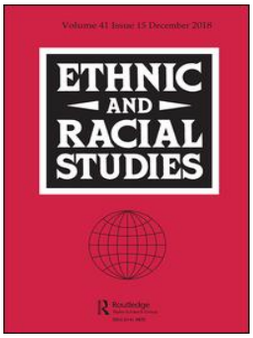

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Young Muslim Australians' experiences of intergroup contact and its implications for intercultural relations

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ABSTRACT
Literature on intergroup contact shows that in the absence of the required structural conditions, contact is not necessarily always a positive experience and that when it is negative, it can lead to heightened conflict and increased prejudice toward outgroups. Therefore, this article examines intergroup contact between Muslims and non-Muslims. Specifically, we examine the experiences of intergroup contact involving young Muslims in Australia and ask how these encounters impact their experiences of discrimination and perceptions of Australian society. We conducted face-to-face, semi-structured interviews to collect rich, qualitative data from young Muslim Australian participants who live in Melbourne, a major cosmopolitan hub, where intergroup contact experiences are likely to be diverse and occur daily. Our findings show that even when met with prejudice and discrimination, young Muslim Australians were able to critically engage with and change the views of non-Muslim Australians through dialogue and creative exchanges about circulating public discourse.

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KEYWORDS Intergroup contact; intercultural relations; Muslim migrants; youth; discrimination; prejudice

Introduction

Similar to anti-Muslim attitudes existing in other Western contexts (Yilmaz 2016), recent Australia-wide surveys and public opinion polls have found anti-Muslim attitudes to be much higher than negative attitudes towards other religious groups (Iner et al. 2017; Mansouri and Vergani 2018; Markus 2018). This trend has coincided with a rise of the political influence of the far right (Bliuc et al. 2018, 2019), and in particular of some right-wing political parties that have exploited anti-Islam platforms for electoral purposes (Dean, Bell, and Vakhitova 2016; Markus 2018). Such a socio-politically divisive climate can have important consequences, including ideological polarization, intercultural divisions and societal fragmentation (Yilmaz 2009, 2012;

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Andrews, Jilke, and Van de Walle 2014; Wickes et al. 2014; Dean, Bell, and Vakhitova 2016; Bashirov 2018, 2020).

Social psychology literature (see, for example, Pettigrew and Tropp 2006; Pettigrew, Wagner, and Christ 2010; Pettigrew et al. 2011) shows that intergroup contact is not necessarily always positive (resulting in prejudice reduction), but can also be negative (resulting in heightened conflict and prejudice between groups, see Barlow et al. 2012). The latter outcome occurs if the requisite social and structural conditions for intergroup contact are not prevalent (Mansouri 2017). In this article, we test the theoretical assumptions underpinning intergroup contact in order to understand and account for how Muslims and non-Muslims encounter each other in the context of contemporary multicultural Australia.

The key question that guides this project is: What are the experiences of intergroup contact among young Muslims in Melbourne and how are these related to broader experiences of discrimination and perceptions of integration in Australian society? Using qualitative data obtained from face-to-face, semi-structured interviews with 64 young Muslims between the ages of 18 and 24, this study examines the ways in which young Muslim Australians experience and interpret their encounters with Anglo-Australians. In particular, we seek to understand how intergroup contact is perceived and made meaningful by young Muslims in Australia. Moreover, this research provides an important appraisal of how young Muslims think about their identity, how they prefer to interact with the wider Australian community, their reactions to everyday encounters, and what kind of initiatives they want to undertake to improve the current situation. The methodological basis for this study aims to strengthen and diversify the empirical literature around intergroup contact whilst also extending current scholarship on everyday multiculturalism and conviviality (Wessendorf 2014; Wise and Velayutham 2014; Wenzel 2016), with its attention to context, shared spatiality, and sociality.

The paper proceeds as follows: first, we give a short summary of the intergroup contact theory literature and provide a critique of this literature through examining issues associated with majority – minority relations in Western contexts. Then, we summarize our methodology. Following, our analysis is divided into four sections: the impact of perceived discrimination; the role of media in reproducing the discriminatory narratives; transformative contact; and responses to negative comments. The final section concludes with a discussion of our findings and their potential implication in the cultural context of Australia and beyond.

Intergroup contact theory

Intergroup contact theory (Allport 1954) is based on the notion that bringing members of different groups into direct, face-to-face contact will reduce

intergroup prejudice and hostility, and foster the development of positive outgroup attitudes. For this to happen, it has been argued that a number of ideal conditions should be met, such as equal status among the participants, institutional support, cooperation towards common goals, and contact should be free from anxiety (Hopkins, Greenwood, and Birchall 2007, 680).

