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## Holding My Breath: The Experience of Being Sikh After 9/11

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# Holding My Breath: The Experience of Being Sikh After 9/11

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Muninder K. Ahluwalia<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

This article is based on the author's experiences after the 9/11 terrorist attacks in New York City and the impact of the attacks on her life as a New Yorker, an academic, and a member of a Sikh family and community. To position the author's narrative, her reflection integrates race-based traumatic stress (Carter, 2007), a model suggesting that individuals who are targets of racism experience harm or injury. The author outlines lessons learned that affect her both personally and professionally, including (a) Paralysis can happen but advocacy and allies are healing, (b) Trauma changes the work, and (c) The power of macro and microaggressions on identity and community.

## Keywords

Sikh, racism, gender, trauma, reflection

I was born and raised in New York and had just returned from my predoctoral psychology internship at the University of California, Berkeley in early September 2001. I was on my way to New York University (NYU) in downtown Manhattan on the morning of September 11 to meet with my dissertation advisor. The day opened as a beautiful, sunny day in New York. I was at my parents' home in the suburbs and decided to drive in to Newark, New Jersey with my father, and then take the PATH train in to New York City (NYC), with a stopover at the shops at the World Trade Center (WTC); it was a rather convoluted way to travel to NYU but I thought that the beautiful day and my return to NYC warranted a bit of meandering. As we sat in my father's office, we looked out the window to see a cloud of smoke coming out of the WTC towers. I am sure only seconds went by as we stopped and stared but it seemed an eternity. Someone ran in to tell us that the towers were hit by a plane. My stomach dropped. Someone did this intentionally. My mind never went to "Oh, this must have been an accident." That was the moment I first held my breath with fear of the thought that whoever did this came from people who wore turbans, people who were brown, and people who looked like my people. It was only a fleeting thought before my concern shifted back to my city, my friends, and my family.

At my father's office, we went to our only source of information at the time, the Internet. As soon as we knew the towers were down, I persistently tried to call my family and friends, but it was hard to get through as the lines were jammed. A sense of disconnection began to settle into me that did not move away for many months and has still not completely lifted. As hours passed, news sources kept replaying the towers falling and all I heard was "Terrorists . . ." As the days and weeks unfolded, New Yorkers were all in mourning for

our city that we knew would never be the same. New York City bridge and tunnel crossings were shut down for days, and I was an outsider looking in, grieving for my city.

Media reports kept talking about how this country and, in particular, how New York was coming together in unity. "United we stand." That was not my experience. I felt as if there was small print after this catchy slogan that said "except for people who 'look' Arab or Muslim." On 9/11, the backlash immediately began and the previous suspicion, hatred, and intolerance that was present just under the surface resurfaced in ways that could have never been imagined.

Discrimination against Sikhs due to their race, religion, and/or country of origin is similar to that which plagued Muslims after 9/11 (Abu-Ras & Suarez, 2009). Sikhs' experiences can be understood through the race-based traumatic stress injury model (Carter, 2007). In this model, racial harassment is defined as hostile racism that communicates to targets their inferior status, racial discrimination as avoidant racism that helps keep dominant and target groups separate, and discriminatory harassment as aversive hostile racism "intended to create distance among racial group members after a person of color has gained entry into an environment from which he or she was once excluded" (p. 79). This harassment and discrimination "can produce harm or injury when they have memorable impact or lasting effect or through cumulative or

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chronic exposure . . .” (p. 88). Importantly, both debilitating (e.g., avoidant) and life-enhancing (e.g., proactive) responses to race-based traumatic stress injury are seen as contextually reasonable and nonpathological.

