

Research Space

Journal article

Dual identity, conflict, and education: An exploration of the lived experience of social relationships of young British Muslim women who attend British universities

Franz, A., Hunt, M. and Nigbur, D.

This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in Social Identities on 12th October 2020, available online: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13504630.2020.1828053>

Dual identity, conflict, and education: An exploration of the lived experience of social relationships of young British Muslim women who attend British universities

Abstract

Previous research concerned with British Muslim women has explored a range of important issues. However, what is missing is research exploring the lived everyday social experiences, including the unique nature of identity formation in British Muslims. This qualitative study tried to address this gap.

Five female British Muslims were interviewed, and their interviews analysed using an interpretative phenomenological approach. Three key themes emerged from the data: Constructing identity, Experiencing prejudice in interactions, and Educating oneself and others.

The findings demonstrate the complex nature of being a British Muslim woman, the impact of discrimination from various sources and the gendered nature of these experiences. It also highlights the active nature of identity formation, which occurs within and relates to a particular setting and particular experiences. Implications and future research are discussed.

Keywords: British Muslim women, minorities, lived identity, lived experience, dual identity, qualitative research

British Muslims are part of the 2.7 million Muslims living in the UK (Office for National Statistics [ONS], 2012). However, they also face unique challenges, for example around reconciling the values of their Muslim identity with those of the non-Muslim majority and their own British identity (Ali, 2013, European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia, 2005, Hopkins, 2011, Tarik, 2017).

The success of this is influenced by a range of factors. For example, anti-Muslim discrimination can lead to lower national identity, more negative attitudes towards non-Muslims, and more perceived identity incompatibility in British Muslims (Kunst et al., 2016, Meer & Modood, 2015) as well as psychological distress (Rippy & Newman, 2006). This kind of discrimination is commonly explained as a consequence of islamophobia, a kind of prejudice directed at Muslims by non-Muslims (e.g. Poynting & Mason, 2007). But the term is contested as an over-simplification with a lack of sensitivity to particular communities and settings (see Bonino, 2013; Halliday, 1999), whereas a more nuanced investigation of specific communities of Muslims within specific settings may be needed (Bonino, 2013). British Muslims seem like an important group in this respect, especially because there is some evidence that bicultural people in the UK may experience threats from both white British majority members and members of their ethnic minority group (Vadher & Barrett, 2009). This is difficult to explain in terms of islamophobia, but can be understood in terms of subjective group dynamics, where both ingroup and outgroup members are judged according to their adherence to group norms (Marques et al., 1998). How British Muslims manage and make sense of these threats and allegiances is thus a matter of considerable interest.

Visible signs of being Muslim exacerbate the likelihood of negative experiences in encounters along gendered lines (Allen, Isakjee, & Young, 2013; Awan & Zempi, 2016). For example, women are more likely to face discrimination if they wear the Hijab (Allen et al.,

2013, Ali, 2013) and men if they have a beard (Dwyer, Shah, & Sanghera., 2008).

There a clear gendered dimensions to this experience. For example, Muslim women's voices are argued to be silenced in academic research (Jawad & Benn, 2003) and the political sphere (Rashid, 2014), although this has been contested by Muslim women themselves (Rashid, 2014). Rashid (2014)'s study questions the common perception that Muslim women do not have a voice within their community.

Bhimji (2014) highlights that British Muslim women were actively involved in creating identity and negotiating between traditional Muslim and Western norms (Bhimji, 2009), in contrast with common public discourses of Muslim women, including British Muslim women, as either passive or unwilling to engage with British society (Ali, 2013). This is also in line with related research by Rockquemore & Brunsma (2004), who found that their biracial participants reported four different identities: Singular identity (exclusively Black or White), a border identity (exclusively bi-racial), a protean identity (sometimes Black, sometimes white, sometimes bi-racial) and transcendent identity (no racial identity). The authors argue that the "racial identity development relies on the social psychological process of validation, because identities are interactionally validated self-understandings" (p.93).

These studies highlight the need to investigate and more fully understand the role of subjective experience and meaning-making in British Muslim women's everyday lives, particularly the role of participants' social relationships in identity formation (Rockquemore & Brunsma, 2004).

Therefore, the aim of the present research was to use first-hand accounts from semi-structured interviews to explore how young British Muslim women in the UK negotiate social life, including the management of dual identity, interactions with Muslims and non-Muslims, and the role of educator within this. More generally, our research adds an

important social-psychological angle to the discussion of dual and synthesised identities among British Muslims (see Meer & Modood, 2015) and responds to Chirkov's (2009) call for more qualitative and experiential approaches to the psychology of culture and acculturation.

Universities seemed a meaningful setting because, aside from the easy availability of articulate participants from multicultural student populations, the homogeneity of the sample is important for IPA to ensure that the shared experience can emerge. The student population is expected to be similar in e.g. engagement with the majority culture as well as age. This group is also likely to experience more similar identity formation processes than would be the case in a more diverse sample. In addition, the first author's own positionality as a young female student is assumed to create common ground with participants.

Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009) is ideally placed to remedy the current under-representation of lived experiences in the social sphere in psychological research (Murphy, 2017) and give voice to participants whilst connecting with existing psychological knowledge (Larkin et al., 2006). Unlike discursive or grounded-theory approaches, IPA has a clear idiographic commitment reflected in its methods, which requires a detailed exploration of how individuals experience and make sense of the phenomenon under investigation. This matters because subjectivity is at the heart of our question about how young British Muslim women navigate their cultures in everyday life – essentially a question of lived identity. An individual level of analysis is essential to this endeavour to hear more of British Muslim women's voices in academic research (see Jawad & Benn, 2003).

