

**The Psychology of Media Bias and Its Impact on
Arab-American and Muslim Psyche**

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الأوجه النفسية لتجاوزات الإعلام وأثرها على نفسية العرب والمسلمين الأمريكيين
محمد حمزه، نيفين ياسين، اشرف الحوي، بيتي دنكن و كارلوس دياز

Abstract

Stereotypical degradation and humiliation of minority ethnic groups have been practiced historically by all forms of U. S. media; however, the devastating aftermath of September 11, 2001, heightened the degree of prejudice, discriminatory behavior and misunderstandings, particularly toward Muslims and Arab-Americans. These groups have continued to experience negative societal reactions that run the gamut from suspicion to phobia. This study attempted to determine the extent to which this has affected all members of Arab-American and Muslim- American communities especially children. A survey was conducted to examine American attitudes toward Muslim and Arab-Americans and their potential impact on children's psyche and well being. Statistical techniques were employed to analyze and summarize responses for each survey question. A chi-square test and logistic regression techniques were used to ascertain if there were significant relationships between response variables and the set of independent variables. The study explored these differences in detail and provides statistical analyses of these findings.

Introduction

In the late eighteenth century, the United States became a republic dedicated to the ideals of religious and political freedom. Since that time, there has been a continuous assimilation of immigrant and minority populations, a melting pot that has never been an automatic or easy intermingling, but has always promised a potential source of newly-infused energies and contributions. The events of September 11, 2001, added a new dimension to this difficulty in blending, particularly for Muslim and Arab-

Americans. This occasion brought to the forefront increased concerns for the role of Islam in society and its relationship to American national security and foreign policy. The media focused on Muslims as the cause of the attack, often stereotyping all Muslims as terrorists¹. As with media coverage of the Gulf War, numerous faces of the Middle East were suddenly brought into American homes, but there was little or no attempt at understanding any of these groups of people or the cultures behind them².

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According to El-Farra, individuals from the Middle East are often described simply as “Arabs,” although those addressed may be from different countries and represent a variety of religions, cultures, and belief systems. Since the mind initially reacts to images more emotionally than intellectually, the media make use of stereotypes to portray common beliefs and gain the confidence of the audience when the stereotypes appear to fit reality and create credibility³. Bayoumi noted that Muslims, as a group, are unfairly held responsible for the actions of any other Muslims world-wide. They are treated as “guilty until proven innocent, and their guilt is premised almost exclusively on their birthplace or birth religion”⁴. This is reminiscent of an episode in American history following the bombing of Pearl Harbor in 1941—a time which witnessed the internment of 120,000 Japanese-Americans. This event was precipitated by Executive Order 9066, which set into motion the mass evacuation and imprisonment of Japanese-Americans in the U.S., two thirds of whom were U.S. citizens. With total disregard for the Bill of Rights of the U.S. Constitution, these people were forced out of their homes and into relocation centers⁵. Although U.S. military authorities at the time justified the action on the basis of a perceived threat to national security, no evidence of sabotage or espionage committed by

any Japanese-American was ever documented. It has been concluded that the only crime these Japanese were guilty of was that of being Japanese⁶. The internment resulted from a history of prejudice and restrictive legislation against Asian-Americans that had been fanned by economic and political motives. Takaki examined the impact of World War II on Asians living in Hawaii and found that Japanese-Americans, constituting 37% of the total island population at the time, were spared being uprooted since interning them would have devastated Hawaii’s economy⁷.

A comparable situation is exemplified by a 2002 CAIR (Council on American Islamic Relations) report advising FBI agents and other law enforcement authorities conducting raids and interrogations of Muslim-Americans who were legal immigrants or U.S. citizens based solely on profiling criteria. While the U.S. government defended their actions as necessary for national security, none led to the arrest of terrorist suspects. As in the case of the Japanese, it disrupted the lives of thousands of Muslim-Americans and threatened democratic freedoms and the rule of law⁸. While one might think these actions would lessen with the passage of time since 9/11, Lisa Miller, writing for *Newsweek* magazine, reported that the Council on American Islamic Relations counted nearly 2,500

civil-rights complaints by Muslim Americans in 2006, a dramatic increase over the year 2005⁹.

According to a *USA Today* report¹⁰, some Muslims and Arab-Americans wonder if internment could happen again—especially if there is another terrorist attack in the U.S. Themes that have repeatedly emerged in *USA Today* interviews with Muslims and Arab-Americans include the following: refusing to travel by air because of continued suspicion and hassles, Anglicizing or completely changing their names, speaking English instead of Arabic, displaying the American flag, trimming their beards, and worrying about government eavesdropping and surveillance¹⁰.