I am an upper-middle class, Asian (Indian) American, Sikh woman. Sikhism, which emerged in the 15th century in Punjab, India, is the fifth largest organized religion in the world (Leifker, 2006). There are approximately 25 million Sikhs worldwide (Singh, 2003) and approximately 500,000 Sikhs in the United States (Sikh Coalition, n.d.). The term Sikh means “disciples,” “learners” (Chilana, 2005, p. 108), or seekers of truth. The founder of the religion, Guru Nanak, preached the unity of humankind and fought against oppression (Singh, 1998). Sikh men and women are required to wear the “five Ks” (symbols) which include *kes* (uncut hair), *kanga* (a small comb to keep the hair tidy), *kachhehara* (underwear or riding breeches), *kara* (a steel bracelet), and the *kirpan* (a small sword; Singh, 2004). Men cover their head with turbans and although some women wear turbans, most either do not cover their head or use a *chuni* (headscarf). Among Sikhs, turbans are not only a matter of pride (Chilana, 2005) but also very private and not to be removed by anyone else other than the wearer (Ahluwalia & Zaman, 2009).

Although I do not wear a turban, all the men in my family do. I was a child through the 70s and 80s, when there was a strong anti-Arab/anti-Muslim sentiment during the regime of Ayatollah Khomeini in Iran. In the predominantly White suburbs where I was raised, I saw myself as an American girl and kept the Indian and Sikh cultural aspects of my identity hidden from those around me. Still, due to my appearance, I was subjected to insults, being afraid for myself and my family. I was treated like the perpetual foreigner, despite being born in the United States. In the schools, by all outward appearances, I was the model Asian student who was academically successful, well behaved, and excelled at playing the violin. Even when I engaged in behaviors that would get other students in trouble (e.g., skipping school), the assumption by school administrators was that I had a justifiable reason for doing what I did.

In the 90s, I was living in NYC when there was a rapidly increasing popularity of “exotic” Indian objects (e.g., clothes, jewelry) and activities (e.g., yoga, bhangra, Indian restaurants). Being a light-skinned Indian woman in NYC, I was exoticized and I rarely had reason to think of my religion, ethnicity, or race in relation to my own safety. Below the surface, however, I was always aware of a simmering suspicion and distrust of difference. That suspicion flared up during the first WTC bombing in 1993 and the initial assumption that an Arab committed the Oklahoma City Bombing in 1995. An anti-Islamic sentiment rose, the word terrorist was used again, and the hate began. I knew what had happened then and thought I knew what was to come.

Although it was going to be hard for me to deal with the backlash, it was also clearly apparent that the everyday experience for the Sikh men around me was going to change dramatically. On the evening of September 11, my dad and I

were trying to process the WTC attacks. We took a walk on the block my parents had lived on for 40 years and a young neighbor whose family we knew well yelled “Go back to your own country, you terrorists bombers” out the window of her home. With that seemingly innocuous incident, my family and Sikh community began to experience hostility and hatred that we had only experienced hints of in previous decades in the United States.

After 9/11, family members experienced racial harassment (e.g., racial slurs and threats) on an ongoing basis. My brothers routinely experience racial profiling at airports (see Goodstein, 2001 for a summary of one of their early experiences). My cousin was physically attacked on the streets of NYC. In addition to physical and verbal attacks, microaggressions (Sue, Capodilupo, et al., 2007), the “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of color” (p. 271), occurred multiple times daily—individually and systemically—at the market, at work, and in the street.

