



“I love the Queen”: Positioning in young British Muslim discourse

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ABSTRACT

Stereotyping of Muslims in media and political narratives can have tangible effects on the day-to-day lives of young people. Using data from focus groups with 19 university students in London and Birmingham, UK and focusing on extracts from the data in which participants tell stories about their own experiences, this article explores how young British Muslims position themselves in response to negative media narratives about Muslims, particularly after terrorist attacks. The analysis shows that the media was seen as a driving force behind negative stereotypes about Muslims, and this resulted in pressure on Muslims to present themselves in non-threatening and welcoming ways to others, despite being subjected to covert and overt discrimination which participants felt in various contexts. Participants suggested that discrimination could be difficult to identify and quantify, and even when discrimination was overt, it could be illogical and incoherent, and therefore difficult to respond to in a meaningful way.

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1. Background

Negative media and political narratives about the Muslims in the West are abundant. Headlines warning about “UK Muslim ghettos” and a “nation within a nation” (Dolan, 2016) are not uncommon in sections of British media, and in the USA, President Trump has made a point of using the term “radical Islamic terrorism” to highlight the perceived threat of Muslims and Islam. Ahmed (2015) argues that since 9/11, young Muslims, particularly in Britain, have faced increasing levels of typecasting and even racism. These positionings of Muslims are often fed by Islamophobic discourse in the media, which reinforces these stereotypes (Baker et al., 2013; Saeed, 2007). For example, media coverage in 2016 of the presence of ISIS in Syria has focused on several examples of individual young British Muslims who have travelled there. The constant presence of negative stories about Muslims leads to general suspicion about young Muslims as both simultaneously vulnerable and dangerous (Panjwani et al., 2017; Dinham, 2012; Pantazis and Pemberton, 2009), but the effects of how young Muslims understand and cope with negative media portrayals of themselves and their communities has not been adequately investigated. This article, therefore, focuses on young Muslim talk about media coverage of Muslims and Islam, and aims to

understand the effect of media representation on the lived experience of young Muslims in the UK.

Stereotyping of Muslims can have tangible effects on the day-to-day lives of young people. Government reports like the UK’s “Counter-Extremism Strategy” have a clear focus on identifying and preventing radicalization among young people and communities, particularly Muslims (Home Office, 2015). These reports can create conditions in which young Muslims are seen as dangerous and recent research suggests that these policies, including their effects on education, can make it difficult for young Muslims to negotiate their identities (Gholami, 2017). Ahmed (2015), for example, found that young British Muslims often feel they are being asked to choose between being British or Muslim when they want to be both. Ahmed suggests that young Muslims struggle with the continuous questioning of their loyalty and integration in public domains – and that this is confusing for them at an age where identity formation is taking place (Ahmed, 2015). Davies (2009) has also argued that identity formation is complex for young Muslims in the current context, one in which talk about young Muslims has a negative effect on their ability for positive narratives to take hold, particularly when media sources have power in shaping how events are perceived.

Stigmatisation of Muslims may be heightened when terrorist attacks occur, particularly when perpetrators are seen as coming from communities in which young people themselves are members, as is the case of the 2017 attack outside the House of Parliament in London (Al Jazeera, 2017), which led to subsequent arrests

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in communities in London and Birmingham. The position of Muslim communities may be particularly brought into question in the tabloid press and media, with pressure on Muslims to further “integrate” (Dolan, 2016). These stories are regularly a part of media coverage of Muslim communities in the UK, which are consistently negative (Baker et al., 2013). This is particularly problematic when coverage of Muslims is linked consistently to terrorism, as Powell (2011) has shown is the case in coverage of Islam in the media post-9/11. The presentation of Muslim and British identities as somehow in conflict is an issue that affects not only how Muslims are viewed in the UK, but also how they view themselves. Issues of state racism and long histories of prejudice and discrimination (Burnett, 2017). The necessity of a fluid understanding of “identity” particularly as it is related to language in use is well-established in within social psychology and discourse analysis (Benwell and Stokoe, 2006). “British Muslim” identities are also particularly problematic, as they are used to cover a wide range of different ethnicities and levels of religiosity. While the category young British Muslim represents a diverse community, identity discourses often take for granted that people from Muslim heritage always privilege the religious element of their identity, treating “Muslim” as a static, religious identity (Gholami, 2015; Panjwani, 2013; Dehanas, 2013). What this identity means for each individual, however, and how they are seen by their own communities and in their own context can differ despite similar experiences.