Pettigrew and Tropp's (2006) meta-analysis of 515 studies on intergroup contact found an overall highly significant positive relationship between contact and prejudice reduction. More recent studies have also found that contact exerts its effect on prejudice reduction both by reducing intergroup anxiety and by inducing empathy and perspective taking (Vezzali et al. 2012). Finally, contact effects generalize from experience with a primary outgroup to attitudes towards secondary outgroups, not involved in the contact situation. Other studies (e.g. Brown and Hewstone 2005; Hopkins, Greenwood, and Birchall 2007) found that the effects of contact are greater when respective group memberships are salient and/or the participating outgroup members are considered typical of their group as a whole; when individuals are considered exceptions, contact only improves individuals' attitudes toward particular outgroup members, leaving intergroup perceptions unchanged (Hopkins, Greenwood, and Birchall 2007, 684). Dixon, Durrheim, and Tredoux (2005, 699) argued that "everyday contact between groups bears little resemblance to this ideal world". In reality, in most cases, contact occurs in conditions where inequality of status persists and cooperative interdependence remains elusive (Connolly 2000). These conditions apply to the context of our study, where intergroup contact between Muslims and Anglo-Australians is underpinned by inequalities experienced by the Muslim community (as the group in a disadvantaged position). Recent research on intergroup contact found that when intergroup contact is associated with threat and anxiety (Schmid, Al Ramiah, and Hewstone 2014; Mahfud et al. 2017; Mansouri and Vergani 2018) and when it focuses on the differences instead of the similarities between groups (Zou and Cheryan 2015), the contact is more likely to produce negative outcomes. In the current research, we apply the intergroup contact framework to experiences of real-life encounters between young Muslim Australians and non-Muslim members of the dominant Anglo-Saxon majority.

Intergroup contact from the perspective of outgroups

In contrast to the oversaturation of research around the question of "optimal contact", the literature has left certain issues, especially those pertaining to the contextual rootedness and specificity of social relations, underexplored. The majority of studies on intergroup contact were conducted in controlled environments, leading to questions of their relevance to everyday lived reality (Wise 2018) and around participants' constructions of their encounters and

their understanding of the implications of its impact. Our approach focuses on the perspective of young Muslim Australians who have experienced prejudice and discrimination, allowing us to examine how issues of multiculturalism, diversity and conviviality operate in the everyday context.

As argued by Dixon, Durrheim, and Tredoux (2005, 704), the methodology of intergroup contact theory "masks the interpretive frameworks and practices used by the individuals and communities in contact to make sense of their everyday relations". In particular, the general categories that scholars use to evaluate the interpretations of the respondents represent the ideal forms of interaction used in the literature. But these ideal forms and academic concepts usually subsume participants' own concepts of contact and do not do justice to the meanings that participants attribute to their encounters with others.

To overcome this shortcoming, there is a need for "a detailed, bottom-up analysis of participants' own frameworks of meaning as they are applied within particular social contexts" (Dixon, Durrheim, and Tredoux 2005, 704). Only such an analysis can reveal the complexities of lived experience. Rather than translating the meanings that participants attribute to their encounters with others into a set of generally idealized categories, our study captures how Muslims subjectively and agentically make sense of their social relations. We contextualize the social interpretation of interaction between Muslims and Anglo-Australians based on data representing the complexities of lived experience.

Intergroup contact and social integration

Much of the research on intergroup contact and race relations was conducted in the context of minority groups in the US. Indeed, studies by Vorauer and Kumhyr (2001), and Shelton and Richeson (2005) on relations between African-Americans and White Americans examined interpersonal concerns and issues of stereotypes. Vorauer and Kumhyr (2001) found that in the US, "some Whites are concerned that out-group members will perceive them in an undesirable manner, particularly as being prejudiced, selfish, and closed minded" (Shelton and Richeson 2005, 91). African-Americans, on the other hand, "are concerned about how they will be treated in intergroup interactions because of their racial group membership" (Shelton and Richeson 2005, 91). When applying these dynamics to intergroup relations between Muslim and non-Muslim Australians, some of these relationships are expected be reproduced in a similar manner to the US context, while others might appear in more accentuated forms.

While deliberating on a potential intergroup interaction, "individuals consider not only their own behavioral options but also those of their potential interaction partner" (Shelton and Richeson 2005, 92). People cite "their own fear of rejection to explain their inaction, whereas they interpret their potential

partner's inaction as lack of interest in getting to know them" (Shelton and Richeson 2005, 92). This is an extension of the pluralistic ignorance phenomenon, which argues, "individuals infer that out-group members" inaction accurately reflects their disinterest in interracial contact. (Shelton and Richeson 2005, 92).

We attempt to remediate this by conducting a study from the perspective of Muslim participants and examining the interpretative frameworks and practices that these minority group members use in their contact with a dominant majority to make sense of their everyday relations. In so doing, our study also focuses on the mundane, seemingly unimportant, encounters that constitute the overwhelming majority of everyday contact experiences, including issues of everyday multiculturalism and everyday conviviality (Wise and Velayutham 2014, 2018).

