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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Multiculturalism, Social Distance and "Islamophobia": Reflections on Anti-racism Research in Australia and Beyond

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Abstract

There has been a flourishing of anti-racism research and commentary on Islamophobia in Australia over the last 15 to 20 years, utilising multiple national surveys on attitudes towards multiculturalism, Muslims and Islam. This article discusses and critiques this research and its accompanying discourse, with special attention given to the questionable way in which social distance scales are used to identify and then frame "Islamophobia" and apparent classes of Islamophobes in Australian society at large. The negative consequences of the resulting conceptual and linguistic framing from this research are discussed, and the underlying methodological flaws and biases of anti-racist researchers are identified and explained as three key "asymmetries" relating to social constructs versus reality; stereotypes and groups; and avoidance of reciprocity.

Keywords Anti-racism · Islamophobia · Social distance · Social constructs · Stereotypes

Introduction

In February 2017, Australia's Special Broadcasting Service (SBS) aired a one-hour TV documentary entitled "Is Australia Racist?", being one of several special events marking *Face up to Racism week*.[1] The documentary used findings from a large national survey undertaken over 2015–2016 by the Challenging Racism Project at Western Sydney University (WSU), itself commissioned by SBS for their documentary. Established in 2002, the Challenging Racism Project is a multipartner collaboration based at Western Sydney University which "supports a *new generation of anti-racism researchers and practitioners and partners* with government, non-government and community organisations that have a *shared outlook* on intergroup relations and anti-racism initiatives."[2] Numerous surveys and studies have emerged from this collaboration over the last twenty years or so, contributing a significant portion of the academic and public debate on racism in Australia over this time.

In this paper, I will focus mainly upon Australian surveys and scholarly discussion of "Islamophobia" and, in doing this, acknowledge both the limitations and advantages of doing so. Australia has been often held up as a successful example of multiculturalism, drawing attention from scholars in cross-national comparisons,[3] and also having a diverse Muslim population that has both a long history in Australia, but has also grown significantly in recent decades.[4] As such, there may well be insights presented here that scholars outside Australia will need to parse carefully in order to apply

[1] The SBS media release can be found here: https://www.westernsydney.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0010/1201006/Is_Australia_Racist_SBS_Media_Release.pdf. The title of the SBS documentary should give pause, as even if "Australia" is taken not to be a singular entity but rather a multicultural society where different groups may have reservations about one another, the answer to the question is guaranteed to be somewhere between "not much" and "a lot", or, more precisely, between 0% racist and 100% racist. What constitutes "racism" and what proxies are used for racist attitudes are—as we shall see—critical to the way the results are being contextualised and "problematised".

[2] Western Sydney University, "Challenging Racism Project" press release available online at: https://www.westernsydney.edu.au/challengingracism/challenging_racism_project. Emphasis added.

[3] For example, Ruud Koopmans, "Multiculturalism and Immigration: A Contested Field in Cross-National Comparison," *Annual Review of Sociology* 39 (2013): pp. 147–169.

[4] Halim Rane, Adis Duderija, Riyad H. Rahimullah, Paul Mitchell, Jessica Mamone, and Shane Satterley, "Islam in Australia: A National Survey of Muslim Australian Citizens and Permanent Residents," *Religions* 11, no. 8 (2020): 419.

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to their local milieu in relation to Muslim populations and multiculturalism. Additionally, this paper is not a history of the idea of Islamophobia, a topic covered in depth by many previous scholars,[5] although it is important to pause briefly to consider the term itself.

As described in the formative 1997 Runnymede Trust report, *Islamophobia – A Challenge for Us All*, "Islamophobia" is a term that "refers to unfounded hostility towards Islam".[6] While dated, this definition has the advantage of at least being an applicable shorthand, and as Erik Bleich has observed:

> In spite of its limitations, the Runnymede Trust report offers a relatively specific and well-developed sense of the term, even when compared to its increasingly frequent use by scholars. Some authors deploy Islamophobia without explicitly defining it ... Others use characterizations that are vague, narrow, or generic.[7]

With the Runnymede definition, criticisms of Muslim beliefs per se were not seen as inherently negative:

> It is not intrinsically phobic or prejudiced ... to disagree with or to disapprove of Muslim beliefs, laws or practices. ... In a liberal democracy it is inevitable and healthy that people will criticise and oppose, sometimes robustly, opinions and practices with which they disagree.[8]

In order to distinguish between what is considered legitimate criticism versus unfounded prejudice, the Runnymede 1997 report constructs a framework of "open" and "closed" views of Islam. There is considerable nuance in this framing, arguably lost in recent anti-racism research where, as we shall see, it is hard to see how legitimate concerns towards Islamic beliefs and practices can be said to exist within a doggedly anti-racist paradigm. It is in the interrogation of the term "Islamophobia" and its application in recent Australian scholarship in what follows that others may find particularly useful beyond the local context described here.

Returning to the work of the Challenging Racism Project, this research is representative of scholarly trends that examine racism, discrimination and Islamophobia in Australia and internationally, in that it uses the two-fold approach of "social distance" tools in surveys which are then interpreted through some very specific theoretical and ideological lenses. The surveys used as the basis for this research result from respondents garnered via a "Bogardus"[9] social distance instrument measuring comfort or discomfort around such hypothetical attitudinal questions as: "In your opinion, how concerned would you feel if one of your closest relatives were to marry a person of [x faith/background]". These results are then interpreted through a variety of theoretical approaches, but which predominantly could be said to be a "critical theory" lens that readers will be familiar with, namely a concern for power relationships, the oppressed and the oppressor, the construction of the "Other", "colonial" and "Western" prejudices, gender normativity and the like.

