

PGTPL COVID-19 Pandemic Oral History Transcript

Interviewee: Shariq Siddiqui

Interviewer: Jeannine Spurgin

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Abstract: Shariq Siddiqui is a Muslim-American resident of Plainfield, Indiana, who is an assistant professor at IUPUI. He tells us about how he and his family dealt with the pandemic, notably considering that two of them are in the high risk group for getting infected. He also tells us about the Muslim-American community's response to the pandemic, as well as gives us some insight into how the pandemic affected people of color.

JS: This is Jeannine Spurgin, and today is January 28, 2021. I'm speaking with Shariq Siddiqui, who is a Plainfield resident; he is an assistant professor, and we're going to talk to him about his experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. Hello, Shariq. When you first heard about the virus, way back when it started, what were your thoughts about it?

SS: So, I didn't take it as seriously as other people. I thought this is something happening in another part of the world and it won't affect us. And, in fact, the day the pandemic was announced and things started closing down, I was actually in Chicago for a weeklong series of lectures. I was social distancing while I was in Chicago, I had a facemask, and I was staying in my hotel, just going to my lecture and coming back. I arrived there on Friday, and Monday, the governor of Illinois said that he was closing down restaurants, and at that point, I knew I couldn't eat, so I just took the flight home on Monday. I've been home since then.

JS: Was that in March, then?

SS: It was in March, yes.

JS: Have you changed your opinion of the seriousness?

SS: I quickly realized how serious it was once I came home, and I think I started hearing more, and sort of tuning in. And since then, I basically have tried to stay home as much as possible. I go out only when I have to, just because I think it has been pretty dramatic in terms of how it's impacted our country, and the world actually.

JS: What issues concerned you most about the virus?

SS: I think the first thing is that I was just worried that someone in my family or I would get sick. A few of us have additional causes, like I have some healthcare issues that could be exacerbated. So, I think that was the primary concern. So, you start out with just thinking about people getting sick. I think the second piece was how this was going to impact employment, right, because my family relies on me to provide for them, and I was worried about that. And then, I guess the third piece of it was, I was worried about my children's education. They're in

different places at different times. And once I thought about that, I was thinking about everybody else around me. I'm privileged, I'm at the University, so we're a little better off in terms of mitigating the challenges of COVID. But there are people that can't. I can teach online, but a lot of people have to go into work, and I just worried about people around me. So, I think that, and then ultimately, I just was worried about how politicized it eventually became, and sadly, that made it worse. So, you know, all of that. And then I have family all over the world from Pakistan, to England, to Australia, and it's been isolating and stressful thinking about all that.

JS: Has the pandemic affected your job at all, at this point?

SS: Luckily, I haven't been unemployed; I'm an assistant professor, and I continue to teach. My research projects are going well. So, I think from that point of view, it hasn't impacted me in the sense that, at least for the given future, provided I do my job, I'm going to have a job. So, I'm lucky in that regard. I think the one thing that we know is that...we're more privileged than most people...but we've been told that we're not going to be getting raises for the foreseeable future. But I think at the same time, costs continue to go up, so in that sense, you're taking a step back. But I think, from that perspective, I'm still in a good place. I can teach online, I teach on Zoom, and I teach asynchronous, all that. So, from that perspective it's going well. My research has been impacted because a lot of my research is qualitative, I actually do things similar to what you're doing, which is talk to people, interview them. And some of my projects are sustained periods, so just being sustained periods of time where the only contact these people that we are studying are only seeing me by phone or by Zoom, it doesn't create the same level of connections that ethnographic research is strong in. So, there are some challenges with that, as well.

JS: Has the pandemic affected the employment of anyone you know?

SS: I don't think anybody has had good experience in terms of...many of the people I know, they have been able to sustain what they're doing. But I know quite a few people who are business owners, or who are in jobs that require going in, and those jobs have resulted in furloughs; some of my friends' business is down to zero, so they're living on savings; another person I know basically spent all of the year not earning anything at all. My brother, for example, his income went to zero, and he basically has racked up debt, once they went through their savings. And then I've seen people who had to do voluntary pay cuts. There have been others. Luckily not me, but a lot of people around me are in that boat.

JS: How has COVID-19 affected you and your family's day-to-day activities?

