainstream media.

It was difficult to identify any single source of information that had a significant influence on a participant's perception of violence. Of interest was the fact that none of the participants identified the Qur'an or their Imam as the most credible source of information, acknowledging some level of bias even in religious teachings. One participant noted that "not even religious institutions...or scholars" would be the single source that could be believed without corroboration. Even those participants who identified most as a Muslim did not identify a religious source as being one of the most credible sources of information.

The responses to the third sub-question to the main research question, How do threats of perceived or actual loss affect how a religious person perceives violence? identified that for most, neither perceived or actual material loss nor status loss was sufficient justification for violence. For some of the participants, there could exist no situation in which their ability to practice their religion would be threatened, while others indicated that they may respond violently to a threat to their material resources in specific, limited situations. When asked about the possibility of having their religious

freedoms hindered, some suggested that they would continue to practice in private while others advocated moving to a place where they could exercise their religious freedoms.

One of the participants whose primary identification was as a Muslim over other groups, did state that preservation of his ability to practice his religion, if it ever could occur, would be a reason for violence. Specifically, he stated that, “religion for me is a way of life” and that inhibiting his ability to practice his faith would be considered oppression of his way of life, which would in turn justify a violent response. He also equated this kind of situation to the Spanish Inquisition and clearly did not see this as a realistic possibility.

### **Conclusion**

In Chapter 4, I discuss the results of this case study conducted to identify factors that affect this group of Muslims’ perceptions of violence. The intent of this research is not to determine a conclusive or causal relationship between the factors discussed in this study and the way an individual perceives violence. The study was designed to identify factors that influence the reasons that individuals in this population perceive violence as acceptable or unacceptable.

The results of this research suggest that three factors had the most influence on determining whether violence was acceptable to this population of Muslims in Western Michigan: identity, religious beliefs, and confidence in the justice system. Specifically, regarding identity, when individuals self-identified with their family over other

groupings, violence would be acceptable to protect their family. This alignment also occurred with the individual who self-identified most with his religion. Violence would be justified to defend his beliefs and his right to practice his faith, if the situation were to ever arise.

There was also a correlation between an individual's understanding of their religious doctrine and their perception of violence, although the exact relationship is not clear. What is clear is that all of the participants indicated that Islam supported their position on violence. In no cases did a participant indicate that their religious beliefs were in conflict with their position on violence.

Lastly, a participant's faith in the justice system had an important effect on whether the individual considered violence to be acceptable or not. For participants who had expressed confidence in the existing justice system, violence was not necessary, not acceptable, and for one participant, not conceivable. As previously mentioned, the exact relationship between religious beliefs and perceptions of violence are unclear but a correlation does exist between these two factors.

In addition to these factors, threats to or perceived threats to object resources (e.g. assets, material goods), condition resources (e.g. status), and energies (e.g. money) were also examined in this research. Most of the participants expressed that threats to or loss of resources in these categories would never be sufficient justification to commit violence, but in a few cases, and in limited situations, violence may be a viable response. Some of

the participants did indicate that a threat to or an attack on their home, when their family was inside would justify a violent response, but most differentiated this from the loss of the physical structure, which was not sufficient to justify violence.

In this research I also discussed how external information sources would affect an individual's perception of violence. Specifically, I examined if and how the credibility of informational sources impacted an individual's perception of violence. The results of this research indicate that the mainstream news, family, schools, and social media were all considered credible sources of information. News sources that were judged to be the most credible provided information that could be corroborated by international sources, such as BBC or France 24. This group identified no religious sources, such as mosques, imams, or religious teachings to be the most credible sources of information.

The potential link between an individual's identity and whether that individual accepts or rejects violence was expected. The link between an individual's religious beliefs and their perception of violence was also expected. The idea that faith or confidence in the justice system would play a role in that perception was not expected. There is logic in the argument that the effectiveness of the existing justice system would impact the need for an individual or a group to engage in violence, though. In this study, participants who had immigrated to the United States and discussed American law enforcement, expressed confidence in the justice system, while the participants who were native-born did not convey this sentiment. Specifically, the participants who were born in



the United States did not express any indication that going to the police or depending on law enforcement was an option to be pursued in the place of violence.