The widespread nature of this continuous suspicion and hateful rhetoric can even be seen in the comments of well-established public figures such as Franklin Graham (son of evangelist Billy Graham), who said during an NBC news program: “The God of Islam is not the same God. He’s not the Son of God of the Christian or Judeo-Christian faith. It’s a different God and I believe it is a very evil and wicked religion”⁸. Furthermore, Pope Benedict XVI’s reference to Muhammad’s offerings as being “evil and inhuman” and commanding his followers “to spread by the sword the faith he preached” was not language that was well received by Muslims¹¹. Dionne cautioned that

Muslims “need to know that non-Muslims are willing to engage with the best and not just the most extreme currents of Islamic thought”¹¹.

Striking examples of this “unwillingness to engage” can be seen by the U.S. government’s refusal to admit into the country distinguished foreign scholars who were in a pivotal position to help Americans better understand not only the sources of international tensions, but also their ongoing potential for further escalation. Although the delays and interminable security checks have lessened since 9/11, scholarly associations in the social sciences say problems persist for their foreign members¹². Foreign scholars who have been barred by the U.S. from 2004 to 2007 include Tariq Ramadan, a well-known Islamic intellectual from Europe; Karim Meziane, a physicist at the University of New Brunswick and a Canadian citizen; Dora Maria Tellez, a Nicaraguan historian who had to resign from a teaching position she had accepted at Harvard Divinity School; Vicente Verez-Bencomo, a Cuban scientist who was to receive an award at California’s Tech Museum of Innovation for his research team’s development of a low-cost vaccine for meningitis and pneumonia; Adam Habib, a professor of political science at the University of KwaZulu-Natal in South Africa and their director of the program democracy and governance, who had been scheduled to

meet with the officials of the National Institute of Health, the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, and the World Bank, as well as with scholars at both Columbia University and City University of New York; and Riyadh Lafta, a prominent Iraqi professor of medicine at Al-Mustansiriya University Baghdad who was to give a lecture at the University of Washington and work with colleagues there on a research project concerning increased rates of cancer among children in southern Iraq¹².

Not only have scholars been stymied, but also those attempting to aid needy Muslims through legitimate Muslim charities¹³. Since 9/11, under the Patriot Act the U.S. government has closed down six American-Muslim charities, although there has not been a single terrorism conviction against any of the employees or board members. According to Islamic teachings, it is immoral, unethical, and un-Islamic to engage in illegal activity, and there has been no documentation showing money for charitable works going into the hands of actual terrorists¹³.

In the aftermath of the September 11 attacks, the U.S. faces the question of whether Muslims and Arab-Americans have the same opportunity to practice their faith and exercise their rights as other Americans. For them, the commitment of America's Founding Fathers to "liberty and justice for all" is

being put to the test daily. In a July/2006 *USA Today* Gallup Poll, 39 percent of Americans admitted to holding prejudice against Muslims and thought Muslims—US citizens included—should carry special IDs. More than 20 percent did not want a Muslim neighbor, and almost 60 percent had never met a Muslim.⁴

Furthermore, offensive advertisements have become more prevalent since the launch of America's war on terrorism,¹⁴ Arab-American groups helped to prevent a billboard ad, designed by the Coalition for a Secure Driver's License, which showed a man in a traditional Arab keffiyeh holding a grenade and a driver's license. The message clearly intended to show that Arabs are dangerous and therefore should not get driver's licenses. Another ad for a car dealership in Columbus, Ohio called for a "jihad on the automotive market," and furthered the theme by the salespeople's wearing of burqas and giving swords to children on "fatwa Friday"¹⁴. Clearly, when misleading concepts are promulgated in a society which knows very little about Muslims and Arab-

Americans, the potential for stereotyping is significant. Since 2001, being or being perceived to be Muslim and/or Arab seems to be sufficient grounds for legal or cultural suspicion. Misinformation or the lack of accurate information, engendered by television, radio programs and the influence of

Hollywood, plays a significant role in the American perceptions, attitudes, behavior and misunderstanding of Muslims and Arab-Americans.