SS: I think, in the beginning, it was where we were all isolated. So, we were doing e-learning just like everybody else. This year, it's been, from my perspective...I work from home. So, I get up, I go to my computer, and I work all day. One personal impact that has happened is that there was a time when I used to go to work - I'd go to the university, and then I would come back. And then the other times were kind of recognized as being personal time, but now I could be working starting as early as seven, and then going on until ten, eleven, or even midnight. I tend to be, while I'm at home, just because I think there's expectations that you're doing all this stuff, and there's an anxiety, that you just want to make sure that you perform more so you're seen as valuable. So, those boundaries have gone from my personal time. That's one piece. I

think for my oldest daughter, last year, she finished law school, so she couldn't go to her law school graduation. But then, beyond that, she was in the last few months of an internship in Washington, D.C., in immigration law, and basically, her landlord told her she had to leave because they wanted to give that space to some relative of theirs who was losing their place. So, she had to come back home and finish that up, and that's been a different experience for her. And she's been studying for the bar exam, which has been really difficult during this period of time, because the bar exam format has changed from written and so on; so, she's been navigating those issues. My son was in his second semester at DePauw, and he was all excited to have left home, right? Freedom! And then in March, he comes straight back, and he's been living at home since then. So, his entire sophomore year has been at home. So, that's been tough on him. And then, I have a senior and a middle-schooler. And in their case, they did e-learning. We were very nervous about sending them back, but the problem was that within the school system, they're both in advanced courses, so they had a choice between just giving up advanced courses and then being able to do e-learning, or do advanced courses and show up to class. So, it was really tough. We sent them to school. In essence, our schedule is, we get up, they go to school, my wife goes to work, and then they come back and we're all at home. We don't go anywhere. So, we're spending a lot more time with each other. I think that's probably joyful for the parents and not so joyful for the kids, right?

JS: I haven't had any kids that I've spoken to have any negative things to say about that, surprisingly!

SS: That's good. Wait until you talk to mine! We adopted a Siberian husky, and I think, because of COVID, we could spend a lot more time with her. But then, in addition to that, I added vegetable beds to my house; I had three and I added three more, so we did a lot of vegetable gardening. We built a patio in the back with the help of my sons. So we did a lot of outdoor work. We planted trees, and all that. And another thing is, we got to check out a lot of Hendricks County's trails that we hadn't seen before. We went out there, went to the trails, went to different parks...you know, state parks and county parks. We would routinely take our puppy, so it was really nice in the spring, summer and fall. We're cooped up in the winter; I think winter is tougher than it was. Spring will be nice again.

JS: Has the outbreak affected how you associate and communicate...you have a large network of friends and family...has it affected how you communicate with them?

SS: Yeah, it has. In the beginning, there was this really conscious effort that we need to stay in contact. There is a poetry group in Hendricks County that me and a few friends, we used to come together, and we would host them in our basement. So, what we started doing was, we created a Whatsapp group so we could stay connected. So that was one. And then, I organized a few Zoom calls where everybody connected, and we did poetry readings. And then, for example, every four years for the past 20-30 years, we've had an election night party, where we have friends over, and we watch the election returns. My kids have posters they draw, and we have our own election center that we do. So, this year we did that all on Zoom. So there's that. With family, we have Whatsapp groups, we have Zoom calls. We've tried to do that, but I think, over time, especially in the fall, when people got really, really busy...I think the spring, there was hope that this would at some point end in the summer, and then during the summer, that hope evaporated. And by fall, the feeling I got was that everyone had entered into survival mode, and so all those innovations went by the wayside. So, now we talk on the phone

every now and then, we'll text each other. But by and large, I would say, on the personal side, I'm totally isolated, you know, in terms of friends. I talk to my family routinely. I have a sister in Australia, a sister in England, parents in England, brother in Dubai, a brother in Japan, who's now moved to England. Those people, almost routinely, I'll talk to over the phone. But I used to do that beforehand, so that hasn't changed. In fact, the only difference is when I used to go to work every morning, the 30 minutes it takes me to get to IUPUI, I would call my parents in the morning, I would speak to them a half hour in the morning, and then I would speak to them on the drive back. That's become lesser and lesser so, because I don't have that dead time, all that time is filled with work.

JS: So, have you been able to carve out any personal time for yourself?

SS: Not as much as one would hope. I think, in the summer, more so, by doing these projects together, and so on. But really, these days, the day starts and you have a lot of work to do. Academics are focused on writing, and so we're trying to get a lot of writing done, and then that goes into the evening. We're watching more TV than I would probably like, so that seems to be the form of entertainment that has been predominant at this stage. I did buy a pizza oven. I've been cooking a lot for my kids. I make the pizza dough from scratch, and the sauce from scratch, so a lot of pizza-making, a lot of cooking. And the kids have loved that.