These two elements of survey data and critical framing were combined to form the core of the anti-racist academic discourse (I use the term here carefully) around Islamophobia that is discussed and critiqued below. First, I shall look at how the results of social distance type surveys are presented and framed across a range of values and attitudes such as the role of women, views on homosexuality and gay marriage, and bigotry towards other religions or beliefs, and second—in light of this discussion—I formulate three types of "asymmetrical" methodological flaws, namely relating to social constructs, stereotypes and reciprocity.

Surveys, Social Distance and Islamophobia

While the documentary "Is Australia Racist?" was a notable achievement in itself, in many ways, the more enduring result of the SBS commission was the "Challenging Racism Project 2015–16 National Survey" (hereafter, the "2015–16 Survey"). Conducted over July and August of 2015 and November of 2016, and based on a sample of 6001 respondents "largely representative of the Australian population",[10] the 2015–16 Survey aimed at measuring:

> ... the extent and variation of racist attitudes and experiences in Australia. It examines Australians attitudes to cultural diversity, discomfort/intolerance of specific groups, ideology of nation, perceptions of Anglo-Celtic cultural privilege, and belief in racialism, racial separatism and racial hierarchy. The project also explored targets experiences of racism and the circumstances in which these events occur. We examined the

[5] See, for example, the texts reviewed by Brian Klug, "Islamophobia: A Concept Comes of Age," *Ethnicities* 12, no. 5 (2012): 665–681.

[6] The Runnymede Trust, *Islamophobia – A Challenge for Us All*, Commission on British Muslims and Islamophobia, 4.

[7] Erik Bleich, "What is Islamophobia and How Much is There? Theorizing and Measuring an Emerging Comparative Concept," *American Behavioral Scientist* 55, no. 12 (2011): 1583. Bleich himself proposes another definition that has been adopted by some scholars, namely "indiscriminate negative attitudes or emotions directed at Islam or Muslims.".

[8] *Islamophobia – A Challenge for Us All*, 4.

[9] Emory Bogardus, 1882–1973, American sociologist.

[10] Katie Blair, Kevin M. Dunn, Alanna Kamp, and Oishee Alam, "Challenging Racism Project 2015–16 National Survey Report," (2017), 3. Available at https://researchdirect.westernsydney.edu.au/islandora/object/uws:39004.

> different forms racism takes, the various spheres of life in which incidents occur, the frequency of incidents, responses to incidents (undertaken by both bystanders and targets) and the impact of those experiences on victims.[11]

As the 2015–16 Survey shows, Australia enjoys high rates of support for cultural diversity. Approximately 80% surveyed agreed with the statement: "it is a good thing for a society to be made up of different cultures", and only slightly lower (75%) agreeing with: "having a multicultural population has been good for Australia." These results varied between men and women, as they did with many questions: higher in positive rates among *women* and in younger age groups. (This is an important point, as we shall soon find.)

Where the results get "problematised" in the anti-racist academic discourse is where responses related to "assimilation" or levels of discomfort with "out groups" are found. To quote Kamp et al. (key researchers in these studies):

> The majority of Australians are pro-diversity. However, we also acknowledge conflicting findings such as strong support for assimilation and identification of "out groups". The findings paint a complex picture of attitudes towards cultural diversity, nation and migration in Australia. *The attitudes reflect contradictory political trends of celebrated diversity, triumphalist claims about freedom, alongside pro-assimilationist views and stoked Islamophobia*. This is within the context of a stalled multicultural project that has not sufficiently challenged assimilationist assumptions and Anglo-privilege.[12]

Several key elements are expressed in this passage: Anglo-privilege, assimilationism, the "othering" of "out groups" and Islamophobia.[13] I will examine and comment on some of these below. Other articles and research reports that use the 2015–16 Survey and similar previous ones will also be included in the discussion that follows, as they form part of a growing genre of academic studies and commentary using similar survey tools to argue for the rise in Islamophobia in Australia.[14]

The 2015–16 Survey found that in response to the question, "In your opinion, how concerned would you feel if one of your closest relatives were to marry a person of [x faith/background]", backgrounds/faiths such as "Indian" or "Aboriginal", "very concerned" or "extremely concerned" rated very low (i.e. below 5% or less) but when referring to "… of a Muslim Faith", it was 10.4% (very concerned) and 17.2% ("extremely concerned)".[15] Kamp et al. expand on these results, noting that if "slightly" and "somewhat" concerned are combined, the figure jumps considerably higher again, leading them to proffer the following interpretation: "In total, 62.9% of respondents expressed some degree (ranging from slightly to extremely) of intolerance/discomfort with Muslim Australians *further elucidating the extent of anti-Islamic/Islamophobic* [sic] within the Australian population…".[16]

Islamophobia has emerged as the flash point of discourse around racism in Australia in a spate of recent anti-racism research. Indeed, Islamophobia has been framed by some academics as a "creeping blight"[17] or even as a "national calamity"[18] with the 2015–16 Survey results being used as concrete evidence of deeper and ruinous social forces. A recent analysis by Dunn et al. (2021) raises the spectre of "ambient Islamophobia", a hitherto obscured blight that has largely escaped scholarly attention. According to the study:

> The ambience of Islamophobia now presents a *threat to social order*, and this was made apparent in a series of catastrophic events in western nations that have targeted Muslims, including the terror attacks on two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand which killed 50 people and the attack on the City Islam Culture Centre in Quebec, Canada which killed six people.[19]

[11] From the online abstract, "Challenging Racism Project 2015–16," available at https://researchdirect.westernsydney.edu.au/islandora/object/uws:39004.