Some studies have explored Muslims' own construction of the meaning of contact, making significant contributions to this growing literature (e.g. Hopkins and Kahani-Hopkins 2006; Hopkins, Greenwood, and Birchall 2007). Our study will focus on how individual Muslim youth in Australia perceive contact and how they ascribe meaning to the intergroup contact experience. Hopkins and Kahani-Hopkins (2006) found that "whereas some Muslim activists construed contact as a vehicle with which to communicate within-Muslim difference and break down monolithic stereotypes (*TYPE 1*), others viewed this as a threat to the coherence of Muslim identity (*TYPE 2*)" (Hopkins and Kahani-Hopkins 2006; Hopkins, Greenwood, and Birchall 2007, 684). According to the latter people

> the precondition for meaningful dialogue was a strong and coherent Muslim identity and (they) urged Muslims to step back from such activities as interfaith dialogue in order to undertake autonomous community development that would allow them to enter into subsequent interactions with a univocal and salient collective identification. (Hopkins and Kahani-Hopkins 2006; Hopkins, Greenwood, and Birchall 2007, 684)

All of our participants are TYPE 1 and none of them shared the position of the TYPE 2 Muslims found in Hopkins and Kahani-Hopkins (2006) study.

Methodology

Research for this paper was undertaken as part of a project on young Muslims in Melbourne, Australia. The project focused on the participants' sense of belonging and interaction with wider society in Australia. We proceeded "not from a top-down imposition of pre-given categories but from a detailed, bottom-up analysis of participants' own frameworks of meaning as they are applied within particular social contexts" (Dixon, Durrheim, and Tredoux 2005, 704). The specific qualitative data for this article was collected between April and July 2018 in the northern, eastern and southern suburbs of Melbourne and Geelong.

Sixty-four Muslim residents of Melbourne between the ages of 18 and 24 were recruited through snowballing. They partook in this research by completing a 31-question demographic survey and participating in a 46-question, semi-structured interview in which they had the opportunity to express their views on a variety of topics, from Australian politics, to religion and identity. The participants' backgrounds and understandings of their Muslim identity were diverse. The participants came from a variety of ethnic backgrounds and religious traditions. Forty-six of them identified as Sunni Muslims; twelve participants identified as Shi'a (Ja'fari), and six as "non-denominational" Muslims. There were 38 female and 26 male participants.

English was the primary language for 44 of the participants. Of those, 18 only spoke English, 27 of them spoke a second language, and one nominated a third language. Arabic, Urdu, Persian (Dari), Indonesian, and Turkish were the languages most spoken after English, alongside a variety of other languages from Eastern Europe, and Central, South and South-East Asia.

Fifteen participants had an Arab background (mostly Lebanese and Iraqi, with two Palestinians and Arab Afghan), eight participants had a Turkish background (including one of Cypriot and one of Eastern European origin), seven were from Pakistan, and six were Afghan from either Hazara, Pashtun or Arab backgrounds. Three participants were Indonesians, another three were Bosnians, two were Iranians and two were Bangladeshis. The remainder were Indian, Malay, Uighur, Kurdish, Albanian, Sri Lankan, Kenyan, Pakistani-Fijian, Uighur, South African and Anglo-Australian who is a convert to Islam.

All but ten were Australian citizens. Four of these participants had permanent residency status and six had temporary residency status. Thirty-five participants were born in Australia, four were born in Indonesia, three in Afghanistan, three in Pakistan, three in Iran, two in England, two in Germany, two in Singapore and one each for Turkey, India, UAE, Kuwait, Sri Lanka, Kenya, Saudi Arabia, Albania, New Zealand, and China.

Some of the questions asked in the interviews specifically related to this paper were: "What obstacles or challenges do you face to fully belong in this society?", "Have you experienced racial and religious discrimination at school, workplace or any other place? If so, what was your reaction to it?", "Have you seen any effects of negative media coverage about Muslims in your day-to-day life?", "Have you been to any non-Muslim worship building such as a church? Can you talk about this experience a little?", "Do you have Anglo Australian colleagues in your workplace? Or friends in your school? Are they friendly? Do you socialise with them outside of work/school?"

The authors adopted a participatory peer-research approach to data collection, which meant that the participants were interviewed by three research assistants who were undergraduate students of similar age and from diverse Muslim backgrounds. To ensure, confidentiality and anonymity, all participant names have been changed to pseudonyms by the authors.

Given our sampling approach and the size of our cohort, we do not claim that the experiences reported here are typical of all young Muslim Australians. Moreover, because most of the interviews were conducted over a period of about an hour, our analysis is not meant to exhaustively cover all real-world contact encounters our respondents have had. Rather, our data can allow us to explore the complexities of contact between majority Anglo-Australians and minoritized young Muslim Australians. All authors read the interview transcripts and noted references to contact of any sort. Then, they listened to these sections of the interviews carefully to identify subtle reactions when interviewees spoke about contact, including emotions, pauses, and emphases. In presenting specific interview materials in this article, the aim is not to be reductionist and convey the opinion of the "typical" young Muslim Australian. Rather, the aim is to demonstrate the heterogeneity of our respondents' experiences through discussing several individualized themes that emerged from the interviews.

This research provides an important appraisal of how young Muslims think about their identity, how they prefer to interact with the wider Australian community, their reactions to everyday encounters, and what kind of initiatives they want to undertake to improve the current situation.

