

## **Social interaction and attitudes towards Australian Muslims: ‘we’ and ‘they’ constructions**

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### **Abstract**

The negative stereotypes of Muslims discussed in this paper underlie some broadly experienced and perceived negative social attitudes towards Australian Muslims. These attitudes are understood as key contributors to experiences of social and cultural exclusion. This paper is based on a small qualitative research study (n=14) which sought to examine ways in which attitudes towards Muslim Australians are socially constructed. It focuses on the particular dimension of social interaction where perceptions of general social attitudes become referential. It seeks to apply Alfred Schutz’s (1964) typology of social relationships as a filter of comprehension, offering an alternative to the common filter of ‘Othering’.

This paper discusses the way in which social interactions, particularly perceptions of common social attitudes construct and normalise the stereotypes that inform negative attitudes. It discusses the development of inclusive and exclusive social collectivities – ‘they-relations’ – through perceptions of general attitudes. The paper shows that social interactions, particularly personal interactions with Muslims and experiences with different ethnic groups, are extremely important for the construction of inclusive social collectivities. These types of personal interactions act to develop a ‘we-relation’ that challenges a dominant construction of Australian Muslims as an ‘out-group’.

**Key words:** social construction, attitudes, Muslim Australians, social interaction, Alfred Schutz

### **Introduction**

Australian media analysis and opinion surveys show the existence of both negative media representations of Muslims and negative attitudes toward Muslims in Australia. These negative attitudes are connected to constructions of stereotypes. As a constructed homogenous group, Muslims have been subjected to negative attitudes (including discrimination and abuse), stereotyping and misunderstanding from disparate parts of Australian society (Dunn 2004; Human Rights and Equal

Opportunity Commission (HREOC) 2004; Poynting, Noble et al. 2004; Saniotis 2004; El-Matrah and Dimopoulos 2008).

Social and individual attitudes can be constructed and informed through social interactions. Perceptions of social attitudes (both real and perceived) towards Muslims not only enable the construction of negative stereotypes of Muslims but reinforce and normalise these stereotypes. The attitude-formation processes described in this paper are relevant to the cultural dimension of social inclusion in Australia.

Attitudes inform and are informed by responses to, and perceptions of, objects and situations. An attitude is “a mental and neural state of readiness, organised through experience, exerting a directive or dynamic influence upon the individual’s response to objects and situations with which it is related” (Allport 1935 cited by Bordens and Horowitz 2001:185). As common perceptions of reality are often negotiated, private attitudes can reflect social attitudes or vice versa, when many individuals or groups in society are perceived to share a common attitude towards an issue or event. This is the focus for understanding the social construction of an attitude. Here, reality is constructed interactively and iteratively within the public sphere when publics, and social sectors and institutions, negotiate the meaning of, and respond to, an issue or event (Habermas 2006). Individuals form their attitudes within this social environment – their lifeworlds – and this social process can be understood as socialisation on a public scale.

Reported experiences of some Australian Muslims and surveys of negative attitudes held by non-Muslim Australians have been defined as illustrative of ‘new racism’; a term used to describe the experiences of people when they are marginalised, excluded, vilified or treated as inferior on the basis of the way they look or the group they are identified with (Dunn, Klocker et al. 2007). It has been theorised that “the

new racisms are more likely sustained by social constructions of the nation, and media stereotypes and other portrayals of cultural groups (most dramatically in regards to Muslim Australians)” (Dunn, Forrest et al. 2004:422) than by a belief in a racial hierarchy such as with traditional or ‘old’ racism.

Research shows that Australian Muslims are more disadvantaged, socially and economically, than non-Muslim Australians with the same or lesser educational qualifications (Hassan 2008). The researcher comments:

One would expect that they should be able to participate in the economic and social life as other educated people are and they are not doing so, and I think that has nothing to do with their religious beliefs. That’s something to do with the larger community, whether it’s discrimination, or prejudice or exclusion prompted by other factors. (Hassan quoted by Cooke 2008)

An exploration of these ‘other factors’ prompts an inquiry into the social construction of attitudes.