IPA involves the collection of primary qualitative data about subjective lived experience (usually from one-to-one interviews) and subjects these data to a detailed qualitative analysis (Smith, 2009), allowing the cultivation of rich descriptions of individual

experience (Fade, 2004). In a process known as the double hermeneutic, the researcher tries to make sense of each participant making sense of their own experience, so that both researcher and participant are involved in exploring the meaning of the participant's perspective – the experiential significance of something that might be understood in non-experiential terms by alternative approaches (Smith, 2019). In our case, rather than trying to understand “Islam” or “islamophobia” at a systemic level of analysis, IPA allowed us to investigate how life as a young British Muslim woman is understood by people who live it. This process of shared meaning-making also applies to concepts such as Western and Muslim cultures. IPA allows for participants to use these concepts based on their own understandings and as part of the process of hermeneutic.

IPA has been used successfully in related studies. For example, Jaspal and Coyle (2010) used IPA in their social psychological study to explore the role of language in the formation of religious identity, and Rizwan and William (2015) used IPA to explore the experience of four Pakistani girls in primary school. What seems to be missing so far, is an exploration of the lived experience of the social relationships of British Women, a gap our study is aiming to fill.

Method

Participants

Participants for this study were five female students from the South-East region of England. See Table 1 for the demographic information of participants.

TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

The sample size, while small, is in line with other IPA studies, e.g. Rizwan and Williams (2015). IPA does not aim to generalise. Because of the aim of exploring a homogenous experience in depth, the sample size of IPA is often smaller than that of other qualitative approaches (e.g. Smith et al. 2009) and IPA has even been used to analyse the interview data of single participants (Eatough & Smith, 2006).

In addition, as discussed above, using a student sample allowed us to research within a more homogenous sample and, because of the shared 'student' identity of the main researcher and participants, to encourage strong rapport.

Design and Materials

The study employed semi-structured interviews. An interview guide was developed based on literature to allow for the exploration of everyday social experience, including the negotiation of Muslim, British and dual identity, the importance of Islam, and the experience of prejudice and discrimination. The interview questions, for example, asked participants about how being a British Muslim affected their sense of identity, what their experiences had been, and if they felt more or less connected to a certain part of their identity.

Procedure & analysis

Participants were recruited through Facebook advertisements. Interviews took place on university campuses or at the homes of interviewees.

Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim in anonymous form, and analysed following the principles of IPA (Smith et al., 2009). The transcripts were read multiple times and coded to identify emergent themes in participants' first-hand accounts of their lived experiences. In line with recommended IPA procedures and to serve the idiographic commitment of IPA, each case (here: interview) is analysed in detail before

moving on to the next case or attempting any cross-case analysis (Smith et al., 2009). As part of the double hermeneutic process described above, the researchers tried to make sense of each participant making sense of their own experience (Smith, 2019) with initial codes staying close to the participants' own words, and then being categorised according to interpretative connections between them, to form the superordinate themes presented here.

Results

The analysis resulted in three superordinate themes: Constructing identity, Experiencing prejudice in interactions, and Educating oneself and others. Many of the themes had clear gendered elements and referred to experiences with the Muslim community as well as non-Muslim people.

Constructing Identity

The British Muslim identity was often characterised by feelings of not fitting in but also feeling unique. Aware of their difference from most other Muslims and most other British people,

The young women discussed a sense of struggle to integrate both cultural identities and, occasionally, additional social identities such as gender or parents' nationalities. Social interactions with people around them created a feeling that they were caught in-between Muslim and non-Muslim cultures. involved feelings of isolation and lacking a sense of belonging within either group as Sumaiya describes below:

S: Right, okay. Some-sometimes I feel like I'm more ha- I'm too halal for haram people and too haram for halal people, meaning you know, I'm, I'm- I feel like I'm too much of a Muslim to be around non-Muslims and too much of a non-Muslim to be around a lot of

Lived relationships of young British Muslim women

Muslims. [...] I thought, 'Wait, I've really got to fix up because this isn't who I am I don't wanna be two people. I don't wanna be someone, a Muslim in front of my parents, and like, a non-Muslim when I'm with my friends'

Sumaiya describes a sense that she does not fit into either of the two cultures, a feeling of continuously being an outsider. Notably, the rigidity of group boundaries and the incompatibility of social expectations to which she feels exposed are evoked here in phrases such as "too halal for haram people and too haram for halal people", exposing a sense that she has to be two different people depending on who is with her -, something she consciously resists. This process is ongoing as she continues: "I haven't really found my middle ground", illustrating her continuous effort in creating her own unique social identity. For Sumaiya, this requires a conscious and active effort to find her own position, her own way of belonging to two divergent communities.

The sense of not belonging, or fitting in, is also picked up by other participants. For example, Hifza recounts:

H: There have been times actually where I've felt...I've been...in a very White British community and I haven't really felt like, I felt like everyone would look at me like I was different? However, I have been in a very Pakistani community and I feel like, this is gonna sound really bad (laughs) I feel like people look at me as if I was a White person? So where I'm not identifying as either side?

Hifza too describes a feeling of not being able to fit into either of two fairly polarised identities, being viewed in both settings as too much like the 'other'. Like Sumaiya, she cannot simply adopt one straightforward identity. She seems to make a connection between being White and British, which she distinguishes from a "very" Pakistani community. This

Lived relationships of young British Muslim women

confluence of ethnicity, nationality and religion can be found across participants, for example, when talking about non-Muslims when making links to their British identity.