Analysis and discussion

Our findings show that young Muslims have experienced discrimination at various times. One respondent, whose sister had received derogatory remarks, explained his feelings as follows:

> I felt angry … we're not here to hurt anyone, we just want to live our lives in peace … and you know just contribute to Australia and like these people have their own ideas and mentalities that we're here to push sharia law and all that sort of things and it's ridiculous, honestly. I don't really appreciate that sort of thing. (Majeed)

In many instances, young Muslim respondents argued that their physical appearance, especially the hijab for women created an obstacle to belonging to Australian society. One respondent described the challenges she faced to fully "belonging" in Australia as follows:

> I can sense that one tram full of people is just stare at me because I am using hijab there is a lot of people, you see that. I am trying to smile, I am trying to be a good Muslim, as a good Muslim representative but you know as a human I feel I am okay I am not really anything for you guys so, I will just be here man, I am just using this (tram). (Adeelah)

Some of the respondents also believed that contact with non-Muslims would alleviate the problems of prejudice that is widespread among conservative, mainly rural, Australians. Some of them were willing to initiate this contact

unilaterally and were eager to visit rural areas and meet with residents to explain Islam and Muslims. They mentioned that when they interact with non-Muslim Australians in rural regions, their Islamic identity is usually very visible and they interact with them as Muslims first and foremost. Participants said they openly and consciously try to represent Islam and Muslims to Anglo-Australians to change their perception of Islam and reduce their prejudices. Moreover, the Anglo-Australians, as the outgroup in this context, were considered by our participants as typical of their group. Some respondents claimed that mostly a small, rural and older group of Australians have prejudices against Muslims.

> I think personally my generation is more diverse and people are more respectful of each other but I think it is the older generations. They have more problems with disrespecting other person's beliefs because … they grew up in different times. (Zareena)

> I think it varies depending on the region. So, in cities … people are a lot more progressive and they understand more. Whereas in rural areas … they … have a worse opinion just because they haven't been exposed as much to the Muslim culture or the Muslims. (Zahid)

This sentiment overlaps with recent findings in the literature. Blair et al. (2017, 4) found that "older Australians (over 65) were more likely to have negative feelings about Muslim Australians, Middle-Eastern Australians and African Australians".

Previous research on intergroup contact has found that "the effects of contact are greater when respective group memberships are salient and/or out-group members are considered typical of their group as a whole" (Brown and Hewstone 2005; Tropp and Pettigrew 2005; Hewstone and Swart 2011, 376). This is confirmed by experiences of this study's respondents. Salience of group membership may have two meanings: (1) that they are seen as representative or prototypical of their group, and (2) that individuals see themselves as representative of their group, thus seek out opportunities to represent their group to others. Certainly, our respondents expressed both of these aspects. For example, several female respondents mentioned how "being a *hijabi* (headscarved) is a challenge to belonging in Australia". They also mentioned how their attire or the way they dress in general almost automatically put them in a position where they were expected to represent and speak for all Muslims in Australia. Ameer's words show the extent to which this idea of "representing the Muslim community" is ingrained in the mindset of some young Muslim Australians:

> As an example … if I went on a reality TV show as a Muslim, the people, knowing that I was a Muslim, I would always think about the impact it [would] have on the community. (Ameer)

Several of the respondents indicated that they were fine with contact with non-Muslims because they believed they were very good representatives of Muslims. Some of the respondents talked about how they seek out opportunities to talk to Anglo-Australians about Islam. They argued that many Australians had negative views of Muslims due to biased media coverage but they were confident in their ability to change these negative perceptions, based on previous positive encounters that had started as negative but after some contact became positive. Importantly, a number of these Muslims argued that, as in previous experiences, these attempts at contact may start with negative encounters but they were confident that the encounters would produce positive results eventually.

Prejudices, stereotyping, and discrimination

Although Australia is considered a country with a high level of social harmony, prejudices against Muslims and Islam have been widespread (Iner et al. 2017; Mansouri and Vergani 2018; Markus 2018; Barry and Yilmaz 2019). Such prejudices have been increasing in the context of various events, such as the rise (and subsequent fall) of the Islamic State, the global refugee crisis, and terrorist attacks in Europe, the US and Australia. Many of our respondents reported facing discrimination at various levels and receiving biased comments from general members of society. Most participants had also seen and heard that their Muslim friends and family members had also had negative experiences. One respondent described her experience as follows:

> You get the feeling that they don't like Muslims or they're just distant … It's just I got the feeling … It's more like having like sixth sense that you know when someone doesn't like you and it's just the way that their face mimics their body language and those kinds of things. (Eileen)

Female Muslims, especially those who wear hijab, often described getting certain looks from other people and, in rare cases, having racial slurs thrown at them. They thought these negative interactions were mainly because of their clothing and the hijab, which is considered a strong symbol of Islamic religiosity. One respondent explained his sister's experience as follows:

> For people around me who wear hijab for example … people look at them weirdly or … they have a bad impression of them before even knowing them and … my sister has been to the city in a headscarf and someone's called them terrorists … it exists. (Bushra)

In rare cases, our respondents reported being in the classes of racist tutors at their universities. One respondent described her experience in a university setting as follows:

> I had a few cases, the tutors were way more racist than lecturers. Like, we had one tutor he wouldn't let any of the ethnic people ask questions … if you ask a question he would just roll his eyes and you could tell that he didn't in any way want to associate with the ethnic students … and then we have a tutor who just assumed my entire background … I said 'Do you think that I have five sisters and we're all oppressed by our father?' She said 'Yeah'. (Jameelah)

Some respondents believed the job market in Australia was biased against Muslims, both in terms of getting a job and being in the workplace. One respondent described her workplace as follows:

> [My manager] would often make fun of my name, which is obviously like an Arab name, and refused to use the name which I go by. He made comments about my country of origin and made comments in regard to the dictator who ruled [the country], which was really quite offensive. (Fatimah)

Our respondents also thought that the older generation of Australians were more biased against Muslims than the younger generation. While talking about his discrimination experience at work, a respondent claimed that,

> Mostly, it's a lot of the older generation that hold onto that kind of idea, younger guys are much more nicer. It's mostly the older ones where they have more of a rigid view of immigration policies and, like, they'll take it out on you and there's nothing that you can do. I'm working there, you just have to smile and move on with it. (Hakeem)

The perceived role of the media in the rise of anti-Muslim sentiments

This research findings permit a critical discussion on the perceived role of mass media and its impact on intergroup contact. Studies have shown that positive media portrayals of outgroup members and intergroup contact can positively influence attitudes toward outgroups, and "exposure to negative intergroup interactions would lead to the modelling of negative intergroup attitudes" (Joyce and Harwood 2014, 637–638). Various studies on intergroup contact theory have also argued that different contextual factors, including the media, influence the contact – prejudice link. Studies have shown that attitudes towards certain groups are often influenced by media representations of those groups and therefore, media plays a significant role in reducing (or increasing) intergroup prejudice and conflict via changed perceptions of social norms (Paluck 2009).

Many of our respondents complained about negative portrayals of Muslims in Australian mainstream media. Some said the media was outright Islamophobic and said the media is "biased against Muslims", "hates Muslims", "emphasized Muslims' identity" in every negative situation, was "not neutral", was intentionally "targeting Muslims", and "misrepresenting" Muslims.

One respondent argued that:

> The Australian news and, you know, a lot of movies portray Muslims as evil and I'd like to see that stop … it's influenced some of the kids because they assume Muslims are all terrorists. I heard it in classes and stuff but I haven't really spoken to people. (Yaqub)

Many of our respondents believed that media influence is behind negative public opinions about Muslims in Australia. They claimed that although most Anglo-Australians are good people, they get intense exposure to negative media portrayal of Muslims, which change their perception and lead to prejudices and even hatred of Muslims. One respondent said:

> I think because of the role that the media can play, and the importance of the media, I think Muslims being such a small number in society, the perception of that through the media has a massive impact. So I would meet a lot of people who thought they knew [what] Islam and Muslims were. But once they were questioned about it or once you asked them to discuss it in a bit more detail they would pretty much be relaying things that they heard in the media. And it was that part that I've seen stuff from the media or, like, the hysteria or the fear from the media play out in numerous ways, whether that's people's perceptions or people trying to change certain laws or general discrimination that happened in the street. I think a lot of that has come from that perception and the view from certain news stories or the media. So yeah definitely. (Anas)

Eileen explained this issue as follows:

> Every second day there's something about Muslims [in the media] or they're just targeting something and doing something. But at the end of the day, what can you do?! There's so many Muslims around the world. Yes [media's negative portrayal is the reason why people have negative perception of me]. Media is a very strong persuasive object … it can manipulate a lot of people. (Eileen)

Particularly disturbing for our respondents was the notion that the media often focuses on the identity of a perpetrator if s/he is a Muslim, whereas in non-Muslim cases, the identity of the perpetrator is not mentioned. Tasneem described this as follows:

> The annoying thing about the media is [that] just because one person does something … all Muslims' name get bad … [it is] very stereotypical. Whereas if another person from another religion or another individual does it and they're not Muslim they all don't get blamed for, they all don't get mentioned. Whereas if a Muslim does one thing it's suddenly all Muslims are like that person.

Nonetheless, many respondents believed that it is predominantly older generation Australians that are influenced by negative media narratives, and that the younger generation, because they do not follow mainstream media as much, are more open-minded about Muslims. Khadijah summarized this sentiment as follows:

> I think [the media effect] depends on the age group and the discrimination … my generation don't really watch the news and we're more social-media reliant and so it's different, like, the news they absorb is very different. It really depends on what you're watching, what else you're watching … with the older generation, like the lecturers and stuff, the conflict there is from news and from the media they are consuming. So, I think again it depends on the age group and what kind of news, but it definitely has a negative impact. (Khadijah)

Transforming negative intergroup contact into positive encounters

While the aim of intergroup contact remains to transform negative attitudes and reduce prejudice, the fact remains that,

> the challenge facing participants in contact encounters is not simply to develop interpersonal familiarity as a means to correct stereotypes and break down intergroup boundaries. Rather, the challenge is to find ways of respecting group difference, even when one may believe that the other's deviate from what one considers as truths central to one's own identity. (Hopkins, Greenwood, and Birchall 2007, 683)

Research also shows that in general, the level and quality of intergroup contact between Anglo-Australians and Muslims in Australia is quite low (Bouma 2012). Moreover, social distance, defined as "the degrees and grades of affective closeness and intimacy people feel towards members of different groups in society" is wider between these two groups than between Anglo-Australians and any other minority group in Australia (Hassan 2018, 13). These problems point at the difficulties of initiating contact with Anglo-Australians from a Muslim perspective. Many of our respondents have acknowledged these difficulties in overcoming reticence in some segments of population and creating meaningful contact.