## After the September 11 Attacks in NYC

Since September 11, there has been a dramatic backlash against Sikhs with a sharp increase in and record high rates of discrimination, hate crimes, and religious profiling against Sikhs (Ahluwalia & Zaman, 2009; United Sikhs, n.d.). Though nearly a decade has passed, the United States continues to be inundated with images of terrorists as a stereotypical manifestation of Islam (i.e., media portrayal of Afghani Muslims with turbans and long beards). The media continues to display images of suspected terrorists—people with “Islamic-sounding” names, those who “appear” Muslim, and men who wear turbans (Ahluwalia & Pellettiere, 2010). Specifically, the images of Osama Bin Laden, an Arab, and Mohammed Omar, an Afghani, became associated in the American mainstream mind with Sikh men because of the visual image of a turban (a Sikh article of faith) and beard (Goodstein & Lewin, 2001; Joshi, 2006). Because of these images in the United States, Sikh men are misidentified as Muslim and *therefore* equated with terrorists (Ahluwalia & Zaman, 2009). This racial harassment has an underlying assumption that an individual who is visibly similar to those identified as terrorists by the dominant culture is “a criminal or is dangerous” (Carter, 2007, p. 78). It is important to note that although the media’s portrayal of terrorists are not of Sikhs, 99% of men who wear turbans in the United States are Sikhs (Singh, 2001). Among South Asians, Sikhs in the United States experienced the greatest incidence in hate crimes and discrimination after 9/11, with 64% of Sikhs reporting that they feel afraid for their physical safety (Rajghatta, 2006).

My Sikh brothers and sisters were under attack. Although, in some ways, the attack on them/us was for no other reason than for maintaining articles of faith, what it really was about

was being visibly different from the dominant American culture. I felt the country turn against my people and against me. I never saw that coming.

## Lessons I Have Learned

I have professionally and personally learned so much from these experiences, but these lessons were slow to come to me and I believe are continuing to unfold. As I will discuss in this section, I learned that fighting injustice is not always a swift and decisive act, or even a series of acts, and that both action and inaction are reasonable responses to race-based traumatic stress.

### *Lesson 1: Paralysis Can Happen but Advocacy and Allies Are Healing*

I learned that trauma can paralyze a researcher when they are also a member of the community that is being traumatized. Why was I not documenting and studying what was happening to Sikhs? I saw the need clearly but I was doing nothing. I felt powerless. I felt isolated and not initially recognizing it, I withdrew further from the Sikh community. There are probably many things that can interrupt the paralysis that occurs in within-community research, but for me, finally reaching out to the community helped.

I felt a range of emotions as I heard about and witnessed these aggressions and microaggressions and had so many thoughts rush through my head. The media portrayals of my community, and other minority communities, contributed to my internal processes. I had fear that the attacks would happen again (the city was color coded by danger levels) and, as a result of racial discrimination, that something would happen to my family and community; I was powerless to prevent either and for the first time in my memory, I was paralyzed. I had trouble working on my dissertation, which was a qualitative study of the experiences of Indian American women. I felt disconnected from my work and from those around me. I was alternately disappointed and angered at myself, the terrorists, people around me, my president, and my country. What I perceived to be my bubble of socioeconomic and educational/ivory tower privilege had burst. Though I didn't characterize them in this way at the time, the range of feelings (e.g., powerlessness, anger, and distrust) I experienced *were* a reasonable and nonpathological response to the racial harassment (Carter, 2007) that my community was enduring. My status as a model minority or an "exotic" woman shifted to one of being the foreign, dangerous other. Though the former and latter labels are both problematic, the former did not draw attention to me (i.e., invisibility) while the latter led to a sense of hostile vigilance from those around me. I had learned to cope with the first while I was completely unprepared for the shift to the latter.

Eventually, I completed my doctoral studies and was hired as an academic a year later. At that time, it was easier for me to work on behalf of other communities rather than

my own. As a Sikh committed to *seva* (service), I have always tried to get involved in a time of need including in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina and the Virginia Tech shooting. I spoke readily and with ease about the incidents and oppression that occurred. So, why the paralysis? Why couldn't I mobilize for my communities (e.g., NYC, Sikh) when I could and did for others? In hindsight, the inability to act is understandable. Sikh advocacy organizations, including United Sikhs, Sikh Coalition, and SALDEF, were fighting for civil rights. I slowly began to reengage in the Sikh community, volunteering with gurdwaras (Sikh places of worship) and the Sikh advocacy organizations. I judged speech competitions with Sikh youth and spoke at a symposium for International Human Rights Day at the Church Center for the United Nations. I consulted with Sikh individuals and the advocacy organizations on issues related to hate crimes, psychological injury resulting from racism, and discriminatory policies in schools and workplaces.

