Muslim youth’s identity in Australia
Vigilant, rational and bicultural

In the current geo-political situation, a tiny minority of radicalised young Muslims have left Australia to fight with the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant. Some scholars have observed that youth who are marginalised and alienated have managed to find solidarity through social media; however, some have also noted that it may have led a few Muslims to the path of radicalisation. In this paper the author seeks to understand the identity of Muslim youth in Melbourne, aged 15 to 17 years, through interviews she conducted a few years ago. The author found that the participants paid careful attention to national events concerning Muslims but their bicultural skills enabled them to discuss the matters rationally.

NAHID AFROSE KABIR

Identity is the condition of being oneself (and not another). Arguably it is a fluid process that is shaped according to circumstances and opportunities. Identity may depend on the family one is born into, the culture and religion one belongs to, one’s community and one’s life experiences. When Muslims identify themselves with their Islamic identity, their religion can become an important element of their culture. Identity is both individual and group oriented. Jenkins (2008) stated that similarity and difference are the dynamic principles of identification. Jenkins also suggested that external factors play a significant role in group or collective identity leading to the “us” and “them” debate (pp.18,41).
This paper begins with a discussion of the existing literature on Australian Muslim youth. It then investigates the life stories of 15 young Muslims, with a focus on how they constructed their identity or identities. It investigates whether certain national and international issues have impacted on their identity and if biculturalism played a role in the formation of their identity. Biculturalism means a blending of majority and minority ethnic/religious cultures. For example, it could mean retaining one’s religion, ethnic culture and language and taking on the new (English) language and some parts of the mainstream culture in order to have dual membership.

**Literature review**

In the domain of Australian youth studies, Harris and Roose (2014, p.802) conducted research on 80 young Muslims, aged 17 to 25, in Brisbane and Melbourne. They found that 55 participants claimed that social media (e.g. blogs) and creative cultural activities were the civic networks they used in their everyday spaces to have their voices heard. So alternative media helped them to forge a feeling of community and sense of belonging. Yet about 73 participants felt that religion was very important to them because it offered them moral and civic guidance, and influenced their “way of life”. This also helped them to engage with the wider society in a positive manner.

Patton (2014) conducted research on some Melbourne-based Shia Muslim groups and found that some visible Muslim girls (who wore the *hijab*) were verbally abused by some members of the wider society. Some Muslims were also distressed by the negative portrayal of Muslims in the media. Patton noted that the negative public perceptions of Muslim identity “had a significant impact on their feelings about citizenship in the formal sense” (2014, p.113). Yet some participants placed Islamic law above any other law. They placed Muslim religiosity over their citizenship practices. While some youths dismissed Australia as a racist or Islamophobic society, they asserted their citizenship rights and believed that bigoted persons did not deserve to be called Australians.

Poynting and Mason (2008, pp.237–40) discussed the heightened Islamophobia
during the aftermath of the September 11 Twin Towers attacks. They observed that some Australian politicians’ rhetoric that Muslims must integrate and obey the laws of the country has been divisive. It positioned Muslim Australian citizens as the “Other”. Mansouri and Wood (2008, p.120) observed that the Islamic totality that is associated with violence, oppression and terror was construed in the Western imagination well before September 11. Kabir (2006) found that after 9/11 some Australian print media have portrayed Muslims negatively through their headlines and images.

Nasir (2013, pp.3-7) noted that the Islamophobic environment led a significant number of Muslim youths to adopt pseudo-English names as they were hesitant to identify themselves as Muslims. Some youths also changed their names and residential addresses in their job applications in order to disguise their Muslim identity. On the other hand, this marginalisation has polarised some Muslim activists to reveal their identity through hip hop music. For example, through tracks such as ‘The silent truth’, the Brothahood articulated issues relating to the exclusionary treatment that Muslims experience under the rubric of national security. Wadumestri (2010, pp.145-81) noted that for young Muslims or Arabs who have experienced racism, sexism or any form of discriminatory behaviour, internet sites such as YouTube served as a new social space to vent their frustrations.