In Chapter 5, I examine the results of this research in terms of their significance to planners and policy makers in the public and private sector. These factors are discussed in terms of identifying potential reasons for the connection to perceptions of violence. Lastly, I explore the findings to identify potential meaning and to predict future behaviors.

## Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusion, and Recommendations

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this research was to identify the factors that influence how Sunni Muslims in Western Michigan perceive violence. Specifically, I intended to determine which factors had the greatest influence religious adherents in determining whether violence against another person was acceptable or unacceptable. Initially, the three factors I examined in this study were: religion, identity, and the credibility of information sources. For this research, identity was determined solely by the individual being interviewed and there was no requirement for the participant to explain or justify how or why the self-identification was made.

I conducted the study using a case study approach in which members of a single mosque or masjid were interviewed to provide data on how these perceptions and attitudes were formed and maintained. I used a questionnaire to conduct the interviews, and in general there was little or no deviation from the questionnaire unless the participant needed clarification or elaboration.

I conducted this research to answer one central research question and three sub-questions. The central research question was designed to identify the factors that had the most influence on how Sunni Muslims from Western Michigan perceived violence, either as acceptable or unacceptable in a given situation. Recognizing that violence could be interpreted in numerous different ways, violence for this research was specifically

defined as the intentional use of physical force or aggression against another person with the intent to cause injury, death or psychological harm (Violence, 2014). To limit the discussion, the concept of violence was only discussed as it would apply to a person; violence toward physical objects was not included in this research.

The three sub-questions in this study addressed specific factors to be considered, specifically the role of religion, the influence of information sources, and the impact of perceived or actual loss. I developed and organized the interview questionnaire to elicit responses that addressed the central research question and each of the three sub-questions.

The interviews were conducted in Western Michigan, and the participants were selected from the population of adherents associated with a single mosque, also in Western Michigan. Because of the sensitivity of the topic for this group, I afforded each of the participants the opportunity to select the specific time and location of the interview to ensure the participant was comfortable with the setting.

The results of this study indicate that the following three factors had the greatest influence on how the participants perceived violence: identity, religious beliefs, and confidence in the justice system. The way an individual self-identified determined not only how they perceived themselves, but also how they perceived violence and how they determined the situations in which violence would be acceptable. An individual's religious beliefs provided support for their individual positions on violence in that

participants identified no conflicts between what Islam taught and their individual positions on violence. Belief in the justice system affected the way participants perceived violence because individuals who expressed confidence in the American justice system were less inclined to find violence acceptable.

### **The Interpretations of the Findings**

The three factors that most influenced how violence was perceived were an individual's identity, an individual's religious beliefs, and an individual's confidence in the justice system. Regarding an individual's identity, analysis of the collected data indicated a link between how an individual self-identified and the types of situations in which violence would be acceptable. For example, individuals who identified most with their family would find violence acceptable in defense of their family. Religious beliefs were also identified as an important factor in that all of the participants indicated that their personal position on violence was in alignment with the teachings of Islam. Although there were differences in the interpretations of Islam, the alignment between the individual's teachings, and the individual's position on violence was consistent. Lastly, there appeared to be an inverse relationship between an individual's confidence in the justice system and their acceptance of violence. Participants who expressed high confidence in law enforcement and the justice system had a lower tolerance for violence, whereas participants who expressed low confidence in the existing justice system described more circumstances where violence would be acceptable.

Recent literature has shown that an individual's perception of violence can be influenced by several factors including social groupings that reflect an in-group/out-group relationship (Canetti-Nisim, Halperin, Sharvit, & Hobföll, 2009; Mani, 2012; Reader, 2012; van Liere, 2011). The self-identification with either family or religious group could create this in-group/out-group situation for these adherents. In a specifically religious context, members of the in-group (adherents) may see members of the out-group (non-believers) as lesser beings, resulting in a lower standard of behavior and possibly violence toward the out-group (Ginges et al., 2009; van Liere, 2009).