[12] Alanna Kamp, Oishee Alam, Katie Blair, and Kevin M. Dunn, "Australians' Views on Cultural Diversity, Nation and Migration, 2015–16," *Cosmopolitan Civil Societies* (2017): 61. Emphasis added.

[13] The easy conflation of what might otherwise be distinguished as "anti-Muslim bigotry" versus "Islamophobia" is highly questionable, as the discussion so far makes evident. Aside from what has been already cited, Meredith Tax and others have contributed to this discussion, and in her book *Double Bind: The Muslim Right, the Anglo-American Left, and Universal Human Rights* (New York: Lulu, 2013), she writes: "[W]hile it is essential that the progressive movement fight racism and prejudice against Muslims, the term 'Islamophobia' tends to echo the framing of the Muslim Right, which can lead to efforts to criminalize free expression and dissent; it this does more to confuse the issues rather than clarify them." 94.

[14] For example: Riaz Hassan, *Australian Muslims: The Challenge of Islamophobia and Social Distance*, International Centre for Muslim and non-Muslim Understanding, University of South Australia, (2018).

[15] Kamp et al., "Australians' Views on Cultural Diversity," 73.

[16] Kamp et al., "Australians' Views on Cultural Diversity," 74. Emphasis added.

[17] Linda Briskman, "The Creeping Blight of Islamophobia in Australia," *International Journal for Crime, Justice and Social Democracy* 4, no. 3 (2015): 112–121.

[18] See, for example, Kevin Dunn, Thierno MO Diallo, and Rachel Sharples, "Segmenting Anti-Muslim Sentiment in Australia: Insights for the Diverse Project of Countering Islamophobia" *Ethnicities* 21, no. 3 (2021): 538–562.

[19] Dunn et al., "Segmenting Anti-Muslim Sentiment in Australia," 540. Emphasis original.

Dunn and colleagues, without irony, propose a taxonomy of classes of Islamophobia that exist outside straight forward anti-Muslim bigotry, namely in a class labelled "Unsure but with concerns", a class that holds concerns about issues like place of worship and close relation marriage ("This quarter of the population are at risk of drifting toward the *Islamophobes* …"[20]), and then in the most prevalent class (50% of the population) that are "Progressives but with concern." This latter class of self-identified "progressives" was diagnosed matter-of-factly as "marginally influenced by Islamophobia". According to Dunn and his colleagues: "It is critical that they [progressives] are vigilant to the ambient Islamophobia" of the aforementioned groups.[21] Do we have a potentially Kafkaesque scenario here where *progressive* people with strongly held values regarding issues like gender rights and homosexuality, for example, may be categorised as being "marginally influenced by Islamophobia" should they show concern (as measured via social distance tools) towards groups where there is a prevalence of *non-progressive* values?

There is a compulsion in this research to see everything through the lens of the oppressor and oppressed, maintained through a Western colonial "matrix of power relations". As a result, critical or cautious views on Muslims or Islam are inevitably linked in a straight causal line to bad actors or irrational fears, whether they be tangible people or intangible "systems". For example, issues such as "social cohesion", "Australia values", "integration" and even "enlightenment values" are framed unambiguously as stemming from Anglo colonialist legacy, i.e. as *Bad Things*. This is made clear in an article entitled "Islamophobia in Australia: From Far-Right Deplorables to Respectable Liberals" by Poynting and Briskman published in 2018: "Thus the 'values debate' serves as a thin veneer of respectability for outright cultural supremacism, oppressive assimilationism, and stark racism."[22] One can only wonder what the authors of the 1997 Runnymede report would have made of this.

It is at this point we can pose the fundamental question: can we make sense of the way concerns expressed towards known prevalences of Muslim attitudes on issues such as the role and rights of women, homosexuality, other religions and democracy are manipulated by anti-racist scholars to create paradigms populated with constructions of an "Other"? Where can genuinely understood and authentic concerns about the levels of discriminatory gender or homophobic attitudes in Muslim communities sit, and who is "allowed" to hold or express them?

The answer, according to anti-racism scholarship, would appear to be as follows: (1) there is nothing other than constructions of the "other" and (2) that, a priori, legitimate concerns cannot possibly exist anyway. Any possible relationship between the predominance of beliefs and values held by a group—in this case Muslims—and the "construction" and "othering" stereotypes of that group by outsiders does not appear to be within scope for anti-racist research. This is made especially clear in the 2015–16 Challenging Racism Survey discussion by Kamp et al. (2017), where our attention is directed towards previous research by Dunn et al. (2007) where it is claimed that "Muslims are *constituted* as culturally inferior, barbaric, misogynistic, fanatical, intolerant, and ultimately alien."[23]

Dunn et al.'s 2007 paper, "Contemporary racism and Islamophobia in Australia," draws from several sources, including three surveys or questionnaires taken over 2001 and 2003.[24] As with the later 2015–16 Survey, again there is heavy use of a Bogardus social distance type instrument in a 2001 survey with the question: "In your opinion how concerned would you feel if one of your close relatives were to marry a person of …". This 2001 survey broke down the responses to "Muslim faith", "Aboriginal background", "Asian background" and "Jewish faith" by age ranges and gender.[25] Across both age and gender, the negative responses to "Muslim faith" are anywhere between a third and double the rate of other categories. Interestingly, and inconveniently for the authors, the results were more negative among females, being 55.6% aggregate versus 48.9% in males. Dunn and his colleagues note this and opine:

> Of course, the *disappointing* observation is that the level of concern regarding Muslims is well above the other "out groups" ... [and] ... also shows that women were much more likely to communicate concern regarding Islam. Of the 19 attitudinal questions asked in that survey, this was the only question where *women were more intolerant/racist than men. This suggests that the stereotyping of Islamic misogyny is an important component of the racialization of Islam in Australia*.[26]

[20] Dunn et al., "Segmenting Anti-Muslim Sentiment in Australia," 550. Emphasis original.

