Acculturative issues of Muslims in Australia

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Abstract

Muslims in Australia are from a range of cultural and language groups. In spite of their long presence in Australia, research on this population is a recent development. The information that is emerging indicates that, in general, acculturation process is not problematic for the majority of Muslims. Most of them integrate well and report a blended identity. They value Australian institutions and contribute to the society in all spheres of life. However, acculturative stress has also emerged in the form of language barriers, employment challenges, financial disadvantages, and marginalization. These challenges have been associated with widespread negativity toward Muslims as a result of domestic and international terrorist attacks. Further, an adverse portrayal of Muslims in the media has contributed to the development of prejudices and Islamophobia among non-Muslim Australians, leading to discrimination and strained relations between the two groups. Although there is an ongoing attempt to repair relations between Muslims and the larger society in Australia, more effective strategies are required. Suggestions for stakeholders are discussed.

Keywords: Muslims, Australia, acculturation, acculturative stress

Acculturative issues of Muslims in Australia

Australia is one of the most multicultural societies in the world. The Australian population comprises of people from 300 language and cultural groups (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2013a). A number of ethnic groups, which contribute to that vast diversity, identify as Muslims. Muslims in Australia are in the minority, based both on religion and ethnic origins. Islam is the third most common religion in Australia (Pratt, 2011), and is the fastest growing religion in that country (Foster, Cook, Barter-Godfrey, & Furneaux, 2011). Although Muslims have been living in Australia for centuries, the country has seen a rapid increase in the population of this group during the last three decades (Pratt, 2011). These Muslims, like all other immigrants, go through an adjustment and acculturation process. While their contributions were appreciated, since the 9/11 terror attacks, they report having been perceived as a threat (Poynting & Mason, 2006). Further, global terror activities and the negative portrayal of Muslims in the media have flared up anger and prejudices against them (Poynting & Perry, 2007). These biases have at times strained the relations between the Muslims and the general population, and have made the acculturation process more challenging. In the following sections, studies with Muslims in Australia are reviewed with reference to their acculturation experiences. Suggestions that can be incorporated to facilitate their acculturation process are discussed. It is important to note that, to the authors' knowledge, acculturation and the acculturative stress have not yet been formally and systematically examined in Australia. Most of this information is inferred through other studies focussing on the experiences and challenges of Muslims in Australia.

Origin, history and demographics of Muslims in Australia

Historical records indicate that Muslims first sailed to the Australian continent in 17th century (Saeed, 2004). There is also evidence of some Muslims entering Australia as settlers and convicts in as early as 1802 (Saeed, 2003). However, the first significant settlement of Muslims occurred in the 1860s, when Afghan cameleers and their families migrated to Australia (Yasmeen, 2010). Due to Australia's white-only policy¹, very few Muslims entered Australia, and records of the few comprised of Afghan-and Malay-origin populations. A small number of Albanians arrived after World War I (Pratt, 2011). After World War

1. The 'White Australia' policy refers to legislation that restricted immigration of non-European (non-white) people to Australia. The Immigration Restriction Act was enforced in 1901. The 'White Australia' policy was dismantled in 1966. <https://www.border.gov.au/about/corporate/information/fact-sheets/08abolition>

II, Muslims from Yugoslavia, Cyprus, Poland, Hungary, Russia, and Turkey migrated to Australia (Foroutan, 2008). The numbers increased slowly in the 1970s, once the white-only policy was eradicated and immigration from non-European countries was permitted. The civil war in Lebanon in the late 1970s led to significant numbers of Lebanese migrants settling in Australia (Betts & Healy, 2006). Similarly, a series of global crises and conflicts, including the Iran-Iraq War, turmoil in Afghanistan, the first Gulf War, civil war in Somalia, and growing militancy in Pakistan contributed to the increased presence of Muslims in Australia (Yasmeen, 2015).