JS: You were mentioning how your emotions changed as this went on, how you were scared, and then hopeful, and then your hopes were dashed. How do you feel now about the fact that there's a vaccine out? Are you guys starting to see a light at the end of the tunnel?

SS: Yeah, honestly speaking, I think, one, the vaccine coming out was a big boost. And I'll be honest, the election change in the White House was the second piece. Because I wasn't sure what this would mean, the politicization of the vaccine, how that would go. I think one of the confusing pieces was it wasn't, at least I think it wasn't, taken very seriously at the top, and so with the new president and administration talking about this, taking it seriously, and some would argue too seriously, I feel better. I keep telling my kids that even though Indiana is facing these huge shortages of vaccines, not only us, everyone else in the world is. My parents are England; my dad got his first shot, but he doesn't know when he's going to get his second one. But, in my mind, I keep thinking, let's hope by the end of summer, we're all vaccinated, and then that's good. Now, from my perspective, that's fine, right, because I've already thought about my work for the spring and the summer, but for kids, that's eternity, right? And then, Zaki doesn't get to get vaccinated because he's under 16, so he's all bummed out, because his life won't change. I just feel bad because these kids, in my case...I'm 49, I'll be 50 this year...my life is very much about my family; I've had the opportunity to have childhood friends, I've had the high school friends, I've had the college friends. But for kids, their social life is so important, overly important, and this is extraordinarily difficult for them. And I think that in the scale of things, I mean there are people dying all over the world, right, and I get we're much more privileged than anybody else, but still, their lives are impacted, and you wonder what that's going to do. So, I'm hopeful, I just worry about...I think this pandemic is changing us worldwide and in this country, and what I worry about is, I don't know what this final piece will look like, economically, from higher ed. to public education to jobs. I'm glad that hopefully, we'll get the pandemic behind us; there are obviously mutant strains, and I'm praying that the scientists are going to be on top of it, and just like our flu vaccine, it gets updated and changed. I believe enough in the public will to do that. In the same way the information age came in the 90's, and just decimated our economy

in terms of manufacturing and so on, my worry is that this pandemic is about to decimate a whole different group of people. At some point, people will say, "You know what, we don't really need this many professors; we don't need to have these big universities with these research centers; we don't need libraries, we can get ebooks." I just worry that COVID has made life possible without people being physically at different places. And in a very market-driven economy, I worry what that means for us going forward. And I don't know the answer, I'm just nervous about it.

JS: How do you feel the Plainfield community, in general, has responded to the pandemic?

SS: I think our institutions have done somewhat better than other institutions. For example, the aquatic center has been very good and responsible. I think the library has. I think the school has, for the most part. Initially, I was worried about their decision to come back, but the numbers have borne them out. So, I give them a lot of credit. So, I think they surprised me, so in that regard, I think the institutions have done well. I think the people have not. I think, when I go grocery shopping, I see people there...I remember going to Menards to pick up something, and I see people arguing with the security people there about not wanting to wear masks. Even when you're walking outside, when you go to Hummel park, people aren't wearing masks. So, I think, people have not been very good. Like I was telling you, we would go out a lot on trails, but we were forced to keep finding trails that were more and more isolated because people didn't follow the rules. If everybody would follow the rules we could all make life...I think people have not been good in Plainfield, I would argue. A friend of mine moved from Seattle, Washington to Indiana in the fall. And he was in for a huge culture shock, because he felt that...he actually has gone back to Seattle because we're all online, and we can work from anywhere...but he felt that Plainfield was not a very civic-minded community as what he thought it would be. He said, "You guys aren't very civic-minded." I said, "What do you mean by that?" He said, "You guys don't seem to care about other people. In Seattle, people are voluntarily going in to get tested. Nobody is out there without masks. People are still going out on the trails, they're making life happen, but they're doing it in such a responsible way, with civic obligations to each other. He felt that in Indiana it doesn't seem that anybody cares about any obligations to anybody else. He was planning to settle here, and all that. But, I thought that was surprising. Because I was frustrated by what I saw, but I always thought Hoosiers were civic-minded people, right? At least that was his perspective, coming from Seattle. He felt safer there, and actually he went back there, because he has serious health issues, and he felt in danger here. So, he's in Seattle.

JS: That is very striking. You and your family are Muslim Americans. How do you think the Muslim American community has been handling this? Anything different than the general population?