[21] Dunn et al., "Segmenting Anti-Muslim Sentiment in Australia," 551.

[22] Scott Poynting and Linda Briskman, "Islamophobia in Australia: From Far-Right Deplorables to Respectable Liberals," *Social Sciences* 7, no. 11 (2018): 7/17.

[23] Kamp et al., "Australians' Views on Cultural Diversity," 72.

[24] Kevin M. Dunn, Natascha Klocker, and Tanya Salabay, "Contemporary Racism and Islamophobia in Australia: Racializing Religion," *Ethnicities* 7, no. 4 (2007): 564–589.

[25] Dunn, et al., "Contemporary Racism and Islamophobia in Australia," 573.

[26] Dunn, et al., "Contemporary racism and Islamophobia in Australia," 573–4. Emphasis added.

One wonders how long they paused to consider alternative interpretations of this "disappointing" data point—a remarkable one as it happens, for women are consistently shown to be more tolerant of others and accepting of difference across repeated surveys. At any rate, Dunn and colleagues frame the response within the paradigm of constructions of Islam as "othering" via misogynistic stereotypes, and that seems sufficient for the researchers and so they can move on.

In order to reinforce the a priori position that any concerns from individuals, communities, groups or across populations on multiculturalism issues can only be framed as coming from a place of, and in support of, cultural misogyny, some academics seek the worst possible bad faith associations and studiously avoid counter-examples that would suggest that things are more complex. For example, Poynting and Briskman cite the Somali-born activist Ayaan Hirsi Ali to suggest that "right" and left" political divisions converge in Islamophobia, and how Hirsi Ali:

> … has captured the hearts and minds of many western feminists who joined up the left and the right especially through attention on the hijab and the many women who see themselves as champions of women's rights, hurtfully portraying head coverings as an instrument of oppression.[27]

Aside from not giving "Western feminists" much credit for being able to parse arguments and evidence about the plight of women outside their own communities, what Poynting and others apparently ignore is the wealth of voices from ex-, moderate, progressive or reformist gay, lesbian and other Muslims that may not have the same political leanings or associations as Hirsi Ali but that in greater or lesser degrees bring additional support to many of the same concerns. (Some of these voices are provided in this discussion). Additionally, Poynting and colleagues might have chosen to engage with the likes of the feminist Meredith Tax, whose *Double Bind: The Muslim Right, The Anglo-American left, and Universal Human Rights* (2012) may have presented a rather more challenging target. In a similar vein, right-wing media are cited regularly (i.e. "Murdoch press") as the centre of bigoted views, without much interest in the views themselves, and only to the extent that they are presented as unfettered exemplars of underlying racism or xenophobia that exists more widely although presumably in a less pure form.

As referenced above, women respond consistently as more inclusive and having more "progressive" attitudes across the board in multiple surveys on multiculturalism and diversity, so the survey result discussed by Dunn et al. in their 2007 study showing higher levels of discomfort by women towards the question of a close relative marrying someone of a Muslim background could have attracted a more thoughtful response. For example, is it possible that women in Australia better understood that there are potentially a variety of attitudes particularly prevalent among Muslim men regarding sex- and gender-based issues that caused them reason to be concerned? As it happens, there *is* now recent survey data that provides insights into Australian Muslims' attitudes and values on topics relevant to this concern that we can consider, garnered via a major 2019 "Islam in Australia" national survey of some 1035 Muslim Australians.[28]

According to the 2019 "Islam in Australia" survey, one in five Muslim males was either *unsure* or *disagreed* with the statement: "Women should be given the same right [sic] and opportunities as men",[29] and nearly one in three (32.5%) Australian Muslim men either *agreed* or *strongly agreed* with the statement: "I would like to live in a country where polygamy … is legal."[30] Interestingly, only 8.8% of *Muslim women* agreed with that same question, and 63.4% of women disagreed or strongly disagreed (double that of men).[31] For comparison's sake, the ICM 2015 survey of British Muslims came up with results for the following statements: "Wives should always obey their husbands" was net agree 45% for males and 33% for females, and "It is acceptable for a British Muslim to keep more than one wife" was net agree 38% for males and 23% for females.[32]

Another recent study of Muslim leaders in Australia noted that while there has been a rise of women into more

[27] Poynting and Briskman, "Islamophobia in Australia," 5/17.

[28] Halim Rane, Adis Duderija, Riyad H. Rahimullah, Paul Mitchell, Jessica Mamone, and Shane Satterley, "Islam in Australia: A National Survey of Muslim Australian Citizens and Permanent Residents," *Religions* 11, no. 8 (2020): 419. This article presents the findings of the "Islam in Australia" national survey and stands in stark contrast to the types of studies discussed previously. Whereas in the anti-racist works of the scholars already discussed, one would look in vain for reference to Saudi Arabia's promulgation of Sunni Islam, funding of mosques or the petrodollar-funded dissemination of Wahhabi prayer books, Rane and colleagues write frankly of such real-life concerns, while also highlighting the range of anti-Muslim bigotry that survey respondents face.

[29] Rane, et al., "Islam in Australia," 419, 12/39.

[30] Rane, et al., "Islam in Australia," 419, 19/39.

[31] The results of the later 2015–16 Survey show the same question regarding marriage as not showing a "statistically significant" (a point made in the research with particular precision) difference between males and females when related to Middle Eastern, Asians and Muslims, although in the remaining categories (Aboriginal Australians, African Australians and Jewish Australians) females scored statistically significantly higher in tolerance. Kamp et al., 74.