In Australia, just over 2% of the population identify themselves as Muslims (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2013b). Of the entire Muslim population, 61.5% can be categorized as immigrants, born elsewhere and migrated to Australia. The remainder (39.5%) are Australian-born, second-generation Muslims. The immigrant population represent 183 Middle Eastern, Asian, Eastern Europe, and African countries of origin (Hassan, 2010). The largest populations, in descending order, are from Lebanon, Turkey, Afghanistan, Bosnia/Herzegovina, Pakistan, Indonesia, Iraq, Bangladesh, Iran, Fiji, Cypress, Somalia, Egypt, and Malaysia (Saeed, 2003, 2004). Nearly half of the Australian-born Muslims are from Lebanese and Turkish descent, and heritage of the others is linked with a wide range of countries (Yasmeen, 2015). Muslims are dispersed across all of the Australian states and territories, with the highest number settled in New South Wales and the second highest in Victoria (Hassan, 2015). The vast majority of Australian Muslims live in urban settings, with 75% of them concentrating in Sydney and Melbourne (Hassan, 2015).

The Muslim population of Australia skews young: 77% are below the age of 44, with 37% below the age of 24 (Peucker, Roose, & Akbarzadeh, 2014). Being young, they are either in full-time education or working. Other biographical statistics reflect 80% of this population possesses a high proficiency of English (Hassan, 2015). Nearly 45% have completed high school and the rest have tertiary education (Peucker et al., 2014). Muslim males, compared with the mainstream males, have a higher level of postgraduate qualification (Hassan, 2010). Muslims are in administration and services (32%), blue collar (38%), and professional and managerial (30%) jobs (Hassan, 2015). Nine% earn more than \$3000 per week, 38% earn between \$1250 to \$2999 per week, 32 % earn between \$600-\$1248 per week, 18% earn \$599 or less per week and 3% have no personal income (Hassan, 2015). The number of people who own a house is half of the national level (Hassan, 2010). Compared to 14% of their countrymen, 27% of Australian Muslim children live in poverty (Hassan, 2015). Elderly Muslims, when compared to average Australian seniors, have a higher rate of disability and require assistance for everyday life (Hassan, 2015).

Acculturation

All those who immigrate to a new country undergo change, referred to as acculturation. It is an adaptation process where different ethnic groups meet and interact and subsequently change by adopting others' beliefs, values, norms, outlooks, traditions, customs, and behaviors (Sam & Berry, 2010). Though it is a two-way process in theory, in reality the minority has to embrace the ways of the larger majority (Berry, 2005). Changes occur at the psychological and sociocultural level (Ward, 2008); Individuals from minority backgrounds can either marginalize and isolate, or assimilate and integrate into the dominant culture (Berry & Sam, 2012). Integration, which is an amalgamation of original and adopted cultures and belief systems, is regarded as the favorable outcome. However, integration is affected by the ideas and perspective of the newly arrived as well as the expectations, attitudes, and behaviors of the host society. It is important for the members of the larger society to accept and engage with its minorities (Bourhis, Moise, Perreault, & Senecal, 1997). Overall, acculturation is a complex multidimensional phenomenon, with changes occurring at numerous levels.

A review of the literature indicated limited information about the acculturation, adaptation, and integration of Muslims in Australia (Fozdar, 2011). To address this gap, researchers have recently started to focus on their settlement process, experiences, and challenges encountered. The information that is available indicates that, in the past, Muslim immigrants settled well, lived peacefully, valued their host society, and contributed to Australia's economic development (Pratt, 2011). They valued the significance of developing English proficiency (Sheppard, 2015) and respected Australian democratic and judicial systems (Rane, Nathie, Isakhan, & Abdalla, 2011). Additionally, Rane and colleagues (2011) identified Australian Muslim appreciation for the educational and health care systems in Australia. Surveys on Muslims in Australia have highlighted that majority of them are not "radicalized" (Kabir, 2008a) and are loyal to their adopted country (Yucel, 2015). Further, investigations on the values of the Muslims in Australia indicated that participants perceived their values to be aligned with universal moral and ethical values (Kabir, 2008a). Allegiance to Australia has become evident through a 2015 report based on the most recent (2011) census data, according to which 74% of respondents identified themselves as Australian (Hassan, 2015). Studies exploring identity issues found that Australian Muslims reported feeling that they can be good Muslims and good Australians (Woodlock, 2011); further, the majority of the respondents reported a bicultural identity (Kabir, 2011; Woodlock, 2011). Muslim immigrants to Australia like to adapt, but also want to retain their original culture, language, and religious identity (Poynting, 2009). Pratt (2011)