It takes time to heal before one can act on behalf of oneself or one's community. Empowerment and advocacy have to be engaged at all levels of intervention—individual, community, and public arena (Toporek, Lewis, & Crethar, 2009). After 9/11, I learned the importance of allies—communities, colleagues, and friends—that would not only help me individually but also advocate for systemic change.

Since 2002, I have taught at Montclair University and teach the multicultural counseling course as a part of my regular courseload. My colleague, a Chinese American adoptee who also teaches this class, and I have collaborated on educating our students about the negative repercussions of discrimination against visible racial and ethnic minorities. Her insistence validated the importance of this topic beyond "my people." Together and separately, we educated our students about experiences of Sikhs. This has taken some of the burden off me to educate others.

My non-Sikh friends are now involved in advocacy efforts in the Sikh community. Although I sent one or two e-mails to let them know about the backlash against the community, a number of them decided that what was happening (e.g., profiling, hate crimes) was a violation of civil rights and intolerable. In fact, I didn't know about any of this until one day I was sharing a recent incident with my mentor and friend. She told me she had heard about the incident and signed a petition about it. I was astonished that I did not have to explain to my friends why all this was important, which "normalized" my experience.

During Japanese American internment, in an attempt to protect themselves from discrimination, many Chinese Americans tried to separate themselves (e.g., wearing buttons that clearly stated "I am not Japanese"). It was important to the Sikh community that Sikhs (who were targeted because they "looked" Muslim) did not say "I am not Muslim" because the implication would be "Don't hate me, hate them." Though there is a history of Moghul rulers' oppression of Sikhs and Hindus in India, Sikhs and Muslims share a common regional identity (i.e., many trace roots back to Punjab and speak Punjabi) and



lived as friends and neighbors side by side. In 1947, however, with the independence of India, and its partition into what is now India and Pakistan, there was a mass exodus whereby Sikhs and Hindus fled what is now Pakistan to go to secular India, while many Muslims left India for the Islamic state of Pakistan. There was much bloodshed among the Hindu, Sikh, and Muslim communities, with a million people killed by the end of the period of violence. So to some degree, after 9/11, communities with histories of tenuous alliances began anew and engaged in social cohesion (Carter, 2007, p. 77) in part as a result of the shared experience of racial discrimination. The Sikh community in the United States allied themselves with the Muslim community and vice versa.

I recall vividly when shortly after 9/11, Norman Mineta, the U.S. Transportation Secretary under George Bush, was clear that even when politicians were calling for unchecked roundup of all Arab and Muslim U.S. residents and citizens, we could not do that again as a nation. He discussed his own traumatic experience of the internment camp as a Japanese American:

Some say the internment was for our own protection . . . But even as a boy of 10, I could see that the machine guns and the barbed wire faced inward . . . Yes, it was a time of great national stress. But moral principles and rules of law are easy to uphold in placid times. But do these principles stand up in times of great difficulty and stress? . . . Sadly, we as a nation failed that test in 1942. (Answers.com, n.d.)

Mineta also tried to stop U.S. airlines from practicing racial profiling and subjecting certain groups of passengers to a heightened degree of scrutiny. He said that it was illegal for the airlines to discriminate against passengers based on their race, color, national or ethnic origin, or religion. For me, it was powerful and moving to have a non-Sikh ally at the national level. It provided psychological, if not physical, safety.

### *Lesson 2: Trauma Changes the Work*

I learned that when studying trauma, it is important to watch for the danger of retraumatization through participants' retelling of their story. The process of telling can lead to feelings of greater vulnerability (e.g., physically, emotionally).

My dissertation research, *The selfways of Indian American women* (Ahluwalia, 2002), was interrupted by September 11. The participants were from diverse religious backgrounds and so my biggest concern became confidentiality. The Indian community in NYC is small and the participants shared their stories of family, friends, and self that they may not have shared with anyone else. Post-9/11, I wanted to do what I could to protect them and their identities; if they were identifiable, they were vulnerable. Because of this, I made sure they had the opportunity to see my research descriptions of them and to edit them as they saw best.