[32] https://www.icmunlimited.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Mulims-full-suite-data-plus-topline.pdf. Pages 110 and 107 respectively. Note here that the survey used a different methodology and sampling.

prominent roles, "Muslim women are still underrepresented in leadership potions. Female participants in this research criticised "*Muslim men's patriarchal attitudes, considering it to be a serious hindrance to the formation of gender-neutral community leadership*."[33] One wonders if female Muslims suffer from the misleading taint of Islamophobia as well when considering the patriarchal attitudes of male Muslims? Have they been fooled by a stereotypical construct of the misogynistic "other" too?

The extent to which a social distance measure in a survey is evidence of Islamophobic stereotyping and "othering" as opposed to a legitimate comprehension of the concerning rates of sexist attitudes within Muslim communities should attract some interest and search for data, although apparently not from the anti-racist scholar's perspective. Aside from the 2019 "Islam in Australia" survey, what little we do have publicly available through official or scholarly surveys is limited and unlikely to specify a particular religious or cultural background. For example, a major 2017 survey on "Attitudes Towards Violence Against Women and Gender Equality Amongst People from Non-English Speaking Countries"[34] does provide some very concerning findings, although not differentiating the specific religion or cultural backgrounds of the respondents. In general, the results indicate that among people from non-English-speaking countries (more precisely non-majority English-speaking counties: "N-MESC"), the results were about double those of Australian-born respondents (*already* distressingly high) for questions like: "A lot of what is called domestic violence is really just normal reaction to day-to-day stress and frustration" (30% vs 18%); "Women who flirt all the time are sometimes to blame if their partner gets jealous and hits them" (21% vs 12%); and "Domestic violence is a private matter to be handled in the family" (25% vs 10%).[35] What percentage of the N-MESC respondents identify as Muslims is unknown, however, as the authors of the study treated N-MESC respondents in aggregate, and while noting that "[t]here is some evidence that attitudes may vary with culture and/or ethnicity or individual country of birth", they express the view that it was not methodologically viable to explore this given the size of the dataset.[36] One can only speculate that if it *were* deemed methodologically viable to consider this question, whether there would be any appetite or incentive to pursue it, even if it could lead to better interventions for women at risk.

We can glean a little more by considering a study on refugee domestic family violence in Australia from 2006, which involved a sample of participants from Ethiopia, South and North Sudan, Serbia, Bosnia and Croatia, and Iraq. One of their findings was that:

> *While many of the women became more aware of their rights and felt more empowered by the changes in their status, many of the men felt disempowered. Many of the men did not accept the socially liberal changes in the women's roles in Australia*, or the role of government in supporting women who have been abused. Many of the men attributed "family conflict" to women becoming more dominant and independent.[37]

Compounding these women's experience of domestic violence steeped in patriarchal traditions within their own communities, for women wearing Hijabs especially, there was anti-Muslim violence and intimidation from those outside their communities.[38]

What anxieties or concerns that might stem from knowledge of the attitudes discussed so far both outside and inside Muslim communities are unclear, but to simply frame concerns using a Bogardus type tool as the results of "othering" is reductive in the extreme. Additionally, the sometimes disingenuous framing of results of such surveys is also troubling. For example, an American 2017 poll on LGBTQ issues (American Values Atlas) presented the overwhelmingly positive news that:

> Most religious groups in the U.S. now support same-sex marriage, including overwhelming majorities of Unitarians (97%), Buddhists (80%), the religiously unaffiliated (80%), Jewish Americans (77%), and Hindus (75%). Roughly two-thirds of white mainline Protestants (67%), white Catholics (66%), Orthodox Christians (66%), and Hispanic Catholics (65%) also favour same-sex marriage. *A slim majority of Muslims (51%) favour same-sex marriage, but only 34% are opposed*; 15% offer no opinion on this issue.[39]

[33] Hadi Sohrabi, "Identity and Muslim leadership: The Case of Australian Muslim Leaders," *Contemporary Islam* 10, no. 1 (2016): 11–12. Emphasis added.

[34] Kim Webster, C. Vaughan, R. Yasmin, K. Diemer, N. Honey, J. Mickle, J. Morgan et al., *Attitudes Towards Violence Against Women and Gender Equality Among People from Non-English Speaking Countries: Findings from the 2017 National Community Attitudes Towards Violence Against Women Survey (NCAS)*, Australia's National Research Organisation for Women's Safety, 2019.

[35] Webster, et al., "Attitudes Towards Violence Against Women", 26.

[36] Webster et al., "Attitudes Towards Violence Against Women", 16.

[37] Susan Rees and Bob Pease, *Refugee Settlement, Safety and Wellbeing: Exploring Domestic Family Violence in Refugee Communities*, Immigrant Women's Domestic Violence Service, 2006. 4–5. Emphasis added.

[38] Rees and Pease, *Refugee Settlement, Safety and Wellbeing,* 36–37. See also Derya Iner et al., *Islamophobia in Australia-II (2016–2017)*, Charles Sturt University, 2019.

[39] A. Vandermaas-Peeler, Cox, D., Fisch-Friedman, M., Griffin, R. and Jones, R.P., "Emerging Consensus on LGBT Issues: Findings from the 2017 American Values Atlas," Public Religion Research Institute (2018), 9. Emphasis added.