described Australian Muslims as using their value system and bicultural identity to uplift the status of their communities; this was indicated by the community's establishment of institutions: a large number of restaurants and businesses, approximately 100 mosques, and 30 Islamic schools across the country (Pratt, 2011). As yet, there is inadequate information about Muslim engagement with mainstream Australian; however, the data emerging indicated that most of the skilled Muslim population interacted with members of the larger society (Fozdar, 2011). Studies examining the psychological factors identify varying levels of self esteem (Every & Perry, 2014). When assessed at the individual level, reports of wellbeing appeared to be similar to that of non-immigrant Australians; at the national level, however, it appeared to be lower than Australians (though still within average range; Woodlock, 2012). Acculturation is not an easy process and can precipitate psychosocial challenges for minorities and the larger majority.

Acculturative Stress

Psychosocial and cultural challenges experienced by the immigrant community resulting from the acculturation process are referred to as "acculturative stress" (Sam & Berry, 2010). Studies conducted in Australia reveal that Muslims have experienced acculturative stress. Acquisition of the English language has been a difficult task, leading to language barriers and a sense of isolation and psychological distress (Casimiro, Hancock, & Northcote, 2007; Khawaja, 2007). Some children of immigrants report feeling torn between their parents' world and their peers' world (Poynting, 2009), and describe integrating the two cultures as stressful. Securing employment has been a major difficulty due to discrimination (Casimiro et al., 2007). There is evidence that, when compared to mainstream applicants, Australian Muslims encounter severe problems securing jobs, and very often do not even get interviews (Centre for Muslim Minorities & Islam Policy Studies, 2009). Peucker and colleagues (2014) report similar findings. Subsequently, unemployment has aggravated poverty (Hassan, 2015). Socioeconomic marginalization and a sense of deprivation are hypothesized as salient factors associated with religious and non-religious "radicalization" (Hassan, 2010). Youth, a period of unemployment, is postulated to be more vulnerable and at risk due to being in a physical and emotional developmental stage (Hassan, 2015). Muslims have emerged as a disadvantaged section of the Australian population (Peucker et al., 2014).

Investigations are indicating that Muslims in Australia tend to feel less safe (Centre for Muslim Minorities, 2009) and worry about their future safety and security (Woodlock, 2012). There is an overwhelming concern regarding the media, as it is not viewed as trustworthy (Rane & Hersi, 2012). There

has been a large number of negative stories about Muslims in the media since 2000; This is a consequence of tragic events, such as a gang rape of woman in Sydney by Muslim men, insensitive comments by someone claiming to be a Muslim leader, and the Cronulla riots (Bouma, 2011; Dunn, Klocher, & Salabey, 2007); media reports on Muslims have similarly worsened after international and national terror attacks. Muslims report being frustrated with the attention on the behavior of an infinitesimal percentage of Muslims (Poynting & Perry, 2007). Media reporting, which is perceived by Muslims as one-sided (Kabir, 2008b), has presented them as illiterate and ill-informed traitors and sympathizers of terrorists (HREOC, 2004; Poynting & Mason, 2006). There is a general impression that Muslim do not assimilate in with the majority (Fozdar, 2011). This notion has been reinforced by politicians, some of whom have used a narrow definition of integration based on cultural indicators (attire worn, language used, and food consumed) instead of the broader financial, political, and social indicators (contributing to society through paid and unpaid work, and social interaction with the majority). Some media reports have represented hijab and niqab in an inaccurate and biased manner (Hebbani & Wills, 2012; Kabir, 2006). Subsequently, Muslim women, particularly those who wore hijab and niqab, report encountering more prejudicial treatment (Yasmeen, 2007). Suspicion has increased toward those who appear to be from the Muslim world (Foster et al., 2011); consequently these individuals have been at a higher disadvantage (Dellal, 2004). Australian governments, past and present, have tried to curb terrorism through their “war on terror” campaign. This approach has led to surveillance, interrogation, and mandating Muslim leaders and schools to teach “Australian” values (Pratt, 2011; Spalek & Imtoul, 2007). These efforts have been perceived as an intrusion by the state into the religious and cultural affairs of Muslim citizens (Poynting & Mason, 2008) and have increased stress upon them (Michael, 2009). Muslims are more likely to be stopped and searched for security reasons, and more likely to be tried in the courts (Poynting & Perry, 2007). Consequently, media and governmental policies have contributed to the rising rates of Islamophobia, which is present in the form of unfounded fears, and prejudicial and stereotypical thinking (Bouma, 2011; Dunn et al., 2007; Ho, 2007; Kabir, 2007). There is an element of “us versus them” thinking on the behalf of non-Muslim Australians, which is tarnishing the social inclusivity and harmony in Australia (Ata, 2015; Hopkins, 2011; Poynting & Mason, 2006). Contrary to the “war on terror” strategy, a softer approach is also being tried, which is more socially inclusive, involves community engagement, and is perceived more favorably by Australian Muslims as they appreciate being actively involved in the safety and wellbeing of their adopted country (Spalek & Imtoul, 2007).