Obtaining feedback from ten participants on qualitative findings was a several-month-long process. This process was disrupted midway by the attacks on the WTC on 9/11, which affected a number of participants directly and all others vicariously. There was some reluctance on the part of participants to read the stories they originally told and I think they would have been more willing if the terrorist attacks never happened. Rereading their stories immersed them (and identified them) in a community that was experiencing a backlash of bias attacks in the United States. Some participants were also critical of components of their culture, which may have felt inappropriate considering the constant negative press from outside the community. Others were critical of the United States, which may have felt dangerous considering the backlash against their community.

Changes arose after participants saw their "stories" in written form. There was a fear of being identified or making family and friends too identifiable, discomfort with the amount of information disclosed to me, and not liking what was written about them or how they were portrayed. Some of this, they readily admitted, was related to being Indian in the United States at a volatile time. As a member of the community I was studying, I could identify with many of their concerns and understood their reluctance wholeheartedly. One participant explained her experience of being Muslim in the United States shortly after 9/11.

Muslims are increasingly pegged as un-American . . . [and] increasingly Islam is viewed as antithetical to the United States and to democracy and to women's equality. When the World Trade Center or is it the Morrow Building in Oklahoma City? I think it was in Oklahoma City. I think that's when . . . my first year or second year in law school and I remember thinking Korematsu is a case . . . That was where the Supreme Court said that the Internment of Japanese was perfectly legal and was useful for national security. And I remember thinking that could so easily happen, so easily, and here I am, like one of the best educated. I have access to the most powerful corridors. You know, I know some of the most important people in the city . . . and I feel like at any point things can deteriorate to the level where Muslims are all suspect . . . [With] the new terrorism legislation . . . there are so many civil rights and civil liberties that are being chipped away in the name of national security . . . It makes me nervous . . . (Ahluwalia, 2002, pp. 258-259)

The anxiety, suspicion, and distrust that these women felt were common emotional responses to racial discrimination and harassment (Carter, 2007, pp. 77-78). As the weeks and months passed after 9/11, the realization emerged that this nervousness was not unfounded. Many of these participants explained that their families were very important to them and this was partly why obtaining feedback was so difficult a process. Some participants did not want their write-up to reflect

negatively on their family or their relationship with their family, many were concerned about confidentiality and protecting their family's privacy. For the one Muslim participant, her family's ability to stay anonymous through this process was essential. After many conversations and e-mails, she decided she felt that her story made her identity too "transparent" and asked for her full portrait not to be included in the study, though she allowed the use of her interview. Two other participants made extensive changes to the stories to conceal identifying information (e.g., places, events); some of this information was eventually cut, including important tales to tell (e.g., the family's experience of Indian independence or immigration to the United States). Honoring the participants' need to protect their family's identity, however, was a greater concern to them and to me than telling the story for the purposes of research. From my perspective, the suspicion on their (and my) part was justified and reasonable in light of the race-related trauma our communities were experiencing.

### *Lesson 3: The Power of Aggression and Microaggressions on Identity and Communities*

Sikhs in the United States, like myself, felt American. Most of us are children of immigrants (or immigrants themselves) and had a sense of pride in our national origin (or adopted country). As someone who is U.S. born, this American identity was once invisible to me. The basic level of "Americanness" was taken away on 9/11.

Individuals from the dominant culture who are unfamiliar with the lived experience of people of color in the United States have suggested that I should emphasize my Americanness and play down other aspects of my identity that indicate difference. In doing so, however, the psychological risk would be too great. I am not willing to emphasize my Americanness at the expense of my Indian and Sikh identity. In addition, I will never be seen as only American or even American enough by White Americans, and so to maintain my selfhood, I must keep at my core the complex intersections of my identity. There is sometimes suggestion that I should define the connection I have to the United States and honor my sense of belonging in this country, but that suggestion, one that is often made to people of color, is not ever made to White Americans. As an Indian American Sikh woman, I am constantly reminded that I do not have the (White) privilege to be American just because I was born and live here.