Somewhat buried within this passage is the concerning result that a *third* of American Muslims at that time opposed gay marriage, a level that matched only by conservative Christians. As the prominent gay activist and ex-Muslim Jimmy Bangash wryly noted:

> Media outlets disingenuously hailed this 51% as some type of success over Christianity ... Noteworthy in this attempt at obfuscation is the comparison between a conservative faction of Christians against a *combined figure of liberal and conservative Muslims*. In a more honest comparison between conservative Christians and Muslims, the data shows a far more damning portrayal of the conservative Muslim community.[40]

For comparison, the ICM 2015 British Muslim survey found that in response to the statement: "Homosexuality should be legal in Britain", a net disagree rate of 47% was from males and 37% from females.[41]

As far as attitudes within Muslim communities towards lesbian Muslims are concerned, some research not specific to Australia gives a sense of the complexity and challenges of how those within the Muslim community navigate this:

> Muslim gay men and lesbian women are engaged in a complex negotiation with different aspects of their indefinite from their faith, gender to sexuality. These components of their identity however, *are negatively influenced by Islam's intolerance of homosexuality, which supports and maintains the continued invisibility of LGBT Muslims in society*. Moreover, homosexuality as a sexual identity is so vociferously devalued and degraded that it inhibits them from expressing and identifying as LGBT Muslims. Muslim lesbians face the tremendously difficult task of reconciling faith with sexuality within this context, and struggle to accommodate themselves within a religious and ethnic community that legitimates and cultivates the stigmatization of homosexuality.[42]

What remains is that even if Muslim and conservative Christian attitudes as measured by a social distance type tool show superficially similar levels of intolerance of homosexuality, how that might manifest is quite another matter. Do, for example, those within the Muslim community also wish to see the application of classical shariah punishments (in *their* conception of shariah, rather than a scholarly one, presumably)—noting that 25% of Australian Muslim males agreed/strongly agreed to these views? (See below).

The link between intolerance towards out-groups and religious beliefs is pertinent to this discussion, and we shall see that things cut both ways, although perhaps deeper in one direction. Studies show strong links between the level of religious fundamentalism and the hostility towards "out groups" in both Christians and Muslims. In a major study looking at the link between religious fundamentalism and out-group hostility in Western Europe from 2014, it was found that:

> Among Christians, levels of hostility against gays and Jews are twice as high among fundamentalist strong believers, and hostility towards Muslims increases from 25 percent among those who are highly religious but non-fundamentalist to 57 percent among fundamentalists. *Among Muslims, we find the same pattern, albeit on a higher base level of hostility*. Hostility towards gays and the West is below 50 percent, and against Jews even below 30 percent among strongly religious, but non-fundamentalist Muslims. *Among fundamentalist Muslims, however, levels of hostility towards all three groups rise above 70 percent.*[43]

There is nothing unique about the higher level of intolerance from strongly religious and fundamentalist communities, other than, when comparing Christians and Muslims, it is higher in the latter across both non-fundamentalist and fundamentalists. Of relevance here is the 2019 survey of Australian Muslim attitudes found that 25% of males agreed/strongly agreed with the statement: "I would like to live in a country where classical shariah punishments are implemented", with a further 31% neither agreeing nor disagreeing (contrasting with only 11% agreed/strongly agreed for females).[44]

Before leaving this discussion of social distance and its possible reasons for some Muslim-specific social distance indicators, it is interesting to look at some recent results of a survey of North American ex-Muslims of why they left Islam, which reveals a significant driver of their apostasy was the conflict they saw between Islam and human rights:

> A little over a third (35%) of respondents cited conflict between Islam and human rights principles—issues like women's rights and gay rights—as the most important factor in their apostasy, more than any other

[40] Jimmy Bangash, "Islamic Homophobia is Empowered by Leftist Silence," *Queer Majority Essays,* 2021. https://www.queermajority.com/essays-all/islamic-homophobia-is-empowered-by-leftist-silence. Emphasis added.

[41] "Juniper Survey of Muslims 2015," ICM Muslims Survey for Channel 4 (2016), 117. https://www.icmunlimited.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Mulims-full-suite-data-plus-topline.pdf

[42] Asifa Siraj, "I Don't Want to Taint the Name of Islam: The Influence of Religion on the Lives of Muslim Lesbians," *Journal of Lesbian Studies* 16, no. 4 (2012): 464. Emphasis added.

[43] Ruud Koopmans, *Religious fundamentalism and Out-Group Hostility Among Muslims and Christians in Western Europe*, WZB Discussion Paper, No. SP VI 2014–101 (2014), 18. Emphasis added.

[44] Rane et al., "Islam in Australia", 19/39.

factor. Almost six in ten (58%) called this a contributing factor, and only 7% said it was not a factor.[45]

The same themes of women's rights and gay rights may well sit at the heart of much of the negative survey responses we have discussed above.

The Asymmetries of Anti-racism Research

What emerges through the discussion above is that a series of strange "asymmetries" seems to be occurring. These asymmetries may be in relation to simple matters like the rather clumsy way the rates of negative or concerning responses in surveys are highlighted or downplayed according to what group is "allowed" to possess bigotry or not, and in more complex and methodological manifestations, such as the conceptualisation and positioning of groups and their attitudes. The latter type is more concerning, as it obfuscates the weakness of anti-racist research such as to make it appear "objective" and survey data driven. I consider these methodological assumptions to result in three flawed asymmetries, namely relating social construction versus reality, stereotypes and groups, and the avoidance of reciprocity.