Research methodology

This paper is a part of a broader research project on Muslim youths in Australia that was conducted in 2006–2007. For this paper, the life stories of 15 Muslim youth (10 male, 5 female; 13 Sunni and 2 Shia Muslims), aged 15–17 years have been examined. The interviews were in-depth, semi-structured and face-to-face for 40 minutes with each participant. The interview questions examined participants’ lives, including their early school memories, sporting activities, music, entertainment and cultural interests, contemporary events, together with their hopes, ambitions and dreams. Yet the main focus of this study was to find out how the participants defined their identity/identities, and how they perceived certain issues involving Muslims through their respective identities. For anonymity, the participants’ are given fictitious names.
This study has employed grounded theory method. Grounded theory is a type of qualitative method (Glaser & Strauss 1967). It is a non-statistical method that describes a methodological approach that is about “letting the data speak” and not imposing pre-formed hypotheses. The goal of this research was to allow respondents to speak about issues that were important to them. The constructivist method of interpretation has helped the author to contextualise the interviews, and understand the meaning behind the interviewees’ explanations (Charmaz 2006).

Topics of discussion

The interviews were conducted in Melbourne in 2007. The issues that impacted on some Australian Muslims during that period were the Cronulla riots, Sheikh al-Hilali’s sermon, the ‘Granville Boys’ YouTube video, Dr Mohammed Haneef’s case, the media, and the impact of the 9/11 Twin Towers attacks. The topics are briefly discussed as follows:

On 4 December 2005 a fight between three surf lifesavers and a group of four Lebanese-background young men occurred on Cronulla Beach in Sydney. The Australian lifesavers had reportedly insulted their assailants with public taunts that “Lebs” cannot swim. On 11 December 2005 about 5000 young people converged on Sydney’s Cronulla Beach, many wrapped in Australian flags, and attacked people of Middle Eastern appearance. The next day a group of young Lebanese Australians launched a reprisal attack.

In October 2006, during his Ramadan sermon at the Lakemba Mosque in Sydney, the Australian Muslim spiritual leader Mufti Sheikh Taj el-Din al-Hilali equated scantily dressed women with uncovered meat and blamed them for inciting men to rape. Although Sheikh al-Hilali subsequently offered an unreserved apology, saying that he meant to protect women’s honour, his statement sparked a heated media debate, which continued for two weeks. Supporters of al-Hilali argued that the statement was taken out of context.

In January 2007 a race hate video was posted on YouTube that glorified
the convicted gang rapist Bilal Skaf, who was of Lebanese heritage, and
boasted about the Cronulla revenge attacks by Lebanese Australians.
The video also featured teenagers boasting about their Middle Eastern
heritage and described themselves as “Soldiers of Granville Boys”
(Mcilveen 2007).

In July 2007 the Indian–born physician Dr Mohamed Haneef was
arrested and held in detention without charges and without the right
to seek bail for 12 days in Brisbane. Haneef was alleged to have had a
terrorist link with his cousin Kafeel Ahmed who had attempted to blow
up Glasgow airport. The case against Haneef was later dropped due to
a lack of evidence. In December 2010 Haneef was awarded
compensation from the Australian Government (Barrett & Owens
2010, p.2).

The author also asked the participants about the impact of media bias and of
9/11 on Muslims, considering that these issues could be important in the
definition of the participants’ identities.

Findings

The participants lived in a socioeconomically disadvantaged area of
Melbourne. Among the 15 participants, 10 lived with their parents in their own
house. Five participants lived with their parents in rental properties. Among 15
fathers of the participants: one was a professional (director of a company);
nine were self-employed or labourers (e.g. handyman, painter, mechanic, fruit
shop owner, foreman, taxi business); two were unemployed; one was retired;
one worked overseas (as a school teacher) and one was a university student.
Out of 15 mothers, two were taking some courses; one was a community
worker; one worked in a factory; and one was a child care worker. The other
10 were stay-at-home mothers.