The respondents' view was that they want to talk about and represent Islam to Anglo-Australians, both to develop interpersonal familiarity and find ways to respect group difference without establishing exclusive identities. That is, our respondents were positive about the common identity they share with fellow Australians as law-abiding citizens. They believed those Australians who exhibit Islamophobic tendencies have not met Muslims in person and their impressions are based on media portrayals. The respondents believed that direct contact with these "ill-informed Australians" who have not met Muslims would show them that Muslims are not different to other Australian citizens. These participants not only want to be accepted as Muslims, but they also believe that being Muslim (their own Muslim identity, and Islam in general) can positively and significantly enable them to contribute to Australian society more generally. For example, Majeed described the experience of one of his friends:

> There was this guy who was a bit rude towards one of my friends wearing a scarf … He didn't acknowledge her as a person … Even though she hasn't even met him. I think it stopped after, when she got to know him in person and explained the reasons why she was like that. I think it's mostly come from ignorance and not meeting other people in other cultures.

Moreover, some of the respondents were eager to find opportunities to speak on behalf of their community to Anglo-Australians about Islam and Muslims that can establish an acceptance pathway of their difference. Along similar lines, it has been found that "religious injunction calls upon Muslims to perform da'wah (i.e. to call others to Islam) and many Muslims interpret this to mean that their religious identity requires them to be active in seeking out opportunities to communicate Islam's teaching" Hopkins, Greenwood, and Birchall (2007, 685).

> Religious injunction calls upon Muslims to perform dawah (to call others to Islam) and many Muslims interpret this to mean that their religious identity requires them to be active in seeking out opportunities to communicate Islam's teachings. From this perspective, everyday interaction may provide opportunities for Muslims to use their own example to correct misperceptions of Islam.

Although we found a similar dynamic, it was not in the form of "Islamic dawah", but rather presenting Muslims as good citizens and normal human beings to Anglo-Australians. This is consistent with other research that has shown that Muslim migrants in the West exhibit many socially progressive tendencies that are centred more on local, civic engagement and less on mere internal religious practice (Mansouri, Lobo, and Johns 2016; Rane et al. 2020).

To be clear, not all respondents endorsed the contact theory. Many of our respondents pointed out the inequalities that exist in intergroup contact between Muslims and Anglo-Australians. The Muslim community take the brunt of the burden and risks in at least three ways. First, some respondents mentioned how they feel the need to make Anglo-Australians *feel secure* in contact with Muslims. Saima said "I think maybe when they feel secure and … they have started to like me, maybe I can try to tell them, 'look I am a Muslim'". This comes from some respondents' perception that Anglo-Australians are afraid of Muslims. Second, some pointed to the burden of being *extra nice*. Zareena summarized this sentiment: "I just try to be nicer than I need … because I know that they literally just view me as a Muslim and not just as an individual". Third, the above-mentioned encounters of discrimination point at the risks involved for Muslims in initiating contact, as the contact might turn into an overpowering experience of discrimination and in some cases even harassment.

This paper also delves into the debate within the Muslim community about the optimal way of building contact with Anglo-Australians. Hopkins and Kahani-Hopkins' (2006) work broaches this. They found two opposing

views among Muslims: one encouraged contact between Muslims and non-Muslims, while the other opposed contact, viewing it as a threat to Muslim identity.

While many of the respondents claimed to have faced discrimination and, in some cases, had racist, Islamophobic slurs directed at them, almost all of them indicated that they often respond in ways that do not escalate the situation. In most cases, their goal is to educate people on Islam and Muslims and be a good representative of Muslims in Australia. Contrary to findings from the US in relation to African Americans' experiences, many of our respondents did not avoid contact with Anglo-Australians who are perceived as prejudiced against them. As Muneera explained, many are willing to explain their position in order to improve societal understanding of Muslim issues.

> There was this woman who asked me, 'oh don't you get warm in your scarf' or 'why are you wearing your scarf?' Then I explain to her why I did it and how any of these obstacles I face doesn't bother me and she like really understood and she thought it was really lovely. (Muneera)

Countering biased media narratives emerged as a main goal in this context. Speaking about the negative media coverage of Muslims, Tasneem argued that:

> It motivates me to be better because it just shows me that … I'm not just seen as an individual … all Muslims are being impacted … because reputation … is very important. So … it makes me feel like I have to be more cautious, like the way I speak and the way I interact with other people to so that they don't get a negative impact about Muslims or Afghans. (Tasneem)

In many cases, the study respondents believed in the potentially positive impact of intergroup contact. Their strategy was to engage respectfully with other Australians and enter into genuine conversations that could lead to the reduction of negative stereotypes and overall prejudice. Majeed described his approach as follows:

> The challenge is to try to get rid of the stigma that I'm a Muslim and I'm here to take away your place, your jobs. And also, you know, the news portraying us … in quite a negative light. I think that also it's a major challenge for all of us trying to belong. We have to overcome [these challenges] by just greeting our neighbours and, you know, trying to be polite as possible and something that I think will go away with time and with more knowledge and education about it. (Majeed)

Nonetheless, these statements also demonstrate the burden placed on Muslims to educate, prove themselves, and engage with prejudice in positive ways. It is important to mention these problematic aspects of intergroup contact in addition to positive engagement. Whether it is Melek's worry that "us trying to prove that we are good but just not getting the acceptance in return", or Nilan's burden to "prove that the way I look doesn't change anything about me like my work ethic" or Zareena's burden that "I have more

responsibility – moral responsibility than a normal person … [to] create an impression for myself. Because like I am not only representing myself but it is like a whole group of people". All of these problematic aspects point to a lack of some of the conditions that Allport (1954) says are necessary for successful intergroup relations, with the most apparent condition that is arguably not met in the Australian society being the equal status of Muslim Australians (in relation to Australians from Anglo-Saxon backgrounds). In addition, while efforts for intergroup dialogue between Muslim and non-Muslim Australians (such as inter-faith Iftar dinners) have been made, predominantly by community and non-governmental organizations (Yücel 2011), there is no consistent and unequivocal commitment to support intergroup dialogue and cooperation from the power structures in the Australian society.

Responding positively to negative comments

Some of the respondents stated that their response to the biased comments that they received was to "just ignore", "walk away" and sometimes "laugh at it". One respondent (Nadeem) described what he did in response to a woman criticizing his political activism as follows:

> I approached the lady very nicely and very gently to describe that I consider myself an Australian citizen, and it is my duty to stand up for my community. We had a very short conversation … at the end of the conversation … she seemed very happy, she apologized for saying what she said … at the end it had a positive result.

While very few of our respondents were Muslim activists, most of our respondents believed issues of bias and prejudice can be resolved through more intergroup contact. Jameelah claimed that "these problems can be solved through interaction … We should mix with other people. This is the only way to solve these issues". Another respondent, Ameer, said he wants to "bring Muslims and Australians together" in order to gain greater mutual understanding and eliminate bias and prejudice.

Majeed, who said he had been called "different derogatory names, like monkey" by customers in his workplace, explained his reaction to such racist comments as follows:

> I just laugh honestly. I just crack up laughing because, you know, it's … their views are so old and outdated … We know Australia is more accepting … most people around my age … they accept who we are. It's mostly the elderly that they … hold on to their ways, they were raised in that way and you know I can't fault them for it. But then again, they should, you know, learn. (Majeed)

Other respondents complained about the Muslim community's own segregation and failure to initiate contact with other Australian communities, a form of intra-community bonding that neglects the primacy of bridging

social capital (Putnam 2002). When asked about what he considers the main challenge to Muslims' fully "belonging" in Australia, Fayrooz said it was:

> Cultural segregation. So, certain cultures will huddle up together and form their own little bubble, their own little country inside a country. So for example, even though we live in Australia in Melbourne, you can clearly see that the Turkish demographic in Australia will always have their own little area [where] they'll form their own Turkish community and this community will not mix in with the rest of the country.

But participants believe the solution lies in contact with other fellow Australians. They emphasize the importance of "being nice" and simply being a good representative of the Muslim community as crucial steps in the right direction. Khadijah described it as follows:

> [To solve problems] just living my life and being nice to the people I meet, I think is helping. Some people that I've talked to [have] never [met] or they have met Muslims but they don't know you very closely. So, it's like … 'hey this is me and I'm very similar to you'.

Khadijah complained about mosques not being open to the wider Australian community. When asked about what the Muslim community can do about resolving the issue of negative bias, she said:

> Mosques being more open to non-Muslims, educating others about Islam and how we really are and how the news is just portraying something else. (Khadijah)

An important driver of this study's respondents' willingness to initiate contact was their firm belief in the positive benefit of information. Simply put, participants believed the problem is that many Australians do not know enough about either Muslims or Islam and spreading information through face-to-face encounters is a necessary step towards changing perceptions. Hakeem offered the following advice for solving this problem:

> Information, just giving out information to people … having people from different beliefs be around each other … if somebody would meet a Muslim and talk … then that alone will start to change opinions. So I think, yes, the first step is to really, sort of bring the wide range of communities together and sort of start to build this trust with one another and understanding. And the ways you can do that is by building programs where you get people from ethnic backgrounds join and talk with each other, talk about their experiences growing up in whatever belief they believe in in Australia. And, you know, you try to get everyone on the same page and once you've done that, you sort of you get people to see things from a different perspective. (Hakeem)

Jameelah shared this sentiment:

> I think just interaction … it's just being in different places. I kind of believe that … as Muslim youth … we should be doing a lot of different things. We

> shouldn't be doing like just teaching and being a doctor … we should try to mix and go to different events and try to just, I guess, make the social spaces … shall include more people. That's the only way. Because if you've never spoken to a Muslim before you wouldn't understand or know how we are. (Jameelah)

On the other hand, participants in this study indicated that they want Muslims in mainstream media to be represented more positively and show that being Muslims is nothing out of the ordinary, they are no different to any other Australian citizens of different ethnic and religious backgrounds, including Anglo-Australians.