This paper discusses the role of social interaction in the construction of attitudes towards Muslim Australians. It references the original research study and explores representations of ‘we’ and ‘they’ relations and the construction of inclusive and exclusive social collectivities. Finally, it proposes that reasoned, reflective and meaningful social interaction can construct inclusive social collectivities.

## **Method**

The original research study followed the contention that “The stereotypes that sustain intolerances have been best outlined in qualitative work and media studies” (Dunn, Forrest et al. 2004).

A combination of interviews and a focus group discussion were employed to obtain and explore in-depth accounts of the genesis and maintenance of attitudes towards Muslim Australians. These views were sought from a small group of participants

(focus group n=4, interviews n=10). Case study analysis was then applied to the data. The participants lived in Melbourne and most described themselves as middle-class, with Anglo-Celtic and Christian backgrounds. While the participants in this study were drawn from a narrow socio-economic and demographic background they were, however, divided fairly evenly by gender and age and reflect the constitution of a culturally dominant Australian social group.

Participants are anonymous and have been allocated a pseudonym.

### **Theoretical foundations – Alfred Schutz**

Social interaction establishes ‘rules’ of social behaviours and attitudes. It enables us to make sense of the world. Society is actively maintained through this social interaction, which reinforces common meanings, and can often be seen to aid the perpetuation of common social roles and stereotypes (Berger and Luckmann 1966). The maintenance of attitudes can occur as a person compares his/her understanding of the world with how others appear to perceive it. In this way, common attitudes can become ‘common sense’.

Those we interact with include families, friends and colleagues, and these can be conceptualised as ‘consociates’, unique individuals whose distinct motivations can be understood by us (Schutz 1964; White and White 1983). We form a ‘we-relation’ with these consociates as we interact with them directly and in real-time. Information about our shared reality may be provided by these consociates in the form of behaviours and expressions, and these can then be interpreted as expected or required in order to belong to their group. This is one of the most powerful social group effects.

Additional social interaction can take place with ‘contemporaries’, people who come into contact with us but whose identity is anonymous – the interaction is based on a performance of a functionary type, a person filling a generic role (Schutz 1964; White and White 1983). Relations with these contemporaries constitute a ‘they-relation’, they are often represented and conceived of anonymously as stereotypes. Groups of contemporaries are known as ‘social collectivities’, experienced as “highly anonymous” groups that are defined by their type and are ascribed certain characteristics (Schutz 1964). They are part of the meaning structure that helps us to make sense of our broad social environments and share a taken-for-granted reality (White and White 1983).

### **Social interaction, group constructions and conformity**

Our identities are situated in social interaction and are therefore linked to our perceptions of the social collectivities we identify with. “It is as members of society, as participants in the life of the community, that we are continuously defining who we are” (daSilva 2007). People may feel attached to groups made up of family members and peers but may also see themselves as part of an ‘imagined community’ - “large collectivities (whose members are) linked primarily by common identities but minimally by networks of directly interpersonal relationship” (Phillips 2002; Anderson 2006). This ‘imagined community’ can be equated with a social collectivity experienced through an inclusive ‘they-relation’.

Group membership and self-esteem can be enhanced “by negatively evaluating groups to which one does not belong. For example a person may selectively search for intergroup differences that favour their group and dismiss information that favours the outgroup” (Reed and Aquino 2003). In this way, responses to ‘Other-ness’ can largely

depend on self and group identification (Phillips 2002). An exclusive ‘they-relation’ will see an ‘out-group’ established.

Group conformity is made effective through the anxiety faced by an individual who is socially isolated due to a differing attitude (Price and Oshagan 1995). People are more likely to conform to a dominant opinion when they are in face-to-face contact (Asch 1999). Other conditions that may contribute to a person accepting a dominant view may be a lack of interest in the issue (Price and Oshagan 1995) or lack of a social network with whom to discuss the information as observed in lower socio-economic groups (Sligo and Williams 1999).