All 15 participants were bicultural. They watched English-language TV
programs. They all spoke both English and their native language, although
some participants were more fluent than others in their native language. All
were interested in sports (e.g. Australian football, soccer and cricket), 13
listened to music (e.g. Michael Jackson, rhythm and blues, hip hop, techno, house, punk), five played computer and video games, and three were readers (novels). The Lebanese Australians spoke about their cultural dance, *debke* and *derbekeh*. The Saudi participant spoke of the Saudi Arabian cultural festival *Jenadriyah*. Some participants spoke about their Muslim *Eid* celebrations.

With regard to current affairs, out of 15 participants, 11 participants had heard of the Cronulla riots in the news. Two participants were critical of Lebanese Australians, one respondent was critical of both groups while one participant was sympathetic to the Lebanese Australians. Ten participants had heard of al-Hilali’s case in the news. Four participants were critical of al-Hilali, two participants made positive comments and three Arabic-speaking respondents noted that his speech was mistranslated. Only two participants had heard of the Granville Boys YouTube video but they did not comment on it. Five participants had heard of Dr Haneef’s case in the news, and two participants commented on it. On the topic of the media, all 15 participants offered a polarised view that the media is biased against Muslims. Nine participants thought that 9/11 Twin Tower attacks were a conspiracy against Muslims. Only one participant believed that some Muslims were terrorists.

The next section examines the dynamics of the participants’ identity/identities and analyses their vigilance and rationality.

**Single identity**

Four participants identified themselves with a single identity. For example, Mateen, Australian-born, said, “I consider myself as a Pakistani ... you gotta say where your background’s from, where your parents are from”. On the Cronulla riots, Mateen said, “They [Lebanese Australians] shouldn’t have done that ... we should respect the Australians ... Because that’s part of the Muslim culture”. Though Mateen connected himself with his Pakistani ethnicity, his religious identity came to the fore when he spoke of the riots.

Samad, Australian-born, considered himself just Muslim through his practice of Islam, fasting and special prayers (*Tarawīḥ*) during the month of Ramadan (fasting). He also mentioned that his girlfriend was a Muslim of a different
ethnicity. The next participant, Abed, Australian-born, identified himself as Kurdish. Abed spoke the Badini dialect (a language that is spoken in the northern province of Iraqi Kurdistan). Abed hoped “To take my family to Kurdistan”.

Mahmoud, overseas-born, said, “I am a Saudi”, and that he will return to Saudi Arabia after a few years. So his single identity was connected to his country of origin. On the al-Hilali issue, Mahmoud observed, “From an Islamic point of view I think he might be right, but I don’t think he has the right to say it in [a] non-Islamic country”. When I asked Mahmoud, “What is your general impression of the two worlds – Saudi and the western?”, he replied:

I think Saudi Arabia, they are a little bit strict but that’s the culture that they live in, it’s not about only the religion, even the culture, they’re from Bedouin people, they’re not free, this is how they lived all their life. So you can’t just change it in a year or so.

But for me I’d rather love to live in Saudi Arabia. I find that the women have their rights, I don’t see why people [westerners] say that they don’t. Australia’s a little bit too free for me ... They [women] work like my mum worked in Saudi Arabia, she was a teacher. She drives and she can vote now.

Dual identity

Seven participants spoke about their dual identities. Their language varied from “more to a certain ethnicity” to specific ethnicities/nationalities. In their interviews, however, they appeared to instinctively float to particular identities at times. For example, Muneer, Australian-born, said, “I feel more Lebanese”. Muneer explained, “Cos I spent like most of my time at home and all my cousins, our food are Lebanese, our dance [dabke, derbekeh], the things that we do are Lebanese things ... I speak Arabic”. Muneer continued, “I went to Lebanon two years ago ... The environment you feel comfortable. You can express what you feel because you are all similar”.

Muneer’s Lebanese “self” was reflected when he commented on the Cronulla riots, “All the Australians ganged up on the Lebanese people. But it’s not only the Australians’ fault, the Lebanese people probably fought back but they don’t
deserve all that criticism and hatred”. Muneer’s Australian “self” was revealed when he said that he played Aussie rules. Muneer concluded, “My dream’s to play footy, and I hope that the wars against Muslims stop and Australia thinks more about Islam, not negative, more positive”. Though Muneer did not mention his Muslim identity, through his hope he positioned himself as a Muslim.

