

Media, Faith and Security, House of Lords, 28th January 2016
Extracts from
‘Risk and Resilience in British Muslim Communities’
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The conceptualization of risk

The concept of risk was used as framework through which to analyse the focus group data. There are various ways to think about the concept of risk. First, there are the common sense, everyday understandings of risk and danger. Second, there are more mathematical and statistical approaches to the analysis and prediction of large-scale risks such as crime and disease. Third, there are the more academic theories related to our changing relationships with risk in modern post-industrial society. However, rather than provide a detailed examination of these more academic approaches, for the purposes of today’s presentation the focus will be placed primarily on how the participants themselves viewed risk within their local communities.

Victimization and discrimination among British Muslim communities

Previous scholarly criminological literature concerning Islamophobia and anti-Muslim hate crime has asserted the disproportionate risks of physical violence suffered by British Muslim communities. Despite these assertions, participants in the study rarely recounted experiences of physical abuse. Instead, the participants described verbal abuse and other more non-criminal forms of victimization and discrimination. Many participants shared accounts of generally hostile social conditions rather than one-off criminal incidents. Participants described these social conditions in a variety of public places (for example, on public transport, or in shops and supermarkets). These accounts were broadly similar across the various study locations. There were no apparent regional differences, and little variance between participants from different ethnic or national backgrounds. A perception of a bad atmosphere for British Muslims was shared in all the focus groups, by both male and female participants, but particularly, as some here might expect, in accounts of ‘everyday’ discrimination shared by visibly Muslim women.

A female respondent during a focus group in northern England shared an account of the ongoing exclusion of her Muslim female classmate who chooses to wear a face veil. Participants in a focus group in southern England shared an experience of criminal verbal abuse (from a block of flats) alongside discrimination that was equally exclusionary, but less obviously criminal: a lollipop lady referred to the participants as ‘*you people*’.

A male participant explained how explicit expressions of racism have been replaced by a form that is equally widespread but much more subtle. A female participant in Scotland described subtle discrimination related to her visible Muslim identity. For her, choosing to wear a headscarf often generates strange looks, especially on public transport. She spoke of her perception that non-Muslim people on the bus often choose to keep her at arm’s length.

Participants in England described the ‘everyday’, almost mundane nature of anti-Muslim discrimination. One account involved people putting on Indian accents and laughing in a supermarket queue, another participant in the group stated that she experiences this kind of abuse all the time. Being ignored was another phenomenon evoked frequently by participants. A participant in Scotland shared an account of her and her children being

repeatedly ignored by staff in a supermarket. The participant clearly recognized the nature of such discrimination saying, 'it is subtle, but it's there...'

A participant in England shared another account involving a non-criminal form of discrimination at a pedestrian crossing. The participant described someone giving her 'dirty looks' and moving away from her as they waited for the lights to change, an encounter that left the participant feeling excluded and uncomfortable.

There were, as expected, many descriptions of incidents involving criminal verbal abuse: terms such as 'fucking Muslims', 'terrorist', and 'raghead' being notable examples from focus groups throughout the study. However, participants relied more often on constructions of personal risk devoid of identifiable criminal activity: to use the lexicon of British police recorded crime, these were 'hate incidents' rather than 'hate crimes'. Risk was perceived as pervading a hostile social environment in which non-criminal verbal abuse is a frequent occurrence. This environment was described as nurturing the fear of more physical forms of anti-Muslim violence even where such incidents were less frequently experienced.

Media complicity

Alongside accounts of these 'everyday' forms of discrimination, the complicity of the British media in generating these adverse social conditions was a common thread throughout many of the focus group discussions.

Previous studies of media discourse using large bodies of analysed text from mainstream newspapers have provided compelling evidence for a systematic negative bias running throughout the British media. Previous social science studies have described communities as blaming their status as a despised and disadvantaged minority on the 'evil demon' of the media.