### **Australian Muslims – constructed as an ‘out-group’ through an exclusive ‘they-relation’?**

Muslims appeared to be constructed in stereotypical terms by most of the research study participants or at the least, it was recognised that others had formed understandings based on stereotypes. Australian Muslims did not appear to be part of most of the participants’ reference groups. Views expressed included that Muslims have, or are widely perceived to have, a distinct and separate culture to non-Muslims.

You know, maybe it’s racism at a relatively benign level, maybe it’s just like grumbling about ‘oh they’re coming to take over our jobs’ or those archetypal forms of racism that happen. But it still comes, I think, from that place of viewing Islam as the Other. And the Other in a way that’s threatening to your own values. (Julian)

Muslims were perceived as immigrants.

...look we’re happy for you to come here and live here but we don’t want you pushing your views on our society and getting us to change to meet your view of the world. (Peter)

They were often described as very religious (and the extent of this was often associated with wearing a hijab or not).

I wonder if ‘they’ (Muslims) are like ‘them’ (Jews). And is it a very strong religion that does that, is it, you know like they have these really strict rules and I know Jewish people do. (Emily)

She wasn’t particularly religious at all—didn’t wear a headscarf. (Lara)

Muslims were associated with violence and the mistreatment of women.

I suppose one thing when you talk about Muslims, it’s the way they treat women. That could just be perceptions but it’s a pretty strong perception. And we’re fed it all the time of course. (Colin)

You’re probably finding that there is a bit of a community concern about the Sudanese coming into Australia. ... Mainly I suppose about the fact that ...they don’t appear to think twice about killing someone if they disagree with someone. ... It’s just a perception. It’s a perception. (Peter)

The views described are connected to negative attitudes and current politically contentious debates. These kinds of constructions reinforce the perception of Muslims as outsiders and show a link to attitudes associated with immigration. They echo the findings of survey research conducted with larger samples, that negative views were a result of disagreement with Muslim religion and culture; acceptance of negative portrayals by the media; perceived associations between Muslims, war and terrorism; and perceptions that Muslims mistreated women (Haque 2001; Dunn 2004; El-Matrah and Dimopoulos 2008). Muslims perceived in this way are only known as an anonymous ‘type’.

That said, many of the views described by participants in this research are not really about Muslims specifically but about other anonymous groups perceived as associated with Muslims. Some of these views appeared to be longstanding while others may have come about recently. All participants recognised the existence of negative attitudes towards Muslims and related negative constructions of Muslims, even though there were some examples given of positive attitudes.

### **Societal attitudes and expressions**

Perceptions of general attitudes may be derived from a variety of signifiers associated with certain views; we often consider the attitude of a ‘social collectivity’ (Schutz 1964) or the ‘collective consciousness’ (Habermas 1984) when we form our own attitudes. In a direct sense, one of the functions of attitudes and their expression is to perform group maintenance; in this way, attitudes are ‘social adjustive’ (Pedersen, Griffiths et al. 2000), they act to limit or modify our social responses to those established by the group. But this group maintenance also takes place in a reflective sense as individuals abstract the group they identify with in order to view themselves as others might, from the perspective of the ‘generalised other’ (Mead 1934).

When participants in this research described their perceptions of general societal views they sometimes described a specific person but mostly referred to a social collectivity that was exclusive of Muslims.

Cause straight away we think of someone of Arabic colour and disposition. ... The biggest Muslim population is Indonesia and Malaysia but we don't see those and if we do it's the screaming people from JJ. (Edward)

I think they're probably held in fairly poor regard, have a bad reputation etc. ... I think probably Australians don't have a good view of them. Certainly, it's really, really significant things like 9/11 probably changed the world's view of Muslims. (Malcolm)

Participants showed that they accepted, rejected or tolerated the broad social views they perceived. For example, in describing Muslims as a focus of society's anxiety, the following participant references the construction of ‘Other-ness’ indicating that he has engaged in the critical evaluation of these sorts of views.