Laila, Australian-born, felt she was “more Australian”. Laila could speak, read and write Arabic, but she said, “I speak more English than Arabic”. Laila considered listening to music was *haram* (forbidden in Islam). Laila said, “When I was listening to it, I was getting distracted from my religion ... especially from reading Quran”. On the Cronulla riots, Laila was critical of the media: “If the Australians does something wrong they wouldn’t say their nationality? They’re trying to destroy the image of Islam, of Middle Eastern people”. On the 9/11 attacks, Laila said, “This thing happened in America, and we’re here in Australia; we didn’t even do anything ... so why they blame us?”. Perhaps Laila meant that Muslims in Australia unfairly experienced repercussions in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks.

Laila continued, “What we can and try and show them that, you know, how our religion is and how good it is”. Laila concluded, “I want to become a doctor ... that’s how I’ll show through occupation, just being a normal Australian Muslim”. Though Laila felt very Australian, her comments revealed her Muslim identity. Both Muneer and Laila were Arabic-speaking people and they observed that al-Hilali’s speech was mistranslated and misunderstood.

The next participant, Freda, of Turkish heritage, considered herself “more Australian”. Freda did not believe that music was *haram*:

> Music is not *haram* in Islam, the only time it becomes *haram* is if it distracts you from your Islamic practices ... I don’t let that affect me. I still do my prayers, I still read my Qur’an. I don’t see why it’s *haram*.

Freda was apprehensive about the Arab community imposing *Shariah* law in Australia: “We feel the Lebanese or the Arab community in general will try to enforce laws that are strictly from Islam, the *Shariah* into Australian society”.

89
However, Freda’s hidden collective Muslim identity came to the fore when she spoke about September 11:

*Oh, September 11 was a turning point of the view on Islam around the world ... It was just a sign to show that Muslims should unite and become one and defend themselves and their belief. However, that’s not happening at all.***

*Because when they blame this on Afghanistan and the Taliban, when Muslims are under threat we just sit back and watch them instead of helping our brothers and sisters in Islam; helping them portray that they are not guilty of that attack which I believe that they are not because Muslims don’t do that ... [9/11] Not Muslims’ work, definitely not.*

Freda was in total disbelief that the 9/11 attacks were committed by Muslims. She thought that it was all Muslims’ duty to help their Muslim brothers and sisters in Islam to erase the misconception that 9/11 was Muslims’ work.

The next participant, Pervez, overseas-born, identified with both countries – Afghanistan and Australia. Pervez justified his dual identity, saying “I mostly will belong to Australia because my mind will grow according to environment. I’m from Afghanistan and I love my land because it’s my land. Here [in Australia] is the opportunity of living in a good life.” Pervez continued, “I was not used to this English [language], but when I came here I have to change myself to the environment”.

Pervez was a relatively recent immigrant and was ready to adapt to his new Australian society. Pervez did not speak of his Muslim identity, but when he spoke of the impact of 9/11 and the media, his Muslim identity came to the fore. Pervez was critical of the media; however, he believed that the 9/11 attacks were acts of Muslim terrorists:

*After 9/11 non-Muslim people, their minds changed because they think that if you are a Muslim it is a possibility to be a terrorist ... 9/11 happened because Muslims were there and they were terrorists. They [the terrorists] are sending their bad actions by saying that “We are Muslim” ... I mean they misuse Islam. Islam is not to be a terrorist or to kill ... Islam is respect;*
just do your work and respect others. But all the Muslims are not like that; five fingers are not the same.

The next participant, Abbas, Australian-born, aged 16, defined himself as, “Somali Australian. I think I’d say both leaning towards Somali maybe. That’s because of my heritage”. Abbas’s father worked in Somalia and he lived with his mother in Australia. Abbas was well informed about all the contemporary issues – the Cronulla riots, al-Hilali case, Granville Boys YouTube video – through the news and internet. On the media, Abbas commented:

Sheikh Hilali, he was on the news for a very long time and I think during that time even the Pope said something about Muslims. He said they [the Muslims] were conquering by the sword ... You just get it like a little clip on the news and it was hushed up.