Participants clearly describe a sense of isolation from the communities they should be a part of, creating the need to consciously ‘fix up’ and create your own identity to avoid the feeling of having to be two people.

One aspect to this experience was the disparity participants experienced between their own views and those of other Muslims about faith and culture.

A: they tell me answers that I don't agree with

[...] So like, they'll tell me the answers to religious questions culturally based so it won't necessarily be religious, it will mostly be Bengali thinking behind it

Amira describes how she resists her parents' answers to religious questions because she understands them as culturally biased. This illustrates how these young women evaluate information from close family members and interpret it in terms of religion, country of residence, and their family's country of origin, reflecting the complex nature of their own social identities and those of their families. Although Amira's parents were born in Britain, they were born to Bangladeshi parents, spent much of their lives in Bangladesh and maintained a Bangladeshi way of living in the UK. For Amira this poses problems in terms of relating to and accepting the knowledge imparted by her parents, which is difficult to blend with her experiences and ways of viewing the world (see Theme 3). This difference in cultural and religious thinking is one of the reasons why the participants view themselves as different. Their faith and cultural lives are different to those of Muslims adhering to Bangladeshi or Pakistani customs. This interconnection of culture, religion and national identity can be problematic and cause conflict within families and communities, as will be

Lived relationships of young British Muslim women

discussed in more depth in the second theme. However, it also requires an active engagement with these identities and an ability and willingness to find their own way of merging at least two worlds.

This is related to interactions with the wider British culture (including majority and minority groups), illustrating the flexible nature of identity in a particular setting. For example, Hifza discusses the difference between her direct family situation and that of her extended family, who live in a more a traditional Pakistani community.

H: growing up like, I did live in a very white area and we were kind of the only non-white people that lived in the area, the only ethnically originated people, like we looked different so, but that kind of, I'd say that was better because it forces you to integrate so like my family who live in a very enclosed Pakistani, Indian area like there's so much kind of racial segregation there or like for example in school the kids all band together in their own racial groups and that's never something I wanted. I think for me, I'm very much integrated whereas my cousin whose parents are both Pakistani, they're not, they're not so integrated, they're very much still living in a mini Pakistan

Making the connection between physical space and social identity, Hifza is very positive about growing up in an area where she had to integrate into British mainstream society and the impact that had on her and her experiences. She contrasts this to the experience of her cousins who are also British Muslims but live in a more segregated "mini Pakistan". Whilst she does not describe this as a bad thing directly, she is clear that she prefers to live in a multicultural area. Exposure to a local White British majority was experienced as a powerful incentive to engage with it.

Despite the problems experienced in trying to merge at least two different identities, participants also described a sense of pleasant uniqueness to their social identity as British

Lived relationships of young British Muslim women

Muslims.

Nafiah: being born here and being a Muslim is kind of like, you're different to say someone who was born here and was not a Muslim or was born like somewhere else and was Muslim, it kind of give, it gives a different identity. [...] It's kinda nice to be somewhere where you're the only person and you can kind of be unique and stand out, but that's only if I don't get anything negative thrown at me (laughs)

Nafiah describes how having a dual identity makes her feel unique, as long as she does not experience negativity because of it. The latter will be discussed in more depth in the second theme. There seems to be some sense here of 'being seen' by both Muslim and British culture because of the lack of strict adherence to either culture. This perhaps places British Muslims uniquely and allows them to create a distinct social identity within and between each group. As we will see in Theme 3, the latter theme of Education within their communities, it may be that their unique position enables them to effectively educate others.

Their position between different cultures and identities also allows participants to have a superior understanding of different perspectives and take up an important mediator role.

H: I feel like I kind of, identify to both sides and in that way you kind of... I don't know how to, you can see both sides too, you can see why British people for example won't like something or why Muslims get, yanno, segregate themselves and get scared so you can see that balance

For Hifza, the British Muslim identity allows her to empathise with both "British people" and "Muslims" (again, note the sharp distinction drawn between these identities) and "see that balance". This ability to understand both sides is important in exchanges with

Lived relationships of young British Muslim women

others, which will be further discussed in Theme 3.

One of the key sources of support for participants in making sense of their identity is their connection with other British Muslims. This is an important and positive aspect of their every-day lives.

N: err, I think the most positive thing is knowing other British Muslims, and like just having that kind of banter with them I mean there are certain jokes that we'll just get, there's certain things, certain... just certain thing that you will have a connection with them

Nafiah explains how her connection with other British Muslims gives her a social forum where she is supported and understood, giving her a sense of belonging, kinship, of sharing a unique and positive identity. The shared understanding within that group forms the basis for close friendships and creates an effective support system.

However, Parveen also discusses switching social identities depending on which friends or groups are around.

P: I feel like I can't associate myself with like being like just a Muslim or just British it's kind of like a mixture of both

I: – okay, erm and what about if you're like around non-Muslim friends versus like Muslim friends or your family, is there like a change if your identity?

P: a BIG change yea, I think like when I'm with my non-Muslim friends its more about like erm just the British culture we just like talk about things that aren't Muslim related, not like culture related, it's all different, but whereas when I'm with my Muslim friends yea, it's all like different, like some wants to go an pray, someone wants to go and do so and so, someone might wanna listen to music, someone might not wanna do that, and it's like you kind have to change, I mean you have the same values each time but you kinda like have to change how you go about them

Here Parveen directly addresses that while her personal identity never changes, her social identity and the way she embodies her personal values varies depending on whether she is around her Muslim or non-Muslim friends. In contrast to some of the sharp distinctions pointed out above, Parveen describes no inherent contradiction between her British and Muslim sides – her core values are just enacted differently around Muslims and non-Muslims.