I think that they're the current kind of focus of race and cultural anxiety in Australia at the moment. Not just in Australia, in the west in particular. I think that because there are some, take the Hijab,...visibly recognisable signifiers of Islam it means that people have a stronger sense of it as the Other in a way that is quite potent. (Julian)

Some participants were more accepting of negative views and spoke about negative attitudes towards Muslims in Australia as part of a greater pattern of social behaviour in Australia – it was just the Muslims’ ‘turn’ to be treated negatively.

Years ago we used to say the same things about the Italians and the Greeks. (Peter)

The focus group also discussed the targeting of recent immigrant groups as part of a well-documented history of prejudice and pressure to assimilate directed towards new migrant groups in Australian society.

They still tend to be quite culturally Muslim in that respect. I think with Australian immigrants from Italy and Greece and all those countries in the 50s, look at how Anglicised the generations are today and that could maybe well happen (to Muslims). (Focus group participant)

...like the Italians and the Yugoslavs and people who came out. I think they were so glad to get here and so happy to assimilate as soon as possible that it didn’t really become an issue but it is now isn’t it? (Marie)

Within these expressions there was a sense that these attitudes and associated behaviours were unwarranted but somehow inevitable and therefore accepted by the participants and their peers. These types of expressions of helpless complicity with prejudice are examples of ‘new racism’ (Forrest and Dunn 2006).

### **Sources of knowledge about general attitudes towards Muslims in Australia**

The sources of knowledge about general social attitudes were, for many participants, described as media sources. Social sources included discussions with others, second and third hand accounts of anonymous others, and self-reflection on social collectivities. Each of these plays a role in attitude construction, from influencing through social comparison, to enabling a definition.

Participants who recognised negative general views, but who had more benign views themselves, proposed that understanding and knowing more about Muslims would

reduce negative stereotypes. This was also the case for respondents to other larger surveys in both Victoria and Australia, where both Muslims and non-Muslims agreed that education would improve understanding of Muslim culture and relationships (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) 2004; El-Matrah and Dimopoulos 2008). These types of responses illustrated the perception of general views as being uninformed.

That would be my biggest thing, to get them to understand that it's not a definition of an ethnic group or a cultural group [hits the table with his finger to emphasise], it is a religion that has many ethnic groups, many cultural groups following it in many different degrees and formats. (Edward)

Some participants who made these kinds of comments gave examples of where others had shown a lack of awareness of Muslim diversity and practice. In this way, participants understood the role of social interaction as a catalyst for attitude-change; they saw that it had the ability to provide information and exposure.

I think it [attitude change] will happen through young people 'cause they travel so widely now and they just move in a lot of these countries. (Colin)

A kind of friendship group ...you could actually get to know them. (Marie)

Participants expressed a range of ways to improve the negative attitudes they observed. But, despite their recognition of the role of social interaction in shaping views, when asked directly, they did not believe conversation was a catalyst of change. They described generally avoiding discussion with people who expressed or displayed opposing views to other things.

I guess it depends on the issue, 'cause a lot of my friends... have very strong-formed opinions, I would tend not to challenge that unless I thought it was really damaging. (Chloe)

Social atmospheres that did encourage reflective conversation appeared to be those where contemporaries expressed plural views and attitudes. That is, it appeared that

when different opinions were commonly expressed, it became more acceptable to present an opinion that contrasted with others.

I think people were just used to people having different opinions about it so it was just standard that you probably wouldn't agree with at least a few people around the table about the [Iraq] war. (Amy)

Some of the participants indicated an awareness that their comments or views may be subject to social criticism. In this way, they exhibited an awareness of general views.

These participants were concerned during their interviews that their comments would be perceived negatively.

And I hope mine's not [like Pauline Hanson's expressions]. I mean mine's more specific like their belief system which then turned – I mean I think it's horrible that people could crash two planes into a building, three in fact and kill and then say I did it for Allah. I don't think so. (Marie)

Another participant, also of similar age and with similar early socialisation experiences, expressed another self-reflective critical examination.