While research has focused on the “identity” of young Muslims, Discourse Analysis from a narrative perspective may offer a richer description of how young Muslims think and speak about their position in contemporary British society. Understanding the “positions” that people take in particular contexts, oriented towards the specific categories or roles, has been a key tenet of Positioning Theory (Davies and Harré, 1990; Harré, 2000; Harré and van Langenhove, 1998), which sees social positions as fluid and contextual. Positioning analysis (Bamberg, 1997, 2004) provides a useful tool for understanding the ways in which individual narratives can be understood in relation to larger, macro-narratives in society. While “narrative” has been used in a variety of different contexts and frameworks (De Fina and Georgakopoulou, 2012), Bamberg’s (1997) model for positioning analysis starts with a Labovian (Labov and Waletzky, 1967) notion of “narrative” as both the recounting of personal experience and accomplishing “sense-making” (p.335) in interaction.

Although Labov’s notion of “narrative” focused on “small stories”, and how they “...are often employed as heuristics for the inquiry into tellers’ representations of past events and how the tellers make sense of themselves in light of these past events” (Bamberg and Georgakopoulou, 2008: 378), Bamberg and Georgakopoulou’s later work on positioning (2008) also includes “narratives-in-interaction” and looks at the importance of these narratives in identity work (see also De Fina and Georgakopoulou, 2012). In this sense, “narratives” are not only about sense-making and representation of events, but do important relational work in interaction. Bamberg and Georgakopoulou (2008) write, “we are interested in the social actions/functions that narratives perform in the lives of people: how people actually use stories in everyday, mundane situations in order to create (and perpetuate) a sense of who they are.” (378–379). In this understanding, narrative positioning can occur in all interaction where speakers are both positioning themselves and responding to the positionings of others in a process of story-telling (Ochs and Capps, 2011). This can include contexts where “narratives”, in a classic Labovian sense, are not present. Narratives may have one single speaker as the teller, with an audience, but they may also emerge in interaction, with speakers, both in one-to-one and group conversations, where speakers construct narratives together (De Fina and Georgakopoulou, 2012).

Bamberg (1997) sees narrative positioning as useful to describe and analyse three levels of storytelling: the interaction of

characters within individual stories (Level 1), the interaction of narrators and audiences (Level 2), and a story-teller’s identity in relation to the larger social environment (Level 3). By examining these different levels of positioning, how and why a certain narrative is being told becomes clearer, particularly because, as Deppermann (2013) describes, narratives are “...interactively occasioned, negotiated and designed with respect to relevancies of individual and collective action” (11–12). Harré and van Langenhove’s (1998) description of positions from the narratives also fit into larger structures called “storylines”, describing how positions fit into larger, generic structures of certain positions can and should operate in the social world, including moral reasoning. De Fina and Georgakopoulou’s (2012) have further argued that larger structures can’t necessarily be “extracted” from local story-telling contexts, but rather emerge in speakers engaging in a back and forth interaction. They suggest that positions should not be treated “...independent, pre-discursive entities that exist out there ready to be taken off the shelf and to be reproduced and revealed in discursive action” (De Fina and Georgakopoulou, 2012: 163). Instead, within interaction, narratives occur that are both unique and individual, and part and parcel of larger storylines, similar to Bakhtin’s (1981) notion of *heteroglossia*. The analyst then must take care to consider carefully all levels of positioning involved in any individual interaction to understand how and why certain storylines emerge in certain contexts.

Positioning can also be used in negative ways, particularly in discourse about minority communities. Malignant positioning describes positioning wherein certain rights – and particularly the ability to position oneself – is deleted (Sabat, 2003). Malignant positioning is particularly important in racist narratives or stereotyping where the voice of the positioned must necessarily be excluded to maintain an incomplete or false narrative. This can be seen in reporting on terrorism and the positioning of Muslims. Baker et al. (2013), for example, show the ways in which media portrayals of Muslims can position commitment to Islam in a negative way, forcing Muslims into categories of “moderate” or “fundamentalist”. This positioning does not allow for a storyline in which devout religious expression by Muslims is positioned positively. This positioning has the potential to create incongruity in the lives of young Muslims in particular, who may aspire to greater piety in their religious expression, but are forced into negative positions by dominant narratives about themselves. Close analysis of specific narratives of lived experience, as well as commentary on these experiences, is likely to provide insight into how these experiences are constructed, particularly in a discursive context where narratives are being told with peers. The analysis will include both narratives that fit a strict Labovian notion of narrative (with narrative elements, temporal ordering, and evaluation as a mechanism to guide interpretation) (Labov and Waletzky, 1967: cited in De Fina, 2009: 235) and narratives-in-interaction among young Muslims, to investigate the ways in which media coverage impacts on how they act and position themselves in this context.

2. Methods

The data for this article is taken from interviews and focus groups with 19 Muslim university students from Birmingham and London in the UK, funded through a small grant by the Department of Mental Health, Social Work and Integrative Medicine at Middlesex University to gather young Muslims’ perspectives on their own position in British society, particularly as it related to media coverage of radicalisation. The focus group was chosen as a mechanism for collecting narratives of day-to-day experience, because it allowed participants to interact with one another and contribute to and comment on what each other had said. The data

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