In this study, I examined individuals' perceptions of violence through the lens of Hobföll's COR theory of stress. This theory holds that "people strive to retain, protect, and build resources and that what is threatening to them is the potential or actual loss of these valued resources" (Hobföll, 1989, p. 516). In this study, most of the participants expressed that the preservation of object (material) resources, conditions (status or reputation), or energies (money) would not be adequate justification for violence. Only in a few, limited circumstances would violence be acceptable to protect these resources. The theory also posits that if an individual does not have a reasonable means to build and retain resources, that person may consider unreasonable responses or "loss control strategies that have a high cost and poor chance of success" (Hobföll, 1989, p. 519). In the article explaining his original theory, Hobföll (1989) did not explicitly cite violence as a solution, but given the definitions, violence cannot be rejected as a possibility.

### **Sub-question 1 Results**

Religion played two crucial roles in the way violence was perceived the participants in my study. Religion helped to form an individual's identity and it served to validate an individual's position on violence. When I asked participants to identify the factor that best described how they saw themselves, a fifth of the participants identified themselves as Muslims before any other grouping. The second role of Islam for this population is that it provides validation or endorsement of the individual positions on violence. Although there were several different interpretations about the guidance given in the Qur'an on violence, the one constant was the alignment between an individual's interpretation of the holy book and their position on violence.

Previous research by Sen and Wagner (2009), van Liere (2009), and Gates and Steane (2009) has shown that religion can have a profound influence on an individual's identity, and can also shape an individual's perceptions of violence. Additionally, the alignment between individuals' perceptions of violence and their interpretation of their faith is not unusual or unexpected. While authors like Lusthaus (2011) and Cinoğlu (2010) described the relationship between religion and violence as one of simple justification, Çinar (2009) explained that religion may be "a way of framing or representing a struggle in terms that a political constituency will understand" (p. 111). Although it is not clear whether the participants' position on violence was affected by

their interpretation of their religion or vice versa, the correlation between the participants' perceptions of violence and the interpretation of their faith is clear.

The role religion plays in its influence on an individual's identity is also an important consideration as it applies to the COR theory of stress. Although Hobföll (1989) did not explicitly identify identity as a resource to be protected and maintained, he does describe resources as "those objects, personal characteristics, conditions, or energies that are valued by the individual or that serve as a means for attainment of these objects, personal characteristics, conditions, or energies" (p. 516). Identity, and specifically religious identity, could be considered a personal characteristic that would qualify as a critical resource given this definition.

### **Sub-question 2 Results**

During the interviews conducted for this research there were several sources of information identified as having influence on an individual's perception of violence, but there was no single information source that seemed to have significantly more influence than the others. Participants identified family members, news outlets, social media, and schools as sources of credible information. Neither religious texts nor formal religious teachings was explicitly identified as a credible source by the participants, but during the interviews, the Qur'an was cited by participants as support for their position on violence.

While mosques and schools served as a critical source of information for Palestinian nationalists, (Post et al., 2009) schools and mosques were in general, not as

significant to the participants in this study. The participants in this study had a wider variety of information sources available to them, and as a result considered daily news to be generally the most credible in terms of providing information. The credibility of schools can be also confirmed as a valuable information source for at least a portion of this population but only a small minority mentioned that schools were a reliable source of information. Given the fact that none of the participants identified religious texts or religious teachings as credible sources of information, the results of this study can neither support nor refute the belief that religious teachings or religious texts are credible sources of information.

The COR Theory was developed to help explain how and why individuals respond to stress (Hobföll, 1989) so it would be less applicable to confirm or refute the data collected for this sub-question. The credibility or believability of an information source may have an impact on how an individual perceives his or her resources or it may indirectly affect whether an individual feels threatened, but this theory would not be generally applicable to the results of this sub-question.