So then you raise the whole issue of racism and are we really quite racist at heart? I don't know. I don't know whether I'm racist. Some of those comments I'm making about Jewish people are really quite racist. If I'm going to stand back and think what is racism, you go to the whole 'they' and 'them'. ... that whole Pauline Hanson thing, you think well, I've probably thought that but she's actually saying it. (Emily)

Being critical of the self in this sense can be a form of internalised social control.

Individuals adopt the attitude of a social collectivity towards themselves and “they are then able to monitor and control their own conduct by reference to social conventions and expectations” (daSilva 2007).

Participants drew on conversations, descriptive accounts, media and their own observations and perceptions to describe their awareness of others' attitudes. But it was hard for them to pinpoint precise expressions unless describing peers' attitudes. Often when describing how they perceived others' attitudes, descriptions were very generic.

Everyone assumed all the refugees were Muslims. (Edward)

These general attitudes discussed above may be the attitudes that participants compare with their own; these may be the attitudes perceived as social norms.

### **Personal interaction with Australian cultures**

Social interaction with Muslim people has an impact on participants' attitudes. It is understood that direct experience is more likely to stop people from holding oversimplified (i.e. stereotyped) perceptions (Sears, Peplau et al. 1991). Some participants' familiarity with Muslims meant that they had an understanding of particular individuals rather than a generalised perception of a homogenous group.

I've got a few friends who are Muslim and they are so different from the way Islam is portrayed in the press. (Amy)

Observations like this are reflective of recent surveys that show the majority of Victorians had little or no contact with Muslims (El-Matrah and Dimopoulos 2008), but that direct contact has a positive effect on views (IDA 2007).

Social interaction in our youth is important in the development of attitudes, as sometimes, simple familiarity makes a difference to perceptions (Bordens and Horowitz 2001). Broader in-group construction (Reed and Aquino 2003) and therefore the reduction of a potential for prejudice can be established where cooperative interdependence, sustained contact and equal status is present amongst groups of people from different ethnic backgrounds (Sears, Peplau et al. 1991).

Most participants were not aware of interpersonal experience with Muslim people but a few did have current friendships and professional relationships with Muslims. The importance of this interaction was clearly its role in breaking down negative stereotypes and differentiating individuals from a generic 'Muslim' group. It was

evident among the participants in this research, that those with extended or early personal relationships with Muslims related more positive observations.

Of the four participants who had a few friends and/or current colleagues who were Muslim, one participant expressed that her understanding of Muslims was completely informed by this personal interaction.

See for me, it's all been from personal interaction. (Amy)

Overall, participants who had more of these personal interactions were more aware of distinctive characteristics of being Muslim.

You're starting to see the actual daily practices of, you know, Muslim.  
(Edward)

Participants recognising diversity seemed more likely to compare Muslims to themselves or their peers, potentially indicating that they had established a 'we-relation' (consociates) or an inclusive 'they-relation' as opposed to an exclusive 'they-relation' (contemporaries).

## **Conclusion**

Social interaction provides opportunity for reflection on shared norms that may be problematic. An expressed lack of meaningful interaction with Australian Muslims, or with non-Muslim Australians to question negative views toward Muslims and/or related issues, may indicate acceptance of existing general societal attitudes. However, social interaction in a reasoned and reflective sense can allow people to negotiate their understanding of a shared world: "Our views of the world go hand in hand with the making of the world so the struggle between perspectives is the struggle for the making and un-making of the world. It's not just about views it's about how the world is shaped" (Hage 2009).

The most important finding of this research study is the way in which social interactions, particularly personal interactions with Muslims and experiences with different ethnic groups, are shown to be extremely important for the construction of inclusive social collectivities. These types of personal interactions act to develop a 'we-relation' that challenges a dominant construction of Australian Muslims as an 'out-group'.

For a number of reasons, most participants in this study were unlikely to question others' views when presented with them in an immediate and face-to-face situation. They were also unlikely to confirm perceptions of general or personal views through discussion or other means. This tacit acceptance of existing broad social views, particularly of the range of negative stereotypes discussed, indicates that perceptions of negative social attitudes and actual negative views of Muslim Australians will take some time to break down, if at all.

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