The interviewee Abbas pointed out that the western media did not make a mockery of the Pope as they did with Sheikh al-Hilali.

Multiple identities

Four participants spoke of their multiple identities. For example, Azmal, overseas-born, said “I would call myself firstly as a Muslim, second I’m an Afghan and I’m proud to be a Muslim Afghan and an Australian comes third”. Though Azmal placed his Australian identity in third place, when he spoke of his passion for Australian Football League matches, his identity showed no boundaries. It was floating evenly with his Afghan and Muslim identities. Azmal’s Afghan identity was revealed when he said, “Hoping Afghanistan will be making a cricket team for 2008 and planning to get a chance to go and participate with them if I can. So they’re playing the Asian qualifiers ...”

Later, Azmal’s collective Muslim identity came to the fore when he commented on the media and the 9/11 attacks: “They [the media] actually bring all the Muslim people down. For example, the September 11 attack ... the rumour was that all Muslim people were involved in this”. Azmal noted, “It could be anyone that did the September 11 attack, it could be a Christian. It doesn’t have to be a Muslim person they reckon who did it”. Like some other participants, Azmal regarded the 9/11 attacks as a rumour or an allegation against Muslims by the west.
The next participant, Faiz, commented, “I speak the [Arabic] language at home. I socialise with the Muslim and the Lebanese community and also the Australian. I play the Australian rules and I hang around with some Australian people. So I’m a mix”. Faiz said that he listened to nasheeds (Islamic devotional songs) and “a bit of Lebanese music … English music … Yeah, I just like the beats”. On the topic of girlfriens, Faiz said, “It’s haram”. On the Cronulla riots, Faiz was critical of both the Australians and the Lebanese Australians, “The guy who actually wrote on his chest, ‘We grew here and you flew here’. I felt like it’s actually being racist … The Lebanese Australians, if they burned the Australian flag … It’s just being racist again”.

Like Azmal, Faiz also believed in the 9/11 conspiracy theory. Faiz commented, “I think everyone felt a bit sad that the Muslims copped the blame. Because I’ve heard stories that someone said, that they were sitting in a tower one day seeing some Jews laughing after, but I have no idea”. On his hopes and dream, Faiz said, ”My dream well actually it’s not far away Inshallah [God willing], I wanted go to university to study … And try to stand up for one of the Muslim leaders in Melbourne or Australia”. When the author said, “Inshallah, yeah, perhaps Member of Parliament?”, Faiz, replied, “Nah politics is too much. Because the media was all over Sheikh al-Hilali and I don’t want to be like that”. It appears that Faiz thought al-Hilali was also a political figure.

Faiz’s identity floated from Lebanese (when he spoke of his Lebanese culture, and criticised the Australians at the Cronulla riots), to Australian (when he was critical of Lebanese Australians’ burning of the flag). He situated himself as a Muslim when he spoke about girlfriens, music, the conspiracy theory and the media.

Discussion

Fozdar (2014, p.101) observed that the general perception of some Australians is that all Muslims are migrants and that Muslims are a homogeneous group. They refuse “not only social inclusion but attempt to impose their beliefs on others”. Therefore Muslim and Australian cannot be synonymous. This study, however, showed diversity among young Muslim participants. The participants
described their identities in various ways. Some indicated that their language was their identity marker, while others indicated their heritage was an important element of their identity. Diversity was also revealed on the concept of music. Most participants listened to music while two participants (Faiz and Laila) considered music is *haram*. Faiz, with multiple identities, considered that having a girlfriend is *haram* in Islam, while Samad, who identified himself as a Muslim, mentioned he had a girlfriend. As Douglas observed, “At a basic level, identity is about who we are, and who and what we identify with. However, identity is also about who we want to be, and how we wish to be seen by others” (2009, p.11). In other words, Douglas suggested that identity can go beyond nationality and place of birth. It can be simply “a state of mind” (Douglas 2009, p.19).