Shaheen documented images on American entertainment shows since 1974 and found that the “rogues” were often Arab-Muslims. He noted that fanatical Muslims surfaced in mid-1980s television movies such as *Hostage Flight* (NBC, 1985), *Sword of Gideon* (HBO, 1986), *Under Siege* (NBC, 1986), *The Taking of Flight 847* (NBC, 1988), *Terrorist on Trial*:

The United States vs. Salim Ajami (CBS, 1988), and *Hostages* (HBO, 1993). He pointed out that these and others like them are constantly rebroadcast on cable and network systems. What he considered particularly disturbing was that they effectively showed all Arabs, Muslims, and Arab-Americans as being at war with the United States.¹⁵ The American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee (ADC) has received complaints from many parents as a result of this.

From many pervasive stereo-typing,¹⁶ These parents have found that their children have become ashamed of their religion and heritage—often the result of taunting from classmates. This has led to Muslim and Arab-American children lying about their heritage and wanting to change their names in order to avoid being targeted, threatened, and accused of being responsible for terrorist

activities.¹⁵ In view of this cultural fear, misunderstanding and distrust, the authors of this paper sought to explore the attitudes and feelings of those living in a particular U.S. region, South-east Texas, toward members of the Arab-American and Muslim communities.

Survey Validity

The survey, based on previous work by Hamza, et al.²³ was conducted in the fall of 2006; the sample size was expanded (n = 90). It was designed to explore respondent’ attitudes toward Muslims and Arab-Americans in the United States, using the independent variables of *religion, age, ethnicity, vocation, area, and gender*. The questions posed provided a basis from which to study the attitudinal relationships resulting from each variable.

The data were collected from several Southeast Texas cities. This survey was completed by volunteers and conducted in various settings such as retail stores, hospitals, schools, corporate atmospheres, and restaurants. Thirty questions were answered and each was based on a five-point Likert scale (*strongly agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree, and no opinion*). The survey also covered demographic variables, such as *vocation, ethnicity, religious affiliation, gender, age, and place of residence*. These responses indicate whether the data show any evidence of bias. To get statistically significant evidence to support the

presence of bias or discrimination, the data were analyzed with statistical techniques such as the chi-square test of independence. Graphs are attached in the appendix.

Ninety-two percent of the respondents were Christian; the other 8% represented other major religions such as Judaism, Buddhism, and Hinduism. By design, there were no Muslims asked to take the survey, in order to prevent the possibility of any extraneous variables that would mix the viewpoints of Muslims with those of non-Muslims. The majority were between 31-50 years old. About 35% were teachers and educators; 20% were businessmen, business-women, or engineers. About 81% of the respondents were Caucasian and 10% were African Americans. The remaining fell under the category of "other," most of these being Hispanic. Forty-seven percent lived in suburban areas, 34% in urban areas, and 19% in rural areas. About 68% were female (see attached graphs).

Percentages and Proportions of the Responses

The following results were obtained from the survey (see Table 1).

1. **Ninety-four percent** stated that racial problems exist in the United States.
2. **Fifty-three percent** thought Arab/Muslim communities suffer prejudice in the United States.
3. **Sixty-three percent** said they did not believe much of what is being said about Arabs or Muslims in the media.
4. **Forty-one percent** of the respondents indicated that when they think of Arabs/
 - a. Muslims, they think of the 9-11 tragedy.
5. **Fifty-two percent** of the respondents indicated that they would pay attention to a person's place of origin or religion.
6. **Fifty-two percent** of the respondents felt that media bias could cause depression in Arab/Muslim families.
7. **Sixty-percent** of the respondents stated that they **have not** studied the cultures and religion of Arab/Muslim people.
8. **Seventy-six percent** stated that they would not change the T.V. channel or radio station if it included bias or discriminatory reports about Arab/Muslim people.
9. **Sixty-two percent** indicated they would not contribute money or time to social programs to help the Arab/Muslim community.
10. **Twenty-five percent** stated that they think Arabs/Muslims are more violent than non-Arab Muslims, **51%** said the opposite, and **24%** said they did not know.
11. **Forty-eight percent** stated that their views of Arabs/Muslims have

- a. changed negatively since 9/11.
- 12. **Forty-two percent** indicated they knew of bias against Arabs/Muslims in their own communities.
- 13. **Forty-nine percent** of the respondents stated they would feel uncomfortable when Arab/Muslim people were speaking their own language in their presence.
- 14. **Fifty percent** think Arab/Muslim children are being affected by media bias.

- 15. **Thirty-seven percent** indicated that they would not express their honest opinion without worrying about appearing racist in the presence of an Arab/Muslim.

Materials and Methods

The following Table summarizes all the results from the survey. The questions were organized into three categories: *agree or strongly agree*, *disagree or strongly disagree*, and *don't know*. The authors sought to identify any evidence of bias on the responses of these questions.