SS: For Muslim Americans, there are two or three major crises that have occurred, and we've handled it in a mixed way. I think one is that the pandemic came about a month before Ramadan. March is when the pandemic hit, and in April is Ramadan, which is the holy month where we fast from sunup to sundown. But it's also the month where we are highly social - every night, we'll have congregational prayers at the mosque, where people gather and will go until late into the night. Ramadan is also the month where you have most Muslim nonprofit organizations raise most of their money for the year - so Muslims give most of their money during Ramadan. And it's usually done at these events, through these congregational prayers

and fundraising dinners. And so when this initially happened, there was this great deal of anxiety, and mosques have suffered as a result of that. People are creatures of habit, and they're not coming to mosque, so they're not giving, right? It doesn't mean they're not giving. These humanitarian organizations, food aid, all these organizations that are digitally active, and that's where you're used to giving to them, actually have raised more than they've ever raised before. So, I think, institutionally, there is this kind of segregation. There's that piece. The other piece of it is that I think there has been this uncertainty both at the federal level, but also at the state level, in terms of what it means to get together and exemption of religious places. The Indianapolis Muslim community actually created a task force that included scientists, people that worked at Lilly, public health officials, religious leaders and others, to come up with a...because we have to pray Friday in congregation. That group actually then basically started taking the lead. So, whereas I felt that state and federal governments weren't willing to take the bulk decisions about congregations and so on, this group did. But over time, the Muslim Hoosiers are no different than any other Hoosiers, right? So, now we are seeing more prayers in the mosque and so on. I think the other challenge that Muslims have faced is that they've been under attack and scrutiny for so long, and then when George Floyd's murder took place, I think that really hit home for many people. Because I think there's been a lot of collective trauma that the community is dealing with that they don't feel they can express because they don't have the traditional means of being in the congregation to connect and engage. So, it's been stressful in that regard. But, I've been really impressed that they created the Muslim Taskforce, and with its work in trying to sort of create connections between those that need with those that have, has been really impressive.

JS: What did you guys do? Did you gather? Or did you use Zoom? How did you gather when we were all locked down?

SS: We didn't. What most families started doing was, on Friday we'd do congregational prayers, though we took turns. So, I would take one day, Zaki would take one day, Safaa took one day. So, each one of us took a day every Friday, and we'd do congregational prayers until school started, because congregational prayers fall during the times they are at school. A lot of homes did congregational prayers at home, and so did we. And that happened across...you know when we had Eid al-Fitr, which is, you know, our Christmas, and Eid al-Adha, which is our other Christmas, same thing. We just did those events at home. So, people did not gather, they stayed apart. I do know that a few Muslim families that I talked to did some really interesting things, where they put chairs and tables ten feet apart in their backyards. People came and they were able to sort of be apart but wear masks and be outside, and so on. So, there were innovations that everyone did, but this was one of the toughest Ramadans. And this coming one is probably going to be the same because I don't think we'll be vaccinated by April.

JS: Have you known anybody that has gotten sick?

SS: Quite a few people. A few have died, sadly. The imam in Indianapolis, Imam Ahmed Alamine, who is very active, very socially engaged, was right in the heart of the Muslim Task Force, got sick and was in the hospital for a long time. Quite a few people within the broader community. And then, I do research on Muslim nonprofits and Muslim nonprofit leaders, and within that group, one of the people I'm studying, her husband passed away just last week. If you think about Muslims in America, they're only 1 percent of the population, but they represent five percent of the healthcare workers, right? So, doctors, nurses, etc. If you were to think

about places like New York, Michigan, Chicago, Muslims may be one to two percent, but eight to ten percent essential workers are Muslim. And we're such a small community. So, these people are getting sick in large numbers. Now, of course, a friend of mine got sick, his entire family got sick, and as a result, they no longer socially isolate. They're traveling, they're doing the stuff that they want to do. My sister-in-law got COVID, she's in Florida. She's a physician. So, a lot of these people are on the front lines. And the challenge is that some of these doctors are older, they're still practicing in their 60s or 70s, and many of them have succumbed and passed away as a result.

JS: Usually, it seems like when I ask most people if they've known anyone who has gotten sick, they mostly say, "Well, yeah, I know a couple, but they all got better." Your story is actually worse than anybody's.

SS: I think it's because of the demographics. I think if you were to speak to more people of color, and I'm not saying you haven't, but I think people of color have been disproportionately affected by this. And then in the Muslim community, it just so happens that my network is that group of people who are physicians, and all that. One of the groups I'm studying is the American Muslim health professionals. Another is the Islamic Medical Association - all groups of doctors and so on. But in Indianapolis, we've seen more COVID. One of our close friends who is on the south side of Indianapolis got COVID, and she was social isolating, and all that kind of stuff, right? She couldn't figure out how she got it. So, we've had people that have gotten sick and gotten better. We know people that got sick and are still dealing with it months later. And we have people who have died.