There have been a number of documented hate crimes and cases of discrimination against Sikhs. However, I also see the impact of the daily microaggressions (Sue, Bucci, Lin, Nadal, & Torino, 2007), such as "airport security personnel screening passengers of color with greater frequency and care" (p. 73), a clear example of discriminatory harassment (Carter, 2007, pp. 79-81). I see the anger and helplessness that my sister-in-law felt when her young son, age 9, was at

the airport and the screeners said that they had to check his *patka* (headcovering). On a recent trip to a family gathering, they made my nephew touch his *patka* and then tested his hands for explosives. This young boy had seen his father go through extra screening consistently and now he is under suspicion as well. As my sister-in-law said to me, "It is illogical, offensive, delusional, and unfair. It is pretty clear that testing the hands of innocent young children is not what is going to make this country safe" (Harsohena Kaur, personal communication, December 22, 2009.)

Another impact on identity is the impact on religious identity (Ahluwalia & Pelletiere, 2010). Sikh men and boys have the most visible markers of their religion (i.e., turban and beards) and some Sikhs felt the oppression was too much to bear, which increased levels of stress and distress in the community. In response to the racial harassment, some Sikhs cut their hair and removed their turbans. In fact, in the immediate wake of 9/11, many Sikh men around the country temporarily or permanently removed their turbans, even though the act itself was emotionally and spiritually painful. Some kept their own hair and cut their children's, wanting to protect them from the oppression they were experiencing. Each act, however, was a step that affected their identity. I recall some Sikh men saying they had trouble recognizing themselves and what they stood for after cutting their hair and removing their turban.

Over the past few years, I have shifted my primary research focus to studying issues that face the Sikh community. It is both my honor and obligation. Hate crimes toward my community continue, with little attention from mainstream psychology about its impact on individuals from this community. A few years ago, I conducted a study on Sikh men's post-9/11 experiences (see Ahluwalia & Pelletiere, 2010) and am beginning a study on Sikh children. In the NYC public schools, discrimination has become routine and that is intolerable for what should be a safe space for all children. When one issue seems to be resolved, another issue flares up. Interestingly, while my community encounters challenges cyclically, I am coming full circle from my academic beginning as an undergraduate and graduate student at NYU and have now returned to NYU on sabbatical to engage in this research.

### **Conclusion**

As I reflect back at the lessons I have learned, I hope that others can use my experiences as a catalyst for agency, advocacy, and healing. There is a very real impact of traumatic events and resulting race-related traumatic stress on individuals, families, and communities as well as the work we do as professionals. I learned I cannot do this work alone, and advocates and allies at all levels, both within and outside the community, become essential.

My desire to help others understand my experience and my community's experience wears away over time as bias continues. As I work on this article, the 9th anniversary of 9/11 has passed. There is a strong anti-Muslim sentiment

related to plans for building a mosque in lower Manhattan; two out of three Sikh students who wear turbans in NYC public schools experience harassment or bullying because of their religious identity (Sikh Coalition, n.d.). At the same time, there is hope; there is more understanding among individuals around me, there are interfaith events organized by different churches, temples, and other places of worship that cut across communities and promote tolerance and respect, and a new New York State law was passed “to address and prevent bias-based harassment and bullying in K-12 schools statewide” (Sikh Coalition, n.d.).

There are still times I find myself holding my breath, but I remind myself to exhale. I am tired but want to continue fighting the good fight. As a response to race-based traumatic stress, telling my story has helped me to gain some clarity and heal. Although I hoped that I would have come to some resolution about the traumatic event of 9/11 and its aftermath, at the point of writing this, it has become clear to me that my life’s work is the *search* for that resolution for me, my family, and my community.

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