On Dr Haneef’s case, only two participants appeared to be vigilant. Farida (identity: Muslim, South African) said, “He had nothing to do with it at all because even his wife didn’t know anything, man!” Farida was critical of the Australian government when she said, “They kept him in detention for so long and I think they assumed that he was guilty before they could prove it, which is so undemocratic”. Hamid (identity: Australian Muslim) brought his Islamic identity to the fore when he said, “Oh, he’s innocent. I’m into conspiracy theories and I mean after a lot of allegations, I’ve read ... they don’t have a base. I find it’s an attack really on the Muslims, and he’s an educated man, he’s a doctor”.

On the issue of the media, all 15 participants positioned themselves as Muslims, and spoke of some discrepancies in the mainstream media’s reporting. They observed that Muslims were portrayed unduly negatively. Nine participants could not comprehend that the September 11 Twin Towers attacks were terrorist acts by some Muslims. In their conversation, some participants, for example Mateen and Pervez, observed that Islam is respect. Laila wished to be a doctor to show that her religion was good and that Muslims in Australia were “normal Australian Muslims”. Freda expressed her camaraderie or *ummah* (Islamic community transcending all national boundaries) feeling by suggesting that Muslims should help “their brothers and sisters in Islam”, and help them “portray that they are not guilty of the attacks”, though Freda had
concerns about the Arab community. Discussing Muslim and non-Muslim identities, Brah (2007, pp.143-44) observed:

Identity is not an already given thing but rather it is a process. It is not something fixed that we carry around with ourselves like a piece of luggage. Rather, it is constituted and changes with changing contexts. It is articulated and expressed through identifications within and across different discourses. To have a sense of being, say, Muslim is therefore different when confronted with non-Muslims than with friends and family. This sense of self will vary depending on whether the non-Muslims are friendly or hostile.

Brah also acknowledged that there could be cultural conflict within the Muslim community, but that conflict may not have an impact on one’s identity in the same manner when the (majority) non-Muslims were antagonistic to the (minority) Muslims. That is, a Muslim’s identity will shape up according to the friendly or hostile attitude of non-Muslims towards them. The continuous negative representation of Islam and Muslims in some media may have led some participants to believe that reports about 9/11 were a conspiracy against Muslims. Research has found that some Americans also believe in conspiracy theories about the attacks of September 11, 2001. For example, some Democrats found the 9/11 conspiracy theories “plausible because members of the Bush administration were looking for an excuse to invade Iraq” (Stempel, Hargrove & Stempel III 2007, p.356).

Conclusion

As in some previous studies of young Australian Muslims (Harris & Roose 2014; Patton 2014), this study also found that Islam was very important to young Muslims. Other studies (Nasir 2013; Wadumestri 2010) discussed young Muslims’ involvement in internet sites and YouTube. In this study, most respondents were aware of national news, for example the Cronulla riots, but their real world revolved more around sports and music. On the topic of al-Hilali, the respondents offered their views from their rational perspective. But on issues such as the media, they offered a polarised voice. This study revealed that young Muslims are vigilant concerning how they are perceived by the wider society, particularly through the media. Overall, the participants were not distressed. Through their bicultural skills – for example, reading novels, listening to music
and playing sports – they appeared to be optimistic in their hopes and dreams. However, under the current climate of news about the Islamic State (IS) and some young Australians leaving Australia to join the IS, it is important that young Muslims are given opportunities to develop their bicultural skills, and that they remain happy with their Australian Muslim identity. They should be provided opportunities for sports, music, debate and intercultural dialogues. The state schools should provide opportunities for dialogue between the Islamic organisations and Muslim students. Muslim parents should encourage their children to socialise with non-Muslim children. Biculturalism should be considered a cultural capital for a cohesive society.

References

Fozdar, F. 2014, “They want to turn to their religion. But they should turn to be Australians”: Everyday discourses about why Muslims don’t belong in Australia’, in Muslims in the west: Spaces and agents of inclusion and exclusion, eds N. Markovic & S. Yasmeen, Ashgate, Surrey, pp.87–103.
Poynting, S. & Mason, V. 2008, ‘The new integrationism, the state and Islamophobia: Retreat from

**Author**

Nahid Afrose Kabir is a senior research fellow at the International Centre for Muslim and non-Muslim Understanding at the University of South Australia.