JS: Do you know anyone who has gotten it twice?

SS: No. I have not.

JS: What are your primary sources of news?

SS: I used to joke that I used to watch *The Daily Show*, that was the comedy show for news. (laughter) But, you know, I try to listen to CNN, and I listen to evening news, that's a very important piece. I stay away from Fox News and MSNBC, just because I feel they're skewed. We listen to ABC, CBS, and NBC nightly news, but stay away from those other channels. I get a lot of news through colleagues of mine that are sharing on social media, and that can be problematic because sometimes these sources are just...you don't know where they're coming from. I've kind of figured out that slant that *Washington Post*, *New York Times* and *Wall Street Journal* take, and so those are some other places, so much more traditional forms of news.

JS: Do you think that you're getting different information depending on your source of news?

SS: Absolutely.

JS: And do you think it affects how the community acts?

SS: Absolutely. I'll give you an example. I don't watch Fox News, but I try to go on there just to see how they're conveying...I want to know what everybody else around me is consuming, because I want to live in this society, right? So, I go to Fox News just to learn. And it's very

different. And I go to MSNBC, because I have friends that are on the far left, and I want to know what they're...because I think if I don't have those realities, it's hard for me to engage with them, and I want to engage with them. So, I can tell you the same news story on Fox News versus on MSNBC and CNN are totally different. And it's very sad how these alternate realities...and there is very little true or true journalism on television. NPR is probably the one place I feel...NPR is on all the time at our house. In fact, it's on too much. All day long, the radio is on, so that's probably the number one source, and it's very different than what you hear, even on CNN, which I listen to just because it's much better than Fox and NBC. But they still have an opinion, and it's still built to drive ratings.

JS: Knowing what you know now, what do you think individuals, communities, and governments need to keep in mind for the future? What is your biggest takeaway from this?

SS: I think that we have to figure out a way to find a bipartisan group of rational people that are willing to take the center of the conversation. And I think the idea is that public health is dependent on who's in government and what the political interest of theirs is to do this. And it's not about party. What we are suffering from is the industrial political partisan complex. There are political operatives on both sides of the aisle that make money through division and by sustaining these realities. And it's true for Democrats and Republicans. But I think what we really need is a group of people that are above this all, that can sort of be almost like the Fed. We need a Fed to handle healthcare emergencies or crises because our other institutions are not working, but the Fed has worked, for better or for worse. We have had a sustained period of economic growth, good or bad, and I can see the inequality that exists, but the Fed has worked and we need something like that. It's not a crazy idea, right? I lived all over the world before I came to the United States. In the world, when you talk to my parents, uncles, relatives and friends overseas, they'll say it doesn't matter who's in political power; it's the bureaucracy in America that decides policy. And we are suffering because of that. So, it's not an insane idea that policy over time has been shaped by bureaucrats, right?

JS: That is the end of my questions. This has been very informative and enlightening, and I really appreciate your participation in this.

SS: I would like to thank you for including the Muslim community. I appreciate you wanting to be inclusive. You know what's interesting? The Muslim community of Plainfield and Hendricks County, is kind of a unique, special community within greater Indianapolis. For example, if you think about in the last 10-15 years, 5-7 valedictorians have been Muslim. What's interesting is that in Carmel, you don't see that. There's been one valedictorian in Carmel, and there's more Muslims there. This community has created leaders. So, if you were to think about statewide and national organizations, many people have been from here. If you think about our kids, they're out there in interfaith activities, raising money, doing those activities. And a lot of people have asked, even in the Muslim community in other parts of town...one is they say that the Plainfield/Avon Muslim community is a very cohesive community, and I think that comes from because we are small; I think the second thing that comes out is that they're very civically engaged. I think the third is that we've had a few successes and that's allowed more success to take place. It's incredible, I mean, one family in Plainfield, their oldest son was valedictorian, their daughter, Sithra, was valedictorian, their third child, Salik, is either valedictorian or salutatorian this year. Of the top two kids, they're actually cousins. One is Rashad Saleem and the other is Salik. So, it's interesting. One has been Arab, one is Indian, one has been

Pakistani...I don't know what it is, but it's kind of cool.

JS: It really is! Thank you once again, and I will let you get on with your day, and I hope it's a good one.