### **Sub-question 3 Results**

Perceived or actual loss affected an individual's perception of violence primarily when an individual's family was threatened. In limited situations, a threat to an individual's resources may be sufficient justification for violence and in one case, when the participant perceived that he was the victim of oppression, violence would be



acceptable. During this study participants were asked how the loss of specific resources would affect their perception of violence. Most of the participants identified that a material loss, like the loss of a house or a car, would not justify the use of violence, but more than one of the participants stated that if their family were in the house, then violence would be justified to protect their family. When asked about the loss of religious freedoms, specifically the freedom to worship, the majority of the participants expressed that such a situation could not exist or that they would practice in private or move to a place where they could practice freely.

There are numerous studies detailed in recent literature about the perceived oppression and humiliation of Muslims across the world and how this view contributes to the justification of violence against those responsible for the oppression. Cavanaugh (2012) specifically speaks of the loss of religious freedoms in his research, while Haynes (2009), Moten (2010), and Sirseloudi (2012) discuss how perceptions of oppression and persecution, which could involve social or material losses, contribute to the notion that violence is an acceptable solution to resolve these issues.

This sub-question specifically addresses the applicability of the COR Theory to this research. The results indicate that a loss or the threat of a loss of family, identity or religious freedoms can contribute to the belief that violence would be acceptable to preserve these resources.

### **Limitations of the Study**

During the data collection process, it became apparent that the information collected would not be easily transferable or repeatable due to the unique circumstances surrounding this study. Transferability of the data would be limited because the participants who volunteered to participate in this research were all well-educated, employed full time and had a relatively high socioeconomic status in the community. Additionally, eight of the ten participants held either graduate or terminal degrees, which is not uncommon in this community, but is certainly not representative of Muslim population in the nation or across the globe. Transferability would be limited to populations that came from similar communities.

In terms of repeatability, the timing of the study and the uniqueness of the external influences would make these findings difficult to repeat. During the conduct of this study the internationally-known group ISIS rose to power, prompting anti-Muslim rhetoric across the state and across the nation. Additionally, the inflammatory and divisive comments from the then-Republican candidate for President caused many Muslims in Michigan to be concerned and distrustful (Hijazi, 2016). Although these concerns are not unheard of within this population, or any minority population, the extent of the unease among the Muslims in Michigan would certainly limit the dependability of the research, making it difficult to repeat the results.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

An examination of the demographics of the participants reveals a population that is unique in their socioeconomic status, specifically that they are much more well-educated than the average citizen in the United States. Across the nation, 17.6% of the population has earned a bachelor's degree, 7.2% has earned a master's and 1.2% of the U.S. population has earned a doctorate degree (Ryan & Siebens, 2012). For this study three of the participants had earned a terminal degree, four were in graduate school, two participants had earned a Master's degree and the remaining participant had earned a Bachelor's degree, which is clearly atypical when compared to the American population as a whole. Further research should be conducted to include participants from all socioeconomic groups and education levels to get a better understanding of how education may affect an adherent's perception of violence.

Additional recommendations for further research would include a quantitative study to examine the three factors identified in this study and to better understand the relationships between religious beliefs, identity, faith in the justice system, and perceptions of violence. Quantitative research will allow the relationships to be examined more closely and to determine if there could exist a causal relationship between how an adherent perceives violence and any of these three factors.

Qualitative research should also be conducted to identify additional factors that may influence the perception of violence for adherents of other religious groups. The link

between violence and the Abrahamic religions has been extensively studied through the holy texts associated with Christianity, Islam, and Judaism (Boustan, et al., 2009; Ibrahim, 2009; Van Pelt Campbell, 2011). The link between violence against women and patriarchal religions like Hinduism has likewise been studied through the examination of religious texts (Bradley, 2010). Qualitative research to identify the specific factors that affect adherents' perception of violence should be conducted with other religions to determine if similarities and differences would exist with the results of this study. Ginges et al. (2009) included several different religions and denominations in their research, which allowed them to apply their findings to a broader audience rather than being limited to a specific religion, denomination or sect.