Social Constructs Versus Reality

Methodologically, the social constructivist mindset that underlies much of the discussion of anti-racist research results in—or perhaps justifies—studious efforts to avoid alternate and perhaps more obvious explanations for "social distance" outcomes and becomes curiously separated from the real world. In this regard, Meredith Tax writes astutely of postcolonial postmodernist feminism's hypocrisy in its approach to what she terms the Muslim right:

> ... [such] analysis has very little room for the real world at all – *its focus is on image, representation and trope rather than relationships between living people*. With the exception of wars of empire, real-world political battles fade away; *there are no actual Islamist organizations, no political parties, no struggles over particular laws. In fact there are no social actors of any kind except for the US military and its drones, just "narratives", "categories" and "complex social constructs"*. Most of all, there is no way that progressives or feminists in the North can act in solidarity with those in the Global South, for any solidarity can only be constructed as imperialist "rescue".[46]

Applying Tax's point to a straightforward real-life scenario, when a researcher asks the question: "How comfortable would you feel if a mosque was built in your neighbourhood?", consideration should be given to the obvious follow-up question: "Well, that depends. Is it funded by Qatari-, Saudi- or Turkish-based Islamic interests or their proxies?".

Academics driving anti-racism research seem to be seeking to uncover omnipresent systems of hidden Western colonial power relations and bigotry, while simultaneously appearing to be disinterested in tangible things like tracking international financial transfers from Gulf States to fund mosques or Islamic schools, "media fairness" organisations as shop-fronts for conservative Islamic pressure groups or acolytes of Yusuf al-Qaradawi collaborating with them. This asymmetrical scholarly interest in construction versus reality results in a "search for truth in only the right places", facilitated by a self-serving oscillation between "construction" and "reality" depending upon the moral cause. So, put crudely, Islamophobes are real people with bigoted beliefs, yet bigoted beliefs within Muslim communities exist only in constructions of an other.

In addition, what flows from this scholarly activity is a strange admixture of fixed "moral clarity" and a rather magnetic moral compass. On the one hand, concerns regarding Muslim attitudes (especially those within high-control religiously conservative communities) towards women, marriage, gender and sexuality, apostates, faith and democracy will be framed only in relation to the bad faith oppressor (itself a construct?), whereas, on the other hand, similar concerns expressed against—say—conservative or fundamentalist Christians with comparable non-progressive beliefs can be celebrated due to a "justifiable" dislike of Western-Anglo-Christian normative attitudes. Aside from being hypocritical, this has potentially chilling consequences for debate and dispute.

Stereotypes and Groups

It normally suffices for researchers to refer to the term "stereotype" as a self-evident critique of views held about a group as being both negative and incorrect. But, rather awkwardly, research into stereotype accuracy in fact shows high levels of accuracy. As social psychologist Lee Jussim and his colleagues observe:

> The historical emphasis on stereotype inaccuracy persists in many modern perspectives and requires scientific self-correction. [We have] aimed to stimulate such self-correction by summarizing the extant evidence on stereotype accuracy. Demographic (and "miscellaneous") stereotypes tend to be highly accurate; political stereotypes exaggerate real differences in the correct

[45] "Apostate Report: Leaving Islam in North America," Ex-Muslims of North America (2021), 14.

[46] Tax, *Double Bind*, 103. Emphasis added.

direction; and national-character stereotypes have often been found to be inaccurate when compared against Big Five self-reports.[47]

According to Jussim et al., to see whether a stereotype is accurate or not, there are three steps: "1. Assess people's descriptive beliefs about a group … 2. Identify criteria that establish group characteristic … 3. Compare beliefs to criteria."[48]

So, let us speculate that awareness exists within the broader non-Muslim Australian population that the levels of homophobia within Muslim communities are about the same level as conservative Christians (by one measure, at least), and the question was now asked of a secularist or non-conservative Christian: "In your opinion how concerned would you feel if one of your close relatives were to marry a person of *conservative Christian faith*"? What response would be deemed informed by actual understanding and legitimate concerns around tolerance for homosexuality within conservative Christian communities, and what would be construed as the consequence of a negative construct of an "other" versus an accurate stereotype?

Again, the point here is that once something has been characterised as the result of an "othering" stereotype, there seems to be no interest in inquiring into whether the stereotype is in fact accurate to any degree, and negative perceptions are not correlated with actual evidence but simply deflected as being part of the discourse of a construct of the "other" in the paradigm of the powerful and the powerless, the oppressor and the oppressed.

Avoidance of Reciprocity

Rather than focussing on attitudes of groups not-x towards group x, consider the scenario of what it would mean to pose the question to a sample of Muslims in Australia: "In your opinion how concerned would you feel if one of your close relatives were to marry a person of *non-Muslim* background/faith?". Would non-Muslim attitudes towards marrying a person of Muslim faith be more positive or less positive than those of a Muslim person marrying a non-Muslim? We can then assess whether attitudes within Muslim communities are more or less tolerant than of the general population in aggregate. We can see some indications in overseas research, where a 2013 PEW survey found anywhere between about 50% (rare) and as low as 2% of Muslims surveyed would actually be comfortable with their son or daughter marrying a Christian (much lower comfort for the latter).[49] Another study, published in 2006, found that British Muslims strongly disapproved of their daughters' marrying outside their faith,[50] while multiple studies have shown that Muslim men were much more likely to marry outside their religion than Muslim women, due to strong and traditional gendered norms.[51]

There is an overarching asymmetry here in that this anti-racist research does not take the step back to consider how the data looks beyond *one-way traffic*. Within the context of overall tolerance and respect for cultural diversity, how does each group contribute to the aggregated whole? Does a particular group *contribute* to or *detract* from tolerance and respect for difference across groups in Australia as a whole? Does group x add or detract from our country's tolerance for, say, interfaith marriages, gay marriage or attitudes towards out-group y or z? Looking for evidence flowing in only one direction is natural if you take as your underlying dogma that everything stems from unidirectional power relations, the powerful against the powerless, oppressor and oppressed.