In summary, this theme describes how the British Muslim actively engage in constructing and enacting their complex and unique social identities. They describe the challenges, but also the benefits of doing this. They find support in others who understand and share these challenges and benefits and discuss how other British Muslims make different decisions based on their particular settings and experiences. For the participants in this study, identity construction is certainly fluid and personal – an active everyday negotiation and reconciliation of at least two different social identities.

Experiencing prejudice in interaction

This theme is characterised by participants' experiences of negativity, stereotyping and prejudice from Muslims and non-Muslims. As Nafiah discussed above, being British Muslim offers a unique role, which can be special and positive. However, this uniqueness can also invite prejudice.

Unexpectedly, one of the main sources of prejudice that participants experienced came from other Muslims because of their reluctance to fully integrate into more traditional Muslim ways of life. Parveen discusses the issue of judgement and pressure she experiences from non-British Muslims:

Lived relationships of young British Muslim women

P: from a Muslim perspective, like only Muslims, people kinda view you as too Westernised, that's one bad thing [...], like you're too Westernised, you're too this, you're too like, erm, Western and stuff, I guess that's like one downside to it cause I feel like I should be able to dress however I want to, blah blah blah

This excerpt shows that, for Parveen, other Muslims judge her for being too “Westernised” and not Muslim enough. It also hints at the gendered nature of these criticisms, as Parveen explicitly mentions the way she dresses. Parveen does not wear the Hijab, which seems to reduce the negativity she encounters from non-Muslims, but increases the pressures she experiences from Muslims. This highlights how important visual markers are in the experience of belonging vs. prejudice. Other participants also experience negativity from Muslims suggesting that being ‘too White’ or ‘too Western’ are identity aspects to be negotiated carefully and continuously in their interactions with other Muslims.

Most participants also experienced prejudice from non-Muslims. These experiences are often verbal attacks. However, Sumaiya has also been a victim of a physical attack because of her Muslim heritage.

S: he grabs the, the top of my arms like that and I'm just like “What are you doing?” And then I had no choice but to kick him 'cause that's all I had free. And then, erm, he let go and I took my headphones off and I was like, I was like, ‘What's that all about?’ and he goes to me, ‘Oh go back home you fucking terrorist What the hell are you doing, beating us up?’ You know, ‘You should be with the ISIS’ and blah-de-blah-de-blah. And I was like, Wo-Wow. Yo-‘ I said, ‘You need help. Go home’

Sumaiya's use of ‘blah-de-blah-de –blah’ seems to trivialise this encounter and suggests that this is not a novel occurrence. However, it seems to have a clear psychological impact on her.

Lived relationships of young British Muslim women

S: I shouldn't expect any less, even though that's bad for me to expect, err, you know, but it's more so after these events that have happened that it's more of a big deal because people think, 'Oh, if that's happened over there, I wonder what the headscarf-, the girl in the headscarf is planning to do over here?' you know[...] it's annoying. It's very annoying. It gets upsetting sometimes purely because I just wanna be- I just wanna live my life, just do what I'm, what I do normally. But erm, that kinda, stops me sometimes

Sumaiya clearly describes expecting such interactions, seeing them as normal, and this has an impact on how she lives her life – it stops her sometimes. This extract shows how experiencing prejudice is part of everyday life and affects the choices and opportunities of people who experience it. It makes it more difficult for Sumaiya to do the things she wants and fully live the life she wants.

Although she doesn't expand, it is interpreted that by 'these events', Sumaiya is talking about terrorist incidents fuelling the discrimination she receives, leading to suspicions of others. Clearly, these recent events and the wider socio-cultural context impact on the lives of ordinary British Muslims and their ability to live out their identities in a positive and meaningful way. Other participants also report experiencing prejudice and abuse, especially after political events such as Brexit.

H: there's been, just after the Brexit vote actually, there were these little kids when I was just out one day who erm came and started shouting at me and telling me to go back to my country, which is fun (laughs) and then I was like, but I was born here (laughs) so like day to day they're not, that doesn't happen every day it's really rare, I mean my younger brothers have had it in school too but it's just school kids?

Hifza directly relates her experience of abuse to the EU referendum but belittles it as having been committed by 'just school kids'. This normalises and trivialises her experiences

Lived relationships of young British Muslim women

of prejudice. She also emphasises the rarity of these acts. Still, the clear link participants draw between societal events and their lived experience illustrates the effect of the current political context on British Muslims.

Participants seem to draw a clear link between visible markers of difference from the British mainstream, such as the hijab, and the experience of prejudice.

In the extract above, Sumaiya explicitly mentioned the visible marker of wearing the headscarf as one of the reasons for receiving abuse, showing how the choices people make about how to live an identity can have consequences for well-being. She explains further:

S: I think it's more, it's more my headscarf that [...] symbolises me as a Muslim, my headscarf. If I don't wear it you'd think I'm either Hindu or you wouldn't even think I'm Muslim sometimes 'cause there's some people that I've met who don't wear it and I don't know if they're Muslim or not 'cause, it not very- it doesn't- you don't have it on your forehead, do you?