Lastly, additional research should be conducted to determine how the intersection of religion and race or ethnicity affects an individual's perception of violence. Some of the participants involved in this research were native-born Americans while others had migrated to the United States from other nations. The native-born Muslims did not express faith or confidence in the existing justice system, but due to the scope of the research, this phenomenon could not be fully examined. During the time that this data were collected, law enforcement organizations across the country were being criticized for racial profiling and shootings of young minority men. The negative perceptions toward law enforcement by some racial or ethnic groups may have also influenced the results of this study. Further phenomenological or ethnographic research, like the

research conducted by Lee in 2010 on the African American Muslim community should be conducted to determine how much influence a religious individual's race or ethnicity has on their perception of violence.

The results of this research could be utilized by governmental and non-governmental organizations that regularly engage with agencies and organizations with large Muslim populations. The organizations that use this data should not be limited to those that deal with terrorism or religiously-based violence, but it may also include groups that have diverse populations or are incorporating greater diversity in their organizations. The results of this study can also be of value to smaller entities that have influence in the communities. This research examined the concept of *violence*, which could include secular or religious violence, both of which can be problematic, whether it be on a large scale or a small scale. Understanding the motivations of religious adherents is important in that it can lead to open dialog and enduring, meaningful results rather than simple and possibly temporary compliance.

### **Implications for Social Change**

As American interests continue to expand globally, the need to better understand the standards, protocols, and social norms of different societies also grows. At a macro level, globalization increases the need for federal, state, and local governmental agencies, who regularly engage populations from a variety of different cultures need to understand the values, principles, and beliefs of the organizations that they engage with. The

implication for social change at the federal level would be reflected in improved relations between nations, enhanced collaboration in diplomatic matters and/or a potential reduction in conflicts. Based on the complexity of actions and interactions that occur at the federal level, it would be difficult to verify or quantify any social change that may occur as a result of this research.

On a micro level, as diversity increases within communities, neighborhoods and workplaces, individuals need to understand the motivations, behaviors, and viewpoints of the people with whom they live and work. At the community level, social change can occur by understanding how religions help to form and maintain in-groups and out-groups. When these groups form and one group is disenfranchised or perceives danger to itself, violence may result (Schwartz et al., 2009; Trisk, 2011). School districts can help to alleviate these perceptions by incorporating curriculum and activities that are inclusive and accepting of cultural differences rather than being divisive and ethnocentric. Local governments can also consider policy changes that support the acceptance of different cultural groups rather than advocating positions that enforce social hierarchies based on factors like race, ethnicity or religion.

Social change can also be facilitated by religious organizations within the communities. Because religion can provide a motivation for peaceful behaviors or a justification for violent behaviors especially when inequalities occur (Basedau et al., 2011; Huber, 2011; Kippenberg, 2010), these organizations can be important proponents

for encouraging nonviolent responses to perceived or actual injustices. Religious institutions can also serve as an “authority that gives the social and political order its reason for being” (Juergensmeyer, 2010, p. 266) so religious leaders are often in a position to determine when violence is morally justified and when it is not. Leaders of religious organizations can also serve a critical role in reinforcing the peaceful nature of religion rather than highlighting any violent characteristics.

Lastly, local law enforcement agencies can affect social change by facilitating an increased confidence in their ability to protect the members of their communities. Local law enforcement serves as the visible element of the justice system, so for many individuals, interactions with local police are often representative of the entire justice system. In this study, half of the participants expressed that their local law enforcement would provide sufficient protection so that violence would not be necessary. None of the participants who were born and raised in the United States expressed such confidence in their law enforcement agencies or the American justice system in general. Increased confidence in the justice system and in the local law enforcement agencies may affect social change by reducing the perceived need for violence.