Table 1

Survey Questions	Agree or Strongly Agree	Disagree or Strongly Disagree	Don't Know
1) Aware of media broadcast bias against the Arab-Muslim community	56%	31%	13%
2) No race problem in the United States	6%	94%	0%
3) Would contribute money or time to social programs to help the Arab-Muslim community	19%	62%	19%
4) Feel film-making corporations (i.e., Hollywood) portray bad images of the Arab-Muslim	31%	52%	17%
5) White civilization is the most highly developed, sophisticated culture to have ever existed on earth	31%	59%	10%

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6) Are aware of bias against Arab-Muslims in their own community	42%	31%	27%
7) Do not pay attention to a person's place of origin or religion	66%	33%	1%
8) Have been in a work or collegial relationship with an Arab-Muslim	48%	39%	13%
9) Think Arab-Muslim children behave just like non Arab-Muslim children	46%	22%	32%
10) Know if Arab-Muslims have been discriminated Against	32%	36%	32%
11) When an Arab-Muslim sits or stands next to them in a public place, they would move away	12%	82%	6%
12) Would listen to the use of Arab-Muslim jokes and derogatory statements when presented the opportunity	36%	53%	11%
13)) Feel uncomfortable when Arab-Muslims use their own language in their presence	49%	48%	3%
14) Their views of Arab-Muslims have negatively changed since 9/11	48%	47%	5%
15) When they think of Arab-Muslims, they think of the 9/11 tragedy	41%	56%	3%
16) Think the United States media are biased toward Arab-Muslim cultures	43%	42%	15%
17) Think Arab-Muslim communities suffer prejudice in the United States	53%	31%	16%

18) Would mind having an Arab-Muslim as their congressman	28%	51%	21%
19) Would not mind having a veiled Arab-Muslim woman as their congresswoman	22%	58%	20%
20) Think Arab-Muslims are more violent than non-Arab Muslims	25%	51%	24%
21) Express their honest opinion when an Arab Muslim is present without worrying about whether they appear racist	51%	37%	12%
22) Think they can do something about discrimination against Arab-Muslims	33%	44%	23%
23) Arab-Muslim children are being affected by media bias	50%	27%	23%
24) Change the T.V. channel or radio station if it includes bias or discriminatory reports about Arab-Muslims	14%	76%	10%
25) Usually tend to believe much of what is being said about Arab-Muslims in the media	28%	63%	9%
26) Have never intensely disliked anyone	52%	45%	3%
27) Believe cultural knowledge affects their expectations	46%	42%	12%
28) Believe they would be uncomfortable with people who have different values from themselves	21%	77%	2%

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29) Have studied the culture and religion of Arab-Muslims	33%	60%	7%
30) Media bias can cause depression in Arab-Muslim families	52%	23%	25%

The Pearson chi-square test was computed to study the relationship between the response variables and other independent variables used in the study.

Table 2: Chi-square Test

Comparison	Chi-square Test	DF	p-value
Response vs. Vocation	46.442	16	0.000
Response vs. Ethnicity	90.784	16	0.000
Response vs. Religion	155.584	8	0.000
Response vs. Area	6.720	8	0.567
Response vs. Gender	52.089	4	0.000

The chi-square test of independence (Table 2) was used to check if there were any significant relationships or associations between the response variable (i.e., agree, strongly agree, disagree, etc.) and set of the independent variables (i.e., vocation, religion, area) used in the study. Under the null hypothesis, we assume that the variables are *not* associated. If the null hypothesis is rejected, then we have evidence that the alternative hypothesis (i.e., the variables are associated or dependent) is true. Table 2 reveals that there is statistically significant evidence of a relationship between the response variable and Vocation, Ethnicity, Religion, and Gender at the 0.05 level of

significance which led to the rejection of the null hypothesis of independence (since $p\text{-value} = 0.000 < 0.05$). This implies that the response does vary by these variables (i.e., there is gender difference in opinion). On the other hand, the authors did not see any significant relationship in area or regional responses (since $p\text{-value} = 0.567 > 0.05$); that is to be expected since all the information pertains to one particular region. This may not be the case if the study was conducted in different regions in the United States.

We notice that p-values for vocation, religion, and gender are less than 0.05 on the level of significance. There is statistical evidence to conclude that

these variables significantly affect responses. There is insufficient evidence to conclude that the variables of ethnicity and area have a significant effect on responses. The log-likelihood from the maximum likelihood iterations is -4088.086 with statistic $G = 34.190$ and a p -value = 0.000, indicating that there is significant evidence that at least one of the coefficients is different from zero. For more details about logistic regression and interpretations¹⁷.