However, in general, academic studies rarely include Muslim voices or detailed descriptions of how these negative media portrayals impact upon daily lives within Muslim communities. The study sought to collect these accounts and aimed to give a voice to those within British Muslim communities who have suffered the perceived practical consequences of widespread media prejudices. These voices, and their analysis, have been summarized for this presentation today.

Many participants in the study reflected on their own social disadvantages as by-products of negative media depictions of Muslims and a negative bias towards the reporting of violence, terrorism and war. Overall, there was a sense of double victimization by the media's portrayals of Muslims. First, the emotional hurt caused by the media biases against Muslims and Islam. Second, the psychological and physical harms caused by actions perceived as having been informed, encouraged or justified by such biases. Just as climate change narratives precede open hostility towards energy companies, so terrorism and radicalization narratives were perceived by the participants as preceding hostility towards Muslims.

A participant in a town in southern England expressed her view that Muslims are always reported in a negative way, and that positive news stories about mosques, communities or individuals are rarely represented, whereas, in her words, 'anything negative is straight there on the news'.

Other focus groups perceived causal links between media portrayals of Muslims and adverse or hostile social conditions and their overall fear of crime. A female respondent in a city in the north of England described, as other participants did, 'dirty looks from others in public places, but particularly after prominent news events featuring Muslim people or conflicts in the Middle East. Other participants perceived a causal link between media depictions and the heightened anticipation of risks around further and more serious forms of discrimination and physical violence.

Two participants in Scotland stated that the media made them more anxious and more scared. This heightened anxiety was described as being caused by the perceived reaction among non-Muslims to stories broadcast on the television news or shared via social

media sites. These fears were described as affecting decisions made in respect of their children's safety whilst playing outside the home.

Other participants in Scotland perceived a causal link between the prevalence of subtle, 'everyday' forms of discrimination and high-profile news events such as murder of British soldier Lee Rigby. Participants described perceiving non-Muslim neighbours as being 'very, very bitter' and receiving unfriendly, discourteous service in shops during the days following the murder.

A female participant in a city in northern England described Islam as having been 'hijacked by the media' and perceived non-Muslims as having been brainwashed into believing that Muslims were barbaric and incapable of being peaceful loving people with the effect that, overall, Muslims have been 'dehumanized' by both the media and the consumers of media stories.

Discussion and conclusion

The summarized examples above form only a small part of a larger, more detailed study which will be published later this year by *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, a leading academic journal.

The study analyses what we might cautiously label as 'low level' incidents of 'everyday' discrimination and media depictions of Muslims and Islam from an ecological perspective: an ecology of anti-Muslim hatred and discrimination formed by the perceived interactions and inter-relationships between news stories, non-Muslim opinion, the 'everyday' risks experienced, in particular, by visibly Muslim women, the perception of a 'bad atmosphere' in public places, and feelings of exclusion and fear among British Muslim communities (especially in respect of more violent forms of crime).

The full journal article also explores some of the reactions to these events and how religious practice and identity, and how engagement with local community networks and organizations can increase a sense of individual and community resilience to the risks of hate crime and discrimination.

One of the main arguments in respect of resilience is that, whilst there are widespread problems of hostility and prejudice among British Muslim communities, we should resist the urge to describe Muslim people only as helpless victims from powerless communities. The study revealed multiple examples of agency, personal strength, choice, and meaning-making through adversity and argues that academics, practitioners and policy-makers would benefit from reliance on these rather than on the implied absence of such factors.

Nevertheless, and within the context of media, religion and security as being discussed here today, the study revealed that discussion of one-off criminal incidents may not be guiding us towards a complete overall picture of anti-Muslim hate crime and discrimination in the UK. Far more Muslim lives are affected by the types of 'everyday' discrimination detailed earlier and by a sense that ongoing hostile social climate is being generated by the negative media reporting of Muslims and Islam.

Thank you for listening.

JH, 19th January 2016