[...] I definitely have had positive experiences as well being a British Muslim. I wouldn't change it. I would never change it to- for anything. Erm, I mean sometimes I do wish at the worst of times, 'oh you know what? I wish I was White. Things would be much much more easier.' But I can handle this. A lot of people couldn't hack what I have to go through. A lot of my friends don't wanna wear the headscarf because of the stuff they know I go through

For Sumaiya, the headscarf is a distinct but not straightforward symbol of her identity. It seems to signify a large part of her struggle as a British Muslim, personifying both the good and the bad. It is also a symbol of her personal strength, as well as her moments of weakness, when she feels that it would be easier to be 'White'. She does struggle with having to be strong, and not taking the 'easy' way out, again illustrating the profound effect the experience

Lived relationships of young British Muslim women

of prejudice has on the lives of those on the receiving end. Parveen, too, clearly links the hijab to experiencing prejudice, but as she does not wear the hijab, she attributes a lack of prejudice to this decision:

P: I think it's because I don't wear the Hijab, so I think that's the reason I don't get anything thrown at me

Parveen's choice to not wear the Hijab means she is able to avoid some of the abuse others encounter, however, as discussed above, this means that she is experiencing more prejudice from her own community.

In summary, prejudice against Muslims, while considered relatively rare by participants is reported quite frequently. It has a clear impact on their everyday life and their confidence in living their chosen identity. The participants report a direct link to political events and to visible markers of their identity and cultural background, illustrating the flexible nature of these experiences. Interestingly, participants also experienced frequent prejudice from the Muslim community, with several describing being pushed into the position of 'other' for being too Westernised.

Educating oneself and others

To negotiate their complex identities, the participants attributed a large role to education, both in terms of actively learning about Islam and in terms of engaging with non-Muslims in helping them understand the true nature of Islam. Both of these were empowering experiences for participants.

Trying to find their own identity also meant for participants having to find their own answers to religious questions. Here, being a practising Muslim required participants to

Lived relationships of young British Muslim women

acknowledge their need to continuously engage with and learn about Islam. Amira and Sumaiya explain:

A: I'm a practising Muslim, I'm practising as I go, I don't know all the answers, I don't know everything

S: I still haven't reached my full, kinda, there's no full potential, but, err, you know there's always an element. You're always growing [...] I'm more, kind of, getting to know me religion wise in the past two years, now still. Erm, and its having more of, more of an effect because I want to learn and I want to find out what it's about, what I need to do.

For both Amira and Sumaiya, identifying as a Muslim does not mean knowing everything about Islam, but to 'practise' every day to get to know their religion. Both discussed speaking with parents and friends to share and develop their understanding, using their Muslim social circles for support in this area.

Sumaiya sees her faith as something that is 'growing', a continuous learning process. She also emphasises how she is getting to know herself in her religion, suggesting that this journey is an integral part of her identity, which is constantly developing. Considering the struggle of participants described earlier in combining parental advice with their own viewpoints, the necessity to engage actively with Islam as part of their negotiation of their own identity is not surprising. But even those disagreements seem to be instrumental in the process of practising and learning about Islam and the particular social identity of British Muslims.

In addition to teaching themselves, one of the most prominent, positive aspects of being a British Muslim for participants was being able to educate non-Muslims about Islam. This was experienced as worthwhile as it allows them to share a truer message of the Muslim

Lived relationships of young British Muslim women

faith.

N: I feel like some people are more educated and I feel like the more educated you are the more accepting you are, whereas some people, like I said, will just read like a bog standard thing on the news and be like ‘YEP OKAY, all Muslims are terrorists’

For Nafiah, education is important to dispel the myths and stereotypes of Muslims in the media, and to encourage a more positive view of Muslims and acceptance of that community. Sumaiya also discussed the need to provide information to ensure others gain accurate knowledge

S: And when people are like, ‘oh, I, you know, I don’t wanna ask you this, but can I ask you this?’ And I’ve literally had every book- every question in the book, so I, I don’t, I’d- I’d rather people ask me than assume and, you know, find out themselves from the wrong source, ‘cause I know what I know, I know- I don’t know everything, but I know myself. I know, you know, the basics of myself and my religion

For Sumaya it is important for Muslims to answer the questions of non-Muslims and to engage in conversations about the Islamic faith to help others learn. Considering the impact of terrorist attacks and other socio-political events described above, the need to ensure others are given accurate information is important to participants. This can be a positive and rewarding experience as Hifza describes:

H: I always like talking to people about it if they’re curious, I like to say yanno, ‘this is what my view is on homophobia, this is what my view is on the Syria conflict’ and say how, for my religious beliefs, how they tie in [...] I think a lot of people, there’s so much stigma, there so much kind of, things in the media so for someone to just, yanno, be able to ask questions to someone quite calmly its nice for them, and it’s nice for me too, to just get rid of that horrible stigma that comes from the media’

Educating others is something Hifza enjoys as it offers the opportunity to dispel 'stigma'. Education for all participants appears to come in the form of conversation and social interaction rather than in a formal setting. This suggests that, as mentioned previously, their unique ability to share social identity with at least two cultural groups allows this informal knowledge sharing to take place. Although participants say nothing about whether other Muslims engage in the same activities, the British Muslim identity may give them privileged access to such conversations with British non-Muslims.

In summary, this theme describes the role of education in the participants' lives. For British Muslims, engaging with religion and finding answers to questions is important in living their identity in a positive way and allows them to make Islam their own and part of that identity. Educating others allows British Muslims to engage in calm conversation about Islam and dispel the negative image of their Muslim heritage that they feel the British mainstream media perpetuates. Education is thus key to reconciling the different parts of the British Muslim identity as well as reconciling the groups with whom British Muslims only share part of their identity.

Discussion

The everyday lived experience of our participants and their negotiation of their social lives was characterised by three superordinate themes: Constructing identity, Experiencing prejudice in interactions, and Educating oneself and others .