Discussion

The negative impact of the media was found to be significant in certain areas. A compelling result was that 94% of those who completed this survey agree that racial problems do exist in the

United States, and 43% think that the United States media are biased toward Arab-Americans and/or Muslims. An even larger number, 63%, responded that they tended not to believe much of what was said about Arabs/Muslims in the media. However, 49% of the respondents indicated that they would feel uncomfortable in an environment where Arabs -/Muslims were speaking their own language.

Fifty-two percent mentioned that media bias could cause depression in Arab/Muslim families, but 24% admitted that they did not know about this. This supports Chan’s findings that Muslim children often

The logistic regression method was used to study the relationship between the ordinal response variable and set of the explanatory variables used in the study. The coefficients (Coef), p -values, standard errors (SE), and odds ratio are provided in Table3.

Table 3: Logistic Regression Method

Odds Ratio	P-value	Z	SE	Coef	Predictor
	0.000	7.68	0.238	1.829	constant
1.07	0.002	3.11	0.021	0.065	Vocation
1.02	0.555	0.59	0.028	0.016	Ethnicity
0.92	0.006	-2.77	0.030	-0.082	Religion
0.97	0.613	-0.51	0.051	-0.026	Area
1.42	0.000	4.35	0.080	0.349	Gender
1.00	0.535	-0.62	0.003	-0.002	Age

experience discrimination from some of their non-Muslim peers¹⁹. Furthermore, bigoted behaviors that encourage stereotyping can lead to problems in

school for Arab/Muslim children, since they may feel humiliated if viewed in a different light than other students¹⁹. About a third said they knew of actual instances

of discrimination, but two-thirds had not witnessed any, or were unaware of any situations that had occurred. Interestingly, 51% indicated they would not mind having an Arab-Muslim as their congressman. On the other hand, 58%, indicated they would not accept having a veiled Arab/Muslim woman as their congresswoman. This latter finding begs the question of whether the bias is toward women, Arabs/Muslims, or a combination of both.

Another significant result was the finding that 76% stated they would not change the television channel or radio station if a broadcast included biased or discriminatory reports about Arabs/Muslims. Forty-two percent agreed that they were aware of bias in the collective treatment of Arab-Americans, but 27% said they were not aware of any. Moreover, 62% noted they would not contribute money or time to social programs designed to help the Arab/Muslim community. Forty-six percent of the respondents of the survey indicated that they believed that their knowledge of cultures affected their expectations.

Conclusion

The results of the survey reveal there is evidence of bias in the attitudes and behavior of respondents towards Arab-Americans and Muslims. Particular findings compel attention. For example, 53% thought Arab-Muslim communities

suffer prejudice in the United States. In addition, 56% of the people were aware of media bias against the Arab-Muslim community. Yet, 76% of the respondents stated they would not change the television channel or radio station, even if it included biased or discriminatory reports about Arabs/Muslims. Thus, the awareness of bias is not matched with any behavior to reduce it. This is also supported by the finding that only 33% felt they could do something about discrimination against Arabs/Muslims (see Table 1).

The greatest weapon in combating this misinformation promulgated by the media toward Arab Americans and Muslims is more education and understanding. This is supported by the finding that only 33% of the survey respondents indicated that they had studied the cultures and religion of Arabs/Muslims. Similarly, a National Geographic Literacy Survey found that young Americans displayed a weak performance in their knowledge of the Middle East and Asia. Despite these regions' almost daily presence in both U.S. and world news broadcasts, and the potential impact of current conflicts on lives worldwide, the survey found that only 13 percent could find Iraq or Iran on a map of the Middle East/Asia¹⁸.

Teaching about Islam and the treatment of Muslims in America are now central issues in national conversations that are occurring throughout America's major

educational and political institutions²⁰. We are increasingly living in a global society that has a new set of challenges, one of which is changing demographics. New immigrants are generating a diversity in U.S. communities which, in turn, makes it incumbent upon the educational system to promote knowledge of, and respect for, other cultures. This respect is revealed in both spoken and unspoken forms. As Hobson wrote in her novel *Gentleman's Agreement*: "Tone and mood are important; they're the distance between acceptance and rejection"²⁰. This acceptance comes only with understanding and allowing others the sense of dignity that relies on the absence of stereotyping or built-in bias. The current focus on the basics, including a strong emphasis on math, science, and technology, is necessary, but to be successful global citizens, workers, and leaders, students will need to be knowledgeable about the world and be able to communicate in languages other than English²². Through teaching of the tenets of all major religions, including Islam, students