Implications

The outcome of the studies conducted on Muslims in Australia is mixed and inconclusive. Muslims appear to be well-adjusted, and appreciative of their host society and optimistic about their lives (Pratt, 2011). Nevertheless, there is an indication of acculturative stress. The psychosocial and financial challenges appear to be associated with the prejudices and discriminations in Australia (Centre for Muslim Minorities, 2009; Casimiro et al., 2007; Khawaja, 2007). The negative representation of Muslims has exacerbated Islamophobia, leading to strained relations between Muslim and non-Muslim Australians (Hopkins, 2011; Poynting & Mason, 2006). Acculturation is a multifaceted issue, therefore, to acculturate and integrate well into the society, there are multiple factors that need to be taken into consideration by the Muslims (Bourhis et al., 1997). Firstly, they need to play an active role in their process of acculturation by continuing to learn the English language and acquire relevant knowledge and skills for successful adaptation into Australian society. Muslim immigrants need to draw on their resilience and personal and collective strengths to manage the stressors associated with migration to a new country and with being a minority. Due to the negative portrayal of Muslims through media and heightened level of terror, it may be difficult for non-Muslim Australians to completely trust their Muslim neighbors. It is therefore vital for Muslims to continue engaging with the larger majority in order to offer insights on themselves and their religion. Interactions like this will diffuse misconceptions and misunderstandings about Islam and address stereotypes about Muslims. To regain the lost trust, Muslims need to inform the public that extremism and terrorist activity has no place in Islam and these negative actions should not be generalized to all Muslims. Moreover, the Australian perspective and definition of 'integration' needs revision and modification. Integration, in multicultural Australian society, should not be restricted to speaking fluent English, wearing western clothing, and consuming local food; rather, it should be measured by a person's social harmony and contribution to the wider society. Further, stakeholders including politicians need to ensure that policies are inclusive and accepting. The "war on terror" campaign can be equitable, fair, and socially inclusive. The media has to play a more ethical role by presenting facts only, with context, and avoid divisive rhetoric. Finally, stakeholders need to pay urgent attention to Muslims who are socially disadvantaged, through unemployment, poverty, and marginalization. It is critical to assist these individuals in order to prevent them from being susceptible to criminal temptations, radicalization, or serious mental health issues. Youth, who are often more vulnerable due to the developmental stage and emotional immaturity, require the most immediate attention.

Limitations and Future Directions

Research with the Australian Muslim population is limited. Investigations have increased only in the last two decades, once Muslims became visible due internal social issues and terrorist attacks. Most of the studies conducted are qualitative or based on small quantitative data sets. Though this is a helpful first step, extensive mixed-method investigations with large samples that represent Australian Muslims nationally are warranted. Although, past research has extensively explored the impact of the media and Islamophobia, there has been a dearth of studies examining the acculturation process, acculturative stress, and other mental health issues. There is a need for the future studies to examine these psychosocial aspects of adaptation.

Conclusion

A review of the literature indicates that while a majority of Australian Muslim immigrants acculturate and adjust adequately, a minority appears to struggle. Moreover, a few outliers have damaged the reputation of Muslim community with their criminal and terror-related activities. The disproportionate attention paid by the media to the disreputable activities of a handful of people has polarized Australian society and intensified Islamophobia. All these developments have hindered the adjustment of Muslims and stained their relationship with the larger society. Muslim immigrants and broader society have to work together to address these problems.

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