For example, the first theme illustrated the struggle the participants were going through in actively creating an identity that combined both aspects of their cultural backgrounds. This furthers research by, for example, Bhimji (2009) and Tarik (2017) by highlighting the conflict that participants experienced between their different identities, leaving the young women in the study feeling as if they did not belong to either. Instead, they

described being rooted more in the bicultural identity of British Muslim (Hutnik & Street, 2010), but also changing their social identity based on the cultural settings they experienced. This strongly reflects findings by Rockquemore and Brunzma (2004) who highlighted that people with more than one identity can move between these identities depending on different social settings. However, for our participants this was not necessarily a negative experience. Instead, participants describe feeling unique and enjoying this uniqueness. It also afforded them a greater understanding of the perspectives of the different cultural contexts they experienced, allowing them to take on the roles of mediator and educator.

The finding that being a British Muslim can have both challenges and benefits helps to merge seemingly contradictory findings, for example that biculturalism can be positively associated with adjustment on one hand (Nguyen & Benet-Martinez, 2012) and accounts that bicultural individuals are marginalised between two worlds on the other (Baysu, Phalet, & Brown, 2011; Brown et al., 2013; Rudmin, 2003). Interestingly, participants described how other British Muslims offered a strong source of support, where participants could be themselves as well as joke about more difficult aspects of their experiences, which seems to be less researched.

A theme across accounts was the experience of prejudice from within the Muslim community. Interestingly, just like prejudice from non-Muslims, the prejudice expressed by other Muslims also strongly related to visual markers of faith. For example, Parveen, who does not wear a headscarf, reported less prejudice from non-Muslims but more problematic experiences with other Muslims. In line with research on prejudice expressed by non-Muslims (Allen, Isakjee, & Young, 2013; Awan & Zempi, 2016), there is a gendered element to the prejudice participants experienced from other Muslims, for example centring around visual markers such as wearing/ not wearing a headscarf. This is in line with research

highlighting pressures faced by British Muslim women from close and extended family (Ali, 2013) as well as research that biracial people who identified with both parts of their identity (instead of adopting e.g. the Black identity) experienced greater negativity from within the Black Community (Rockquemore & Brunsma, 2014). Our participants did engage with both cultures, which might have increased the prejudice they experienced from other Muslims compared to British Muslim women who identify more with their Muslim identities. Further research would need to explore this in more depth as well as its impact on confidence, well-being and identities of British Muslim women.

Our data suggest that the distinctiveness of the British Muslim identity leaves young women in a position where they potentially have to act against family values and norms to develop their own identity, which can be empowering as well as place them in a vulnerable position. This can be easier for some young women than for others, depending on a range of situational factors. For example, Hifza reported how growing up in areas where they were part of the minority group greatly impacted her, and in very different ways to her cousins who lived in a more Muslim-orientated area. Such social factors can act as facilitators or barriers and will need further exploration.

Participants in the current study reported actively engaging in meaning making to achieve a synthesis of their different identities, seeking to create their identity, seeking support and finding their own faith in discussion with others. This is clearly contrasting more stereotypical ideas about the passive Muslim woman. Just as Ali (2013) argues, the young women felt strongly connected to their Muslim culture, however, had to redefine the role of religion and culture in their everyday life to synthesise the different social settings they embodied. Many participants reported rejecting parental cultural and religious values, instead exploring Islam through their own understandings and their own relationships. Further

research needs to explore the reality of British Muslim women who do not feel able to engage in this identity formation and to investigate the effect this has on them.

Throughout the interviews, participants discussed the importance of other British Muslims in offering support and a safe space and understanding. Offering opportunities for these supportive connections can be an important aid for British Muslim women who want to engage in this active identity development. This links to the research by Bhimji (2009), which illustrated the importance of the support women in her research offered each other in learning about Islam, forming identities and realising goals. The relationships available to the young British women in our sample, did have a clear impact on how they were able to negotiate their experiences. It is also reminiscent of the cultural frame-switching attributed to bicultural individuals (Hong, Morris, Chiu, & Benet-Martínez, 2000; Verkuyten & Pouliasi, 2002), specifically the ability to “flag” or perform different identity aspects in different interpersonal interactions (Nigbur et al., 2008; Rutland et al., 2012; Wang, Shao, & Li, 2010).

The findings also support existing research highlighting that being visibly Muslim is a trigger for prejudice from non-Muslims (Allen et al., 2013, Awan & Zempi, 2016). In the present research, the Hijab (as a specifically female item of clothing) was associated with experiences of prejudice that had the potential to hold them back from their daily lives, but as discussed above also leading to prejudice from other Muslims if not adhered to. Hopkins and Greenwood (2013) also reported that Muslim women often found themselves categorised as foreign because they wear the headscarf, but also found that being visibly Muslim led their participants to feel they were setting an example and representing the Muslim community, both of which were feelings explored by the women in the present research. It is important to note the clear link between visible signs, current socio-political events and the experience of prejudice, which clearly impacted on participants’ lived identities and wellbeing. More in-depth research on this would be useful.

Participants in the present research emphasised the importance and positivity of exchanges with non-Muslims about Islam. They contrasted the media's perpetuation of negative stereotypes (see Allen et al., 2013) with the opportunity to correct errors in people's knowledge. Abrams et al. (2017) illustrated that contact can counter negative effects of media coverage of terrorist acts committed by Muslims ("contact prevails"). Our participants appear to show an implicit understanding of this. The findings suggest that contact and education are beneficial for both Muslims and non-Muslims and provide an opportunity for open dialogue about current issues surrounding Islam. The self-disclosure and intimacy of sharing their views and experiences with non-Muslims also presents a possibility of belonging (Aydogan & Gonsalkorale, 2015; Bagci, Piyale, Bircek, & Ebcim, 2017; Turner, Hewstone, & Voci, 2007). This has implications for interventions looking to improve intergroup relationships.