In contrast to mainstream media, some respondents talked about social media in a positive light:

> There are people who are about spreading the Muslim excellence, there is a whole thing about that and uplifting Muslim women in particular, so those people I really like and admire. So, Twitter I would retweet some of their things, so yeah. Share it around. (Aisha)

However, social media is not necessarily considered as an antidote to negative stereotypes as participants did not have unequivocally positive views of it. For most respondents, social media can be helpful or harmful depending on the way Muslims use it:

> It can be good because you can voice your opinions and like share what you think online as well. But it can be bad as well like others and people of the like other community and what not, can say bad stuff too, you just like- it is a more not open way but greater way to put forth and they can be both bad or good depending on what you put forth. (Ajmal)

Nonetheless, one of the positive aspects of social media is certainly that it allows Muslims to represent themselves as everyday Muslims, normal citizens, good people who can laugh, who can talk about cuisine or fashion, just like Anglo-Australians and others:

> I think it is good, I don't see any negative aspects to it … I have seen more videos of Muslim people that people find funny and videos on Instagram where there are women in hijabs in it, I think that is a good thing because it shows how people we can laugh and you know. (Jameelah)

They believed that through social media they can fight negative mainstream media narratives and framings and can interact with Anglo-Australians in a more positive environment. From their perspective, it appears that televisual, vicarious intergroup contact is severely missing in Australia, as mass media does not show Muslims interacting with Anglo-Australians in a positive environment.

Conclusion

People's conceptions of what other people think of them are as important as their own self-perceptions for meaningful intergroup contact (Shelton and

Richeson 2005). One of the key findings of this study is that although the majority of the respondents anticipate prejudice against them from Anglo-Australians, these young Muslim Australians believe in the capacity of intergroup contact to challenge and transform non-Muslims' negative attitudes, prejudices and sentiments in a positive way. The findings show that prejudice is seen as mostly linked to a lack of contact with and knowledge about Muslims – non-Muslims in some cases might have never met Muslims and base their views on biased and prejudicial mainstream media. Many participants expressed a willingness to engage in contact with non-Muslim and Anglo-Australians to increase inter-personal interaction and thus reduce prejudice and intercultural tensions. Almost all of the participants indicated that social media represents a potentially useful platform for Muslims to create an alternative narrative to the stereotypical, Islamophobic and sensationalized framing of Muslims by the mainstream media.

This study found that even when a person has anxiety about perceived prejudice against Muslims, young Muslim Australians have been able to transform the views of non-Muslim Australians through engaging in dialogue and responding positively to negative remarks. Rather than confrontation, most of our respondents chose to establish positive contact with those who exhibited anti-Muslim attitudes and prejudice.

Moreover, our findings show the burden placed on Muslims to educate, prove themselves, and engage with the prejudice in positive ways. It is important to mention these problematic aspects of intergroup contact in addition to positive engagement. These aspects suggest that there are deep-seated contextual issues in the Australian society – such as status inequality and a lack of structural support for cooperation and dialogue (to mention only two of Allport's optimal conditions for intergroup contact), that might further undermine positive intergroup relations between Muslim and Non-Muslim Australians. These findings highlight the potential for broader support from the government structures (in terms of both reducing inequality and providing platforms for intergroup dialogue) to bring substantial benefits to the Australian society as a whole.

Finally, we found that while our respondents are aware that conditions for a positive intergroup contact are hard to come by in real life, many still value intergroup contact highly and have eager to initiate contact or at least be model citizens, in order to develop better and stronger ties between Muslims and Anglo-Australians in Australia. Respondents were willing to engage with all Australians, despite believing that many have disproportionately negative attitudes and systematic prejudice against them. They believe that engaging in positive intergroup contact with Anglo-Australians can change attitudes and reduce overall prejudices against Muslims. The literature argues that both ingroup and outgroup fears of rejection, not only influence the dynamics of intergroup interactions, but also influence both

groups' explanations for why they avoid intergroup interactions (Shelton and Richeson 2005; Shapiro et al. 2011; Stathi et al. 2020). However, this study found that not all participants refrained from contact because of perceived prejudices against them. While some actively pursued intergroup contact in order to represent Islam and Muslims in positive ways, many also tried to be good citizens in order to establish positive view of Muslims in Australian society. It is possible that the trend captured here is a reflection of processes particular to our sample and the community they represent, but it is more plausible that this trend signals that attitudes of young Muslims in Western societies might be changing. It suggests that young Muslims who are well integrated and feel they are valuable members of society use their voice to promote positive intergroup contact. Being mostly socialized in an information-rich society, the young Muslim Australians in this study seemed to instantly recognize the importance of factual as well as experiential knowledge for breaking down old prejudices and misconceptions.

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