To press the point a little more, there is an interesting thought experiment to be had in relation to "minorities" (read: oppressed, powerless) and their beliefs. If, in a Muslim majority country, a minority cultural-religious or gender group (say Christians in today's Pakistan[52] or LGTBQI+individuals in Palestine or Egypt) were being discriminated against by the religious conservatism and bigotry of the majority, what kind of academic discourse would we want to see, and what would be the focus: dominance of the majority or the nature of the beliefs themselves? What if we migrate religious conservatism and bigotry to a country where those beliefs are no longer majority or as dominant—but nonetheless remain held within migrant communities—what do we discuss? Is it the case that bigotry is accepted or dismissed so long as those holding it are the minority? Is it bad faith "assimilation" or "acculturation", or even "Islamophobic" to ask why some attitudes and beliefs should be acceptable in Australia today or express that concern through a social distance survey instrument?

[47] Lee Jussim, Jarret T. Crawford, and Rachel S. Rubinstein, "Stereotype (In)Accuracy in Perceptions of Groups and Individuals," *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 24, no. 6 (2015): 492.

[48] Jussim et al., "Stereotype (In)Accuracy", 492.

[49] Pew Research Center, *The World's Muslims: Religion, Politics and Society* (2013), 124.

[50] Heather Al-Yousuf, "Negotiating Faith and Identity in Muslim–Christian Marriages in Britain," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 17, no. 3 (2006): 317–329.

[51] See, for example, Cila and Lalonde, "Personal Openness Toward Interfaith Dating and Marriage Among Muslim Young Adults: The Role of Religiosity, Cultural Identity, and Family Connectedness," *Group Processes & Intergroup Relation,* 17, no. 3 (2014): 357–370.

[52] See, for example, Philip Mounstephen, "Bishop of Truro's Independent Review for the Foreign Secretary of FCO Support for Persecuted Christians: Final Report and Recommendations," (2019).

Conclusion

The ironic consequence of the three asymmetries described above is that statistical groups are constructed as artefacts from surveys (i.e. categories of latent Islamophobes), who are then collectively ascribed motives and beliefs that are the result of imposing anti-racist assumptions and biases in the first place. There is, it seems, always a *deeper* and *darker* truth to what is observable using the lens of anti-racism research methodologies, as evident through their interpretation of social distance measures. The answer to why this happens in the anti-racism studies cited is not necessarily that the scholars are being disingenuous or lazy, but rather that they are convinced of a "pure" form of racism (or, in this case, somewhat confusingly, Islamophobia) that lies beneath all signs of caution or concern towards Muslim beliefs, and so there is a mission to find exemplars. So, part of the problem lies in a steadfastly applied Ptolemaic mindset that sees racism and power relations at the centre of all visible or invisible phenomenon, with vigorous efforts to find both confirmation on the one hand and to avoid or explain away inconvenient data on the other.

A likely outcome of the broad and crude application of the term "Islamophobia" is that it will not only frame any concerns or critique by those *outside* the Muslim community of the prevalence of concerning values or beliefs of Muslim communities, but also stifle dispute and dissent from *inside*. This is especially the case when Islamic leaders who profess to speak on behalf of Muslim communities and yet do not properly represent them or the diversity of their views. As Silma Ihram writes:

> The inability to raise critical concerns in a safe and public environment or find any avenue within Muslim community institutions for internal criticism of the statements of their religious leaders, has meant that *young Muslims often engage in a dual process of dialogue*. Internally young Muslims along with various members of their families lament the inability of their religious leaders to provide a more positive image of their religion, to grasp the subtleties of the English language (and sometimes even the rudimentary skills of English) and their often inappropriate responses to external calls for accountability or explanations. Publicly however, they maintain solidarity with their religious and ethnic leaders, as to counter them publicly would be seen not only as disrespectful, but as akin to joining with the "enemy", a position possibly exacerbated by strong parental and family connections with the latter's continued links with countries of origin. *This has restricted severely any opportunity to make Muslim religious leaders accountable, as any overt criticism can be labelled as supporting the deliberate misrepresentation and wilful marginalisation of the community as a whole*.[53]

How, one may reasonably ask, can vigorous and fruitful debate occur within a community on pressing issues when questioning those same issues from the outside risks being labelled as Islamophobic? The result may well be that the increased use of the category "Islamophobic" will simply serve to suppress debates from those marginalised within Muslim communities, while also leading to counter-productive public displays of solidarity with their leaders, as Ihram describes.

The work of scholars and commentators such as Elham Manea, Meredith Tax and Kenan Malik behoves us to be wary of the politics of identity that accompanies commentary and research on Islamophobia. In tackling very real racism and intolerance within Australia, and anti-Muslim bigotry especially, the questions we will need to face squarely are as follows: where does the "assimilationist" tag cloud our commitment to "social cohesion" or "tolerance"?; where does framing of the "Other" in a scholarly framework obfuscate misogyny or intolerance from *within* the so-called Other?; and how can deeply rooted tensions or clashes of values be discussed if the *only* framing is racism or Islamophobia? Finally, a further risk is that those within some conservative and high-control religious communities who seek reform, to leave, or to embrace the affordances of "mainstream" Australian values, face additional marginalisation and obstacles as scholarly narratives obstruct their quest for change or greater alignment with values and freedoms enjoyed more broadly across the breadth of multicultural Australia.

[53] Silma Ihram, "Muslim Youth and the Mufti: Youth Discourses on Identity and Religious Leadership Under Media Scrutiny," (PhD diss., University of Western Sydney, Australia, 2009): 136. Emphasis added.