### **Theoretical Implications**

The basis of Hobföll’s COR theory of stress is the idea that “people strive to retain, protect, and build resources and that what is threatening to them is the potential or actual loss of these valued resources” (Hobföll, 1989, p. 516). Acknowledging that

identity can be considered a “valued resource,” coupled with the idea that religion, for many religious adherents is often a critical component of their identity, positive social change can occur by developing and implementing processes that reduce the threat to an individual’s identity.

The theory also suggests that in an effort to reduce the possibility of experiencing future stress, individuals will build up surpluses of these valuable resources also known as developing resilience. High cost strategies, such as violence can occur when individuals experience a loss, or a perceived loss of resources and have few options, if any to replenish them (Hobföll, 1989). Additionally, inappropriate or counterproductive strategies may be utilized when “those who lack resources attempt to employ what resources they have, often producing self-defeating consequences” (Hobföll, 1989, p. 519). To counteract the employment of these counterproductive or high cost strategies, schools and other community organizations can help individuals to build up and maintain these surpluses by supporting cultural differences and acknowledging the value of diverse cultures. Law enforcement agencies can help to reduce the threat of loss by providing the population with a sense of security and protection of these resources.

### **Recommendations for Practice**

At the federal or state level, managers, planners and policy makers can incorporate this research into policies that affect interactions with organizations where Muslims comprise a large portion of the population. This research has the potential to



affect a wide range of fields at the state or national level, including security, intelligence, diplomacy and operations. Multi-national corporations may also benefit from the information gained in this study to better understand the similarities and differences in perceptions of violence among Muslim and non-Muslim societies.

Local governments and community organizations can use the results of this research to develop policies that provide support for and reduce the threat to their Muslim residents. Schools and neighborhood or community groups can help Muslims to feel comfortable and secure with their cultural/social identity through tolerant policies and the acceptance of diversity in the school curriculums. Local law enforcement can also facilitate positive social changes in the community by providing a sense of physical security for their Muslim residents. Individuals in the community can contribute to positive social change by speaking out against discriminatory policies or practices against Muslims and reinforcing practices that accept cultural differences.

### **Reflections of the Researcher**

This research process was personally enlightening and professionally informative, although it took significantly longer than originally expected. Having had significant experience with different cultures and having lived in Europe as well as several Muslim nations, much of what was discussed during the interviews was not surprising. Having met and worked with many intelligent, articulate, and dedicated Muslims it was not unexpected to learn that this population's perception of violence would be similar to the

perceptions expressed by friends and colleagues that are Christians, Jews, Hindus, Buddhists and even atheists. The conditions under which this group of Muslims found violence to be acceptable were not unusual, but seemed normal and almost predictable.

The only unexpected factor that was identified in this research was the confidence that some of the participants felt about the capabilities of law enforcement and the integrity of the justice system. As data analysis was conducted on the transcribed interviews, it did not take long to identify that the native-born Americans, did not express the same confidence in the justice system. This undoubtedly influenced how these participants perceived violence but the reasons for this lack of confidence were not examined during this study. Given the timeframe that the data were collected and the national discussion that was occurring about shootings of unarmed minority males, one can speculate about the reasoning for this lack of confidence, but without further research the theory cannot be confirmed.

The data collection took much longer than expected, for reasons that have been articulated in previous chapters, but there was no way to predict the obstacles encountered during this process. The complications with finding participants and making changes to the original plan were frustrating. Collecting data while staying within the limits approved by the IRB was more difficult than originally anticipated and at one point this researcher considered changing the criteria for participants. Identifying new key

communicators was initially problematic and often frustrating but ultimately sufficient participants were identified to complete the research.

Ensuring that the researcher's personal values and biases did not have a substantial effect on the results of the research was always a concern with this qualitative study. To reduce the probability that the researcher's biases and preconceptions would influence the results, several measures were put in place. During data collection, the researcher used an audio recorder to document the interviews. This way, the actual words and tone of the interviewees would be preserved for future inspection. Additionally, the interviews were conducted by strictly following the questions as written and only allowing for variation if a participant misunderstood or was confused about a question. During the data analysis process, there was the greatest chance for bias to be included in the results, so a colleague, who is also in the doctoral process was recruited to conduct a peer-review on the chapters. Overall this researcher is confident that the measures that were put in place to prevent or reduce bias were effective.