would be more intellectually and emotionally equipped to recognize the use of stereotypes and become citizens who work toward reducing prejudice and discrimination against Arabs/Muslims and other religious minorities. It would be interesting to see if any of this focus on religious and cultural education does affect the responses on future surveys designed to detect bias toward Muslims and Arab-Americans. Additional research might target a larger sampling and compare the attitudes of more formally educated people with those less educated to see if there are any differences in their opinions and attitudes toward Muslims and Arab-Americans. Further insights could be gained by administering surveys in different regions of the United States. Finally, this study has shown that there is some evidence that bias toward Arab Americans and Muslims is perceived by fellow citizens of the U.S. who do not belong to either group. Findings also indicate that perception of this bias does not automatically translate into efforts to reduce it.

ملخص

دأب الإعلام الأمريكي على إهانة وتحقير الأقليات العرقية ، إلا أن أحداث الحادي عشر من أيلول سبتمبر 2001 رفعت من درجة الأحكام المسبقة والسلوك التفريقي وسوء الفهم خصوصاً نحو المسلمين والعرب الأمريكيين . هذه الدراسة تحاول أن تحدد مدى تأثير الجالية المسلمة والعربية الأمريكية وخصوصاً على صحة الأطفال وحالتهم النفسية، في هذه الدراسة تم تحليل كل إجابة وعلاقتها بعوامل أخرى مستقلة بوسائل إحصائية مختلفة وتم تقديم النتائج ومناقشتها.

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Figure 1

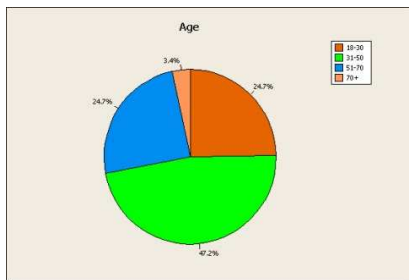


Figure 2

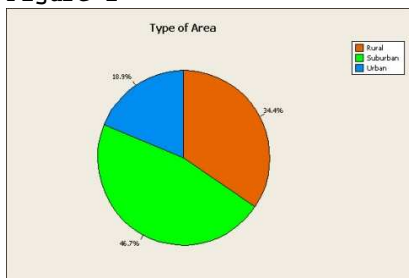


Figure 3

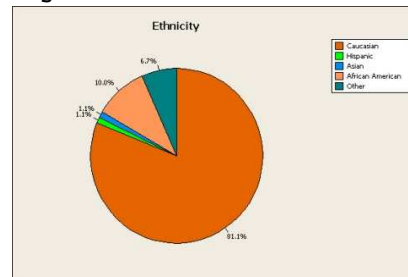


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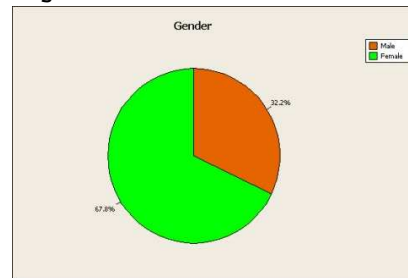


Figure-5

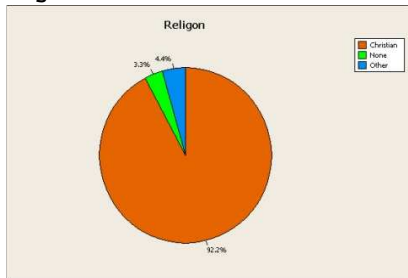


Figure 6

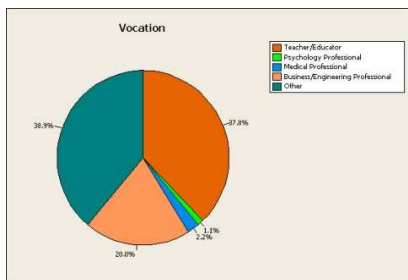
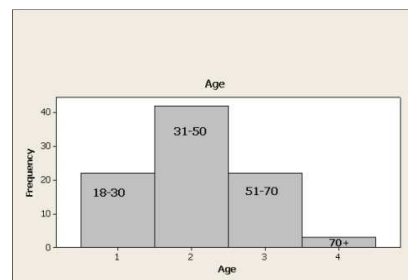


Figure 7



Histogram (Age Distribution)

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