Future directions

The results presented here are from a specific group of British Muslim women only. Considering the gendered, and culturally-specific, nature of lived experience, and the need for more particularly female voices, this is valuable and necessary. However, this means that the findings are unique to the female participants of the study. If we are seeking to understand British Muslim women's identities more generally, the diverse experiences of British Muslims need to be further explored. Also, the effects of geography and diversity on identity are well documented (Bisin, Patacchini, Verdier, & Zenou, 2016; Umana-Taylor & Shin, 2007). Further research should explore the impact of geography on the lived experience of British Muslim young women and men.

In all qualitative research, the role of the researcher must be considered. The first author's position as non-Muslim woman might have hindered full comprehension of the

issues facing the group being studied (Berger, 2015; Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). On the other hand, the position of outsider while also sharing similarities such as being a female student of similar age may have allowed for new findings to emerge (see Crisp, Walsh, & Hewstone, 2006) as participants may have felt less judged when exploring issues around conflict with their faith or family values.

In conclusion, the present research offers important insights into the everyday lived experience of young British Muslim women in the UK while they negotiate social life, including the management of dual identity, interactions with Muslims and non-Muslims, and the role of educator within this. Our results highlight some important problems including experiences of pressure from other Muslims as well as British citizens, and the difficulties of managing multiple identity. In contrast, participants experienced positivity from interacting with, and educating, others about Islam. Our results clearly illustrate the negative impact of experiences of prejudice and provide evidence for the personal value of intergroup contact to improve intergroup relations and illustrate that inter-cultural exchange has the potential to increase the well-being of women from minority groups.

References

- Abrams, D., Van de Vyver, J., Houtson, D. M., & Vasiljevic, M. (2017). Does terror defeat contact? Intergroup contact and prejudice toward Muslims before and after the London bombings. *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology*, 23, 260-268.
- Ali, I. (2013). Experiences of life in Britain: Young British Muslim women negotiating their identities. Masters thesis, University of Huddersfield.
- Allen, C., Isakjee, A., & Young, O. O. (2013). *"Maybe we are hated": The experience and impact of anti-Muslim hate on British Muslim women*. Unpublished Manuscript, Institute of Applied Social Science, School of Social Policy, University of Birmingham, Retrieved March 24, 2017, from <https://www.tellmamauk.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/maybewearehated.pdf>
- Awan, I., & Zempi, I. (2016). The affinity between online and offline anti-Muslim hate crime: Dynamics and impacts. *Aggression and Violent Behaviour*, 27, 1-8.
- Aydogan, A. F., & Gonsalkorale, K. (2015). Breaking down a barrier: Increasing perceived out-group knowledge reduces negative expectancies about intergroup interaction. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 45, 401-408.
- Bagci, S. C., Piyale, Z. E., Bircek, N. I., & Ebcim, E. (2017). Think beyond contact: Reformulating imagined intergroup contact theory by adding friendship potential. *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations*, published online, <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F1368430217690237>.
- Baysu, G., Phalet, K., & Brown R. (2011). Dual identity as a two-edged sword: Identity threat and minority school performance. *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 74, 121-143.
- Berger, R. (2015). Now I see it, now I don't: Researcher's position and reflexivity in qualitative research. *Qualitative Research*, 15, 219-234.
- Bhimji, F. (2009). Identities and agency in religious spheres: A study of British Muslim women's experience. *Gender, Place and Culture*, 16, 365-380.
- Bisin, A., Patacchini, E., Verdier, T., & Zenou, Y. (2016). Bend it like Beckham: Ethnic identity and integration. *European Economic Review*, 90, 146-164.
- Bonino, S. (2013). Prevent-ing Muslimness in Britain: The normalisation of exceptional measures to combat terrorism. *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, 33, 385-400.
- Brown, R., Baysu, G., Cameron, L., Nigbur, D., Rutland, A., Watters, C., ... Landau, A. (2013). Acculturation attitudes and social adjustment in British South Asian children: A longitudinal study. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 39, 1656-1667.

- Chirkov, V. (2009). Critical Psychology of acculturation: What do we study and how do we study it, when we investigate acculturation? *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 33, 94-105.
- Crisp, R. J., Walsh, J., & Hewstone, M. (2006). Crossed categorisation in common ingroup contexts. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 32, 1204-1218.
- Dwyer, A. C., & Buckle, J. L. (2009). The space between: On being an insider-outsider in qualitative research. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 8, 54-63.
- Dwyer, C., Shah, B., & Sanghera, G. (2008). 'From cricket lover to terror suspect' – challenging representation of young British Muslim men. *Gender, Place & Culture*, 15, 117-136.
- Eatough, V., & Smith, J. (2006). 'I was like a wild person': Understanding feelings of anger using interpretative phenomenological analysis. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 97, 483-498.
- European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia, (2005). The impact of 7 July 2005 London bomb attacks on Muslim communities in the EU. Retrieved January 26, 2017, from <http://fra.europa.eu/en/publication/2005/impact-7-july-2005-london-bomb-attacks-muslim-communities-eu>
- Fade, S. (2004). Using interpretative phenomenological analysis for public health nutrition and dietetic research: A practical guide. *Proceedings of the Nutrition Society*, 63, 647-653.
- Halliday, F. (1999). 'Islamophobia' reconsidered. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 22, 892-902.
- Hong, Y., Morris, M. W., Chiu, C., & Benet-Martínez, V. (2000). Multicultural minds: A dynamic constructivist approach to culture and cognition. *American Psychologist*, 55, 709-720.
- Hopkins, N. (2011). Dual identities and their recognition: Minority group members' perspectives. *Political Psychology*, 32, 251-270.
- Hopkins, N., & Greenwood, R. M. (2013). Hijab, Visibility and the performance of identity. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 43, 438-447.
- Hutnik, N., & Street, R. C. (2010). Profiles of British Muslim identity: Adolescent girls in Birmingham. *Journal of Adolescence*, 33, 33-42.
- Jaspal, R. & Coyle, A. (2010). 'Arabic is the language of the Muslims—That's how it was supposed to be': Exploring language and religious identity through reflective accounts

