



# Cultural Identification and Religious Identification Contribute Differentially to the Adaptation of Australian Adolescent Muslims



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## ABSTRACT

Australian Muslims are generally perceived as a devalued group in Australia and the public attitudes towards them are generally negative. This context raises questions about belonging and adaptation among Australian adolescent Muslims. The current study investigated how adolescent Muslims relate to their heritage culture, religion, and Australian culture, and which of these three factors is most important to adolescent Muslims' psychological and socio-cultural adaptation. The study employed a mixed-method design. A total of 321 high school Muslim students (149 males and 172 females) aged between 14 and 18 years completed self-report questionnaires, and a subset sample of 18 students in the same age range, evenly split between males and females, participated in semi-structured interviews. The study revealed a hierarchical pattern of identification among Australian adolescent Muslims, with attachment to their religion being the most important, followed by heritage culture identification and being Australian in third place. Australian adolescent Muslims' religious identification was perceived overall as more crucial to their socio-cultural and psychological adaptation, than their heritage culture identification or Australian identification. There was an overall modest contribution of Australian identification to adolescent Muslims' adaptation. This might be connected with the relatively less attachment they show to their Australian identity due maybe to perception of being the target of prejudice, an issue that can be addressed by implementation of prejudice reduction strategies.

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Muslims in the Australian Context: Study Overview

Muslims are a cultural minority group in Australia. According to the Australian 2011 Census, 476,291 Muslims live in Australia and comprise 2.2% of the total population. Of the total Australian Muslim population, 38.5% were born in Australia,

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with almost 50% aged below 25 years (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011). Australian Muslims are citizens in a country that explicitly adopts a Multicultural policy. Recently, on 16 February 2011, the Australian government launched “The People of Australia: Australia’s Multicultural Policy” and reaffirmed the importance of a culturally diverse and socially cohesive nation (Department of Immigration and Citizenship, 2011). The policy emphasises, among other things, (1) the expression of cultural values and benefits for all Australians, within the broader aims of national unity, community harmony, and maintenance of Australia’s democratic values; (2) a commitment to a just, inclusive, and socially cohesive society where everyone can participate in the opportunities that Australia offers and where government services are responsive to the needs of Australians from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds; and (3) a commitment to promote understanding and acceptance while responding to expressions of intolerance and discrimination with strength and law enforcement.

The explicit adoption of a multicultural policy in Australia encourages a general positive and socially inclusive public atmosphere, which is psychologically beneficial for cultural minority individuals in fostering a secure sense of belonging to their heritage culture whilst consolidating their Australian identity, factors postulated by acculturation research to eventually promote minority individuals’ adaptation (e.g., Abu-Rayya & Sam, in press; Berry, Phinney, Sam, & Vedder, 2006; Nguyen and Benet-Martínez, 2013).

Despite the socially, politically, and psychologically positive aims of Australian Multicultural Policy, the general Australian public attitudes towards Australian Muslims is less accepting and more prejudiced than might be hoped (Mansouri & Wook, 2008). This prejudice can hamper Australian Muslims’ cultural belonging and adaptation. For instance, Australian Muslims are perceived as ‘culturally inferior’, the ‘dangerous other’, and incompatible with, or radically different from, the non-Muslim Australian culture (Dunn, 2004; Dunn, Klocker, & Salabay, 2007; Poynting, Noble, Tabar, & Collins, 2004). Relatedly, Abu-Rayya and White (2010) have found that Anglo-Australians hold a segregationist attitude towards Australian Muslims and this correlates positively with their negative out-group attitudes towards Muslims. More recently, across the years 2010–2014, the Scanlon Foundation Surveys found a large percentage of Australians reporting consistent negative attitudes towards Australian Muslims (25%), compared to a lower presence of negative attitudes towards Christians (<5%) or Buddhists (<5%) (Markus, 2014).

In order to understand how Australian adolescent Muslims relate to their heritage culture, religion, and Australian culture in reaction to prejudice and discrimination they face in such a context, we nested the current study within the Multiple Identities Approach (e.g., Birman, Persky, & Chan, 2010; Mähönen & Jasinskaja-Lahti, 2012) argued to have a better explanatory power than Berry’s (1997) two-dimensional acculturation identification model, particularly among those whose lives involve multiple cultural affiliations. The present study aimed, through the employment of a mixed-method design, at exploring how Australian adolescent Muslims negotiate their heritage culture identification, Australian belonging, and religious identification, and how these identities comparatively relate to two distinct aspects of adolescents’ adaptation, namely (1) psychological adaptation, defined through emotions that evolve due to intercultural contact stress experiences (Berry et al., 2006; Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001); and (2) socio-cultural adaptation, defined in terms of the acquisition of appropriate social and cultural skills needed to operate effectively in a cultural milieu (Berry et al., 2006; Ward et al., 2001).

## 1.2. Rationale of the Multiple Identities Approach

Adolescence is a crucial developmental period for heritage culture identity formation, especially for those from cultural minority groups. In Arce’s (1981) words “for [cultural] minority group members, identification with others who share their origins and traditions is critical in developing both a positive [cultural] identity and feelings of self-esteem and efficacy rather than self-blame and powerlessness” (p. 82). A plethora of research evidence supports a positive link between adolescents’ heritage culture identification and a range of adjustment measures (e.g., AbuBakar, Van de Vijver, Mazrui, Arasa, & Murugami, 2012; Berry et al., 2006; Heim, Hunter, & Jones, 2011).

Heritage culture identification, however, is not the only characteristic that minority adolescents may develop within multicultural societies. The interplay between heritage culture identification and how cultural minority individuals identify with the culture of the mainstream society, that is, their acculturation process seems crucial to their psychological and socio-cultural adaptation (Abu-Rayya & Sam, in press; Berry et al., 2006; Nguyen & Benet-Martínez, 2013; Sam & Berry, 2010). Berry’s (1997) two-dimensional model has guided much acculturation research concerned with cultural minority individuals’ identification and adaptation. The model classifies minority individuals’ acculturation identifications according to the degree of identification with their heritage culture (dimension 1) and with the culture of the mainstream society (dimension 2). Interaction of the two dimensions according to the model gives rise to four potential acculturation identification modes: integration (high on both dimensions); assimilation (low on dimension 1, high on dimension 2); separation (high on dimension 1, low on dimension 2); and marginalisation (low on both dimensions). Research employing Berry’s model suggests a positive link between integration and adaptation among cultural minority adolescents (e.g., Abu-Rayya & Sam, in press; Berry et al., 2006; Sam & Berry, 2010).

While Berry’s bicultural theorisation represents an important advance over previous cultural identification approaches, it does not capture the reality of cultural minority individuals with multiple identities (Birman et al., 2010). Berry’s model limits the supposed cultural context of minority individuals with multiple identities to two cultures (Rudmin, 2003). For instance, Ferguson, Bornstein, and Pottinger (2012) reported that the majority (70%) of their Jamaican adolescents sample in the US showed a strong tendency to tricultural integration, i.e., identification with their Jamaican culture, African American culture, and European American culture. Besides, the model does not take religious identification, where relevant, into

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