Young Muslims and exclusion - experiences of ‘othering’

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Since 9/11 and the ‘war on terror’ we have seen an increase in terror attacks receiving high profile media attention in UK and Europe. In 2017 these have included attacks taking place in London on Westminster Bridge and London Bridge, and at Ariana Grande’s concert in Manchester. At the time of writing, the recent Barcelona attack is the most current example with media coverage ongoing. There is a strong sense of solidarity after such events that has seen people come together in often positive ways to respond, grieve and build community with each other. However, such events are also followed by increased levels of hate crime towards Muslim individuals and communities, and the aftermath of these events impacts on the everyday lives of young Muslims. In addition, both the fact that most major terrorist attacks take place in Muslim countries against Muslims, and the hate crime that is levelled against Muslim communities in the UK and elsewhere following terrorist events, go under-reported.

Research we completed in 2016 with 19 Muslim university students in London and Birmingham suggests they often feel exclusion most strongly after such events. The exclusionary experiences our participants faced took place on public transport, in the streets, at work, and at school and university. They included a combination of both subtle and direct experiences of exclusion; for example, from a London participant noticing that no-one would sit next to her on the tube to a Birmingham participant having a woman refuse to move her bag so she could sit down on the bus and directly accusing her of causing terrorism – both following the 2015 Paris attacks. The significance of ‘dressing Muslim’, particularly through wearing the hijab, emerged in the narratives of the young women we spoke to, with them often reporting to be perceived in ways that other them such as ‘foreigner’, ‘problematic’ and even as ‘extremist’.

Other scholars have suggested that Muslim young people and communities struggle with these ‘othering’ discourses which are communicated through media and policy as well as experienced in their everyday lives (see Ahmed, 2015; Jeldtoft, 2012; Khan, 2013). Khan (2013) refers to this process as ‘theyification’ which he argues is consolidated by policy, practice and even research. The examples from our research are explored in two articles we have submitted to other journals: ‘“I just love the Queen” Positioning in Young Muslim Discourse’ (Pihlaja and Thompson, forthcoming in Discourse, Context and Media) and ‘Temporary liberties and uncertain futures: perceptions of young Muslim women on life in Britain’ (Thompson and Pihlaja, under review). Here, we explore an example that has not been included in these other articles.

In the extract explored in detail below, Habiba (a pseudonym), an African Muslim of Somali heritage, explains her shock at being labelled a racist by another Black woman, and her feelings at being ‘othered’ by her because of her clothing. When asked during a focus group she was part of about a time that they were particularly aware of being Muslim, either at university or work, Habiba, a student who worked part-time in a large department store, recalls one such negative interaction with a customer:

Actually, I’ve just remembered something that happened to me at work. I feel like we keep saying white or English people. I have actually had a Black, I would say Jamaican somewhere from the Caribbean as she didn’t look African, a lady saying to me, I was giving out blotters, like those perfume cards and she seemed very busy with her child, so, and there was an Asian -- Pakistani lady with a headscarf and she asked for the blotter and so I passed it to her and I want to get rid of them because the more people I give the more chance they are to come back and buy. So, she, this Black lady saw me and she was like ‘Oh you racist, you this and that, you’re giving it to the Muslim lady but not to me’ and I am like ‘How did you work that one out? I am [Pakistani], you are Black? Like racist? Like really?’ So, it is quite interesting to see that even though I am Black and she is Black, she doesn’t see us as alike, she saw me as different, [a] Muslim and favouring a Muslim lady over her. If anything, I could identify more with her because we are Black, and I feel like I am Black, you know. Dunno, it was a very, very bizarre situation [laughter], I mean how do you work that one out, I have never been called a racist before.

Habiba’s appearance leads to an encounter where a customer appears to place her religious identity above her ethnicity. Habiba is a Black African woman who wears a hijab, but the customer perceives (and others) her as a ‘Muslim lady’ rather than a Black woman because, in the context, Habiba’s actions appear to favour another woman in a hijab. Habiba says, ‘even though I am Black and she is Black, she doesn’t see us as alike, she saw me as different, [a] Muslim and favouring a Muslim lady over her’. In her description of the two women, Habiba’s talk also shows how her own perceptions and positioning around ethnicity and appearance occur. Habiba describes the two other women in the interaction as ‘…a Black, I would say Jamaican somewhere from the Caribbean as she didn’t look African, a lady’ and ‘an Asian -- Pakistani lady with a headscarf’. In this situation, both Habiba and the customer are making judgments about others based on how they appear and which feature or features are most relevant to the interaction. Habiba also assumes that the customer has wrongly perceived her ethnicity to be ‘Pakistani’ using a derogatory term for such (that we have removed from the extract), significant given her aversion to being labelled a racist. The reasoning and judgement occurs in an ad hoc manner, one follows the logic of a negative storyline about Muslim identity, and has consequences for how the customer treats Habiba, who perceives Habiba as being a Muslim woman over being a Black woman.

Participants in the focus groups and interviews described their identity as Muslims being highlighted at inappropriate times and in ways that they did not feel were relevant. While others, like the customer in Habiba’s story, treated the hijab as a means of explaining the interaction, Habiba’s response highlights how ‘bizarre’ this feels for her. For Habiba, her hijab was not relevant because ‘I want to get rid of [the blotters] because the more people I give the more chance they are to come back and buy’. From her perspective, the situation cannot be the site of a racist action. She says, ‘If anything I could identify more with her because we are Black and I feel like I am Black you know’. Habiba’s response, where she voices what she seems to identify as a typical racist construction, asks the woman ‘how do you work that out?’, but by highlighting that the other customer in the situation was ‘wearing a headscarf’ and understanding that the Black woman saw her ‘as different, [a] Muslim’, Habiba does show how she is implicitly aware of the reasoning that led to the woman calling her a ‘racist’. The reasoning may be illogical, but not incomprehensible. Habiba shows that she understands what has occurred, despite being exasperated by the woman’s words and actions.

The encounter also shows how moral reasoning might occur based on little evidence. The woman who accuses Habiba of being ‘racist’ does so based apparently on Habiba’s hijab, and uses this evidence to make a judgement about her actions, based on one element of her appearance, which the customer treats as the dominant characteristic. This happens outside of Habiba’s control and she is ‘othered’ by the customer without being able to challenge it. The perception of her as a ‘racist’ also does not make the customer’s reasoning explicit — that Habiba was being perceived as a Muslim in exclusion to her own Black identity because of her decision to wear the hijab. The othering she experiences therefore restricts Habiba and places her in a storyline in which Muslims favour one another to the exclusion of others. The accusation limits Habiba’s possible responses and actions, without giving her the ability to challenge the reasoning in a meaningful way, although in recounting it in the focus group, she is able to position herself as rational and patient to the hearers of the story, both her peers and the researcher.

Experiences of ‘othering’ such as these led the young people in our research to question their freedom to choose how they dressed and practice their religion beyond university, particularly if they were considering public-facing careers. They also felt there was little representation of Islam they could relate to in public life. Beyond this, they felt apprehensive for their futures as Muslims in the UK and felt concern for their families. They wondered what life in Britain would be like for them going forward, based on the exclusionary experiences they face. The implications of this for policy and practice are a need to recognise how stigmatising discourses affect young Muslims, and how these are reinforced by current policy and practice interventions such as the Prevent Strategy. Instead, work needs to be done to challenge this exclusion and ‘othering’ of young Muslims.

References

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