After Chapter 4 was written, I reflected on my personal feelings about the effectiveness of local law enforcement and the impartiality of the American justice system. Although the inequities that exist within the American justice system toward some minority groups is well-documented, neither this knowledge nor the recent events occurring across the nation have changed my perception of when violence is acceptable. All systems have inequities, but overall our justice system is effective and reliable.

Additionally, we as a nation are working to make it better. Years of international travel and significant experience with Middle Eastern cultures have had a more profound effect on my idea of when violence is acceptable and when it is not. The recent domestic events have had little to no effect on my position toward violence.

### **Conclusion**

From the highest levels of international diplomacy to the individual engagement in the workplace, globalization is changing how the world interacts. National interests are now so closely tied to international concerns that failure to understand other cultures can be catastrophic. While the concept of *culture* involves many different elements, a society's religion is arguably one of the more critical elements in understanding the morality, ethics and principles of a society. Religion is often the basis for a society's values and specifically determining which behaviors are acceptable and which behaviors are unacceptable.

In this case study I examined how religious adherents, specifically Sunni Muslims in Western Michigan perceived violence and to identify which factors had the greatest influence on that perception. The results indicated that the factors that had the most influence for this population were: identity, religious beliefs and confidence in the justice system. Although understanding how and why these factors influence an individual's perception of violence is important, further research is needed to better understand the factors that affect the way a religious adherent perceives violence.

Violence can result when individuals perceive a threat to their resources. A potential approach to reducing the acceptability of violence is to reduce the perceived threat of loss. In this research, the concept of identity was examined, and the results indicated that threats to an individual's identity were associated with an individual's perception of violence. This study may provide some insight into the conditions under which individuals find violence to be acceptable, offering a suggestion for governmental and non-governmental organizations to consider as they develop plans and policies for their organizations.

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## Appendix A: Demographic Questionnaire

Name\*: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone Number\*: \_\_\_\_\_

E-mail\*: \_\_\_\_\_

City/County in which you live: \_\_\_\_\_

What religion/sect/denomination do you adhere to? \_\_\_\_\_

Are you over 18? Yes/ No (circle one)

Which term best describes your faith: atheist, moderate, devout, or fundamentalist?

(circle one)

What sources of information do you have access to: radio, TV, internet, e-mail (circle applicable)

\* Name and contact information (phone number and e-mail) are not required to participate in the research, but without this information the researcher will have no way to contact you after transcribing the information to verify its accuracy.



## Appendix B: Interview Questionnaire

For this research violence is defined as: *the intentional use of physical force or aggression against another person with the intent to cause injury, death or psychological harm.*

1. Understanding the given definition of violence, under what circumstances would you consider violence to be acceptable? For example, if your family, or home were being threatened with violence would you, in this circumstance find it acceptable?
2. Under what circumstances would violence not be acceptable?

### **Credibility of Sources**

3. What sources of information do you find to be the most believable or credible? (family, friends, neighbors, TV, radio, social media, religious institution, school, other community organizations?)
4. What makes these sources more credible than others?

**COR Theory** – There exists a theory that suggests that when people are threatened they may respond violently to protect their resources.

5. Under what circumstances would a threat to your material resources (house, car, etc.) justify violence?
6. Under what circumstances would a threat to your reputation or money justify violence?

### **Identity**

7. What characteristic best describes who you are, as a person? For example, do you identify most with a country, or a city or a family or an ethnicity?
8. If your identity were threatened, what actions would be justified to preserve your identity?
9. From your understanding, what does your religion say about violence and the situations in which it would be acceptable?
10. If your religion or your right to practice your religion were threatened, what actions would be justified to preserve your faith?