- from young British-born South Asians. *Mental Health, Religion and Culture*, 13, 17-36.
- Jawad, H. & Benn, T. (eds) (2003). *Muslim women in the United Kingdom and Beyond: Experiences and Images*. Leiden and Boston: Brill.
- Kunst, J. R., Sadeghi, T., Tahir, H., Sam, D., & Thomsen, L. (2016). The vicious circle of religious prejudice: Islamophobia makes the acculturation attitude of majority and minority members clash. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 46, 249-259.
- Larkin, M., Watts, S., & Clifton, E. (2006). Giving voice and making sense in interpretative phenomenological analysis. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3, 102-120.
- Marques, J. M., Paez, D., & Abrams, D. (1998). Social identity and intragroup differentiation as subjective social control. In S. Worchel, J. F. Morales, D. Paez, & J.-C. Deschamps (Eds.), *Social identity: International perspectives* (pp. 124-141). Sage.
- Meer, N., & Modood, T. (2015). Religious pluralism in the United States and Britain: Its implication for Muslims and Nationhood. *Social Compass*, 62, 526-540.
- Murphy, J. (2017). Beyond “religion” and “spirituality.” *Archive for the Psychology of Religion*, 39, 1-26.
- Nguyen, A.-M. D., & Benet-Martinez, V. (2012). Biculturalism and adjustment: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, 44, 122-159.
- Nigbur, D., Brown, R., Cameron, L., Hossain, R., Landau, A., Le Touze, D., ... Watters, C. (2008). Acculturation, well-being and classroom behaviour among white British and British Asian primary-school children in the south-east of England: Validating a child-friendly measure of acculturation attitudes. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 32, 493-504.
- Office for National Statistics. (2012). Religion in England and Wales 2011. Retrieved March 24, 2017 from <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/culturalidentity/religion/articles/religioninenglandandwales2011/2012-12-11>
- [Poynting, S., & Mason, V. \(2007\). The resistible rise of Islamophobia – Anti-Muslim racism in the UK and Australia before 11 September 2001. *Journal of Sociology*, 43, 61-86.](#)
- Rashid, N. (2014). Giving the silent majority a stronger voice? Initiatives to empower Muslim women as part of the UK's ‘War on Terror’. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 37, 589-604.

- Rippy, A. E., & Newman, E. (2006). Perceived religious discrimination and its relationship to anxiety and paranoia among Muslim Americans. *Journal of Muslim Mental Health, 1*, 5-20.
- Rizwan, R. and Williams, A.R. (2015). 'Only the wind hears you...' The experiences of Pakistani girls in a primary school: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. *Educational & Child Psychology, 32*. ISSN 0267-1611
- Rockquemore, K.A. and Brunsma, D.L. (2004). 'Negotiating racial identity: Biracial women and interactional validation'. *Women & Therapy, 27*, 85-102.
- Rudmin, F. W. (2003). Critical history of the acculturation psychology of assimilation, separation, integration and marginalization. *Review of General Psychology, 7*, 3-37.
- Rutland, A., Cameron, L., Jugert, P., Nigbur, D., Brown, R., Watters, C., "... " (2012). Group identity and peer relations: A longitudinal study of group identity, perceived peer acceptance, and friendships amongst ethnic minority English Children. *British Journal of Developmental Psychology, 30*, 283-302.
- Smith, J. A. (2019). Participants and researchers searching for meaning: Conceptual developments for interpretative phenomenological analysis. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 16*, 166–181.
- Smith, J. A., Flowers, P., & Larkin, M. (2009). *Interpretative phenomenological analysis: Theory, methods and research*. London, UK: Sage.
- Tarik, M. (2017). A qualitative study into the negotiation of dual identity in British Muslim women. (Unpublished Doctoral thesis, City, University of London) Retrieved August 8, 2017 from, http://openaccess.city.ac.uk/17735/1/Tarik%2C%20Mariam_Redacted.pdf
- Turner, R. N., Hewstone, M., & Voci, A. (2007). Reducing explicit and implicit outgroup prejudice via direct and extended contact: The mediating role of self-disclosure and intergroup anxiety. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 93*, 369-388.
- Umana-Taylor, A. J., & Shin, N. (2007). An examination of ethnic identity and self-esteem with diverse populations: Exploring variation by ethnicity and geography. *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology, 13*, 178-186.
- Vadher, K., & Barrett, M. (2009). Boundaries of Britishness in British Indian and Pakistani young adults. *Journal of Community and Social Psychology, 19*, 442-458.

- Verkuyten, M., & Pouliasi, K. (2002). Biculturalism among older children: Cultural frame switching, attributions, self-identification, and attitudes. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, 33, 596-609.
- Wang, Q., Shao, Y., & Li, Y. J. (2010). "My way or Mom's way?" The bilingual and bicultural self in Hong Kong Chinese children and adolescents. *Child Development*, 81, 555-567.

