POLICY BRIEF

The Racialization of Muslim-Sounding Names

The interaction of names, embodied identities and Islam (religion)

Author: Emily Jay Wykes, Bridge Institute for Research and Policy
Policy: Louis Carserides, Bridge Institute for Research and Policy

**Bridge
Institute**

Executive Summary

The research findings stem from the qualitative experiences of interview participants, who have – at different times - borne a 'white British' name, and a 'Muslim-sounding' name, which has enabled them to compare their experiences of using the different names.

This report demonstrates that, despite claims that the UK is a post-racial society; names are understood in a racialised way. It is suggested that names are racially hierarchised according to the racial and/or national identity that the name is seen to represent. The evidence suggests names inform stereotypes of a person's embodied racial appearance. To be clear, names are not an independent variable, but intersect with racial appearance and accent in different ways and contexts.

Names can impact both how a person is racialised and the degree of privilege they have access to. The report reveals anti-Muslim racialisation manifests at multiple levels, including at an everyday "micro-level" which feeds into broader, more complex problems around integration, social participation and reduced levels of aspiration. Ultimately, and more specifically, we found that:

- Names are more than just an *individual* marker of identity. They are seemingly understood in ethnic/'racial' terms and are utilised as a 'gateway' to determining one's characteristics including intelligence, beliefs and morals.

- Names are connected to matters of rights and inheritance: they symbolise privilege and consequently have a 'commodity-like value'. Participants who changed their name from a 'White British' sounding name to a 'Muslim-sounding name' reported a loss of "white privilege".

- Adopting Muslim-sounding names can lead to alienation and isolation from kin and friendship networks.

- People's aspirations and life chances are negatively impacted as a result of:

    a) The pre-existing and inaccurate prejudices of external subjects.

    b) Internal self-doubt regarding one's own identity.

- People experienced, at times, feelings of threat, vulnerability and suspicion as a result of being stereotyped.

Introduction and Justification

- The Equality and Human Rights Commission, *Healing a Divided Britain*, 2016, which centred on race inequality and discrimination, noted that more research needs to be conducted on people's experiences of stigma and stereotyping, as there is presently 'limited' national data (p. 52).

- Existing evidence proves that Muslims experience the worst outcomes in employment (Ibid., p. 24).

- Muslim men are 76% less likely to be employed than their white Christian counterparts, according to research by the Research Centre for the Study of Ethnicity and Citizenship at the University of Bristol.

- Both Sikhs and Muslims have the highest pay gap, when compared with those with no religion, earning around 20% less in 2013 (p. 25).

- In 2017, the BBC found that a job seeker with an English-sounding name was offered three times the number of interviews than an applicant with a Muslim name.

- Added to existing structural downward pressures, there is a rapid increase in anti-Muslim hate crime, which has fuelled highly controversial, and polarising, policy debates nationally and globally.

- By qualitatively understanding the experiences of name racialisation, and the apparent reasons behind this bias, this article captures insights and information that do not exist in government records and datasets.

Full research paper available upon request

Research Approach

- This research paper explores the lived experiences of victims of name racialisation. 32 participants were originally interviewed. This paper streamlines the experiences of six hard-to-reach case-study participants who were able to compare their experiences of possessing both a white British-sounding name and a Muslim-sounding name.

- The research and policy recommendations are grounded in sociological theory, and are informed by existing research including the McGregor-Smith Review (2017), the Parker Review (2016), the Women and Equalities Committee report into Employment Opportunities for Muslims in the UK (2016), and the Casey Review (2016).

- Research was conducted in accordance with ESRC ethical practices, and met the research standards set by the University of Nottingham for doctoral research.

Key Research Findings

- Respondents or their partners were victims of negative stereotyping and received hostile reactions from family and friends as a result of their new Muslim-sounding names or their partners' Muslim-sounding names.

- People were identified and characterised, often negatively, by others, contrary to their own personal perceptions of self.

- Respondents reported choosing white British-sounding names, or avoided using their Muslim-sounding names because they feared for their own prospects or life-chances of their children.

What they said

Negative characterisation and stigmatisation of names

"[I receive] … the usual comments [about my husband] like, "oh so he's foreign", that "he's going to be using you" … or, "he's just trying to get into the country", lots of rubbish like that …. Again, that was just by me mentioning his name to them, so they didn't meet him or know anything about him … they just presumed he's some [chuckles] foreigner …"

Externalised identity constructions

"It annoys me … it's like they're saying I'm not English … because of my name … it just winds me up. I can understand people saying, "ah it doesn't sound English", but when they're saying, "Oh no it's not English, you're wrong", it's like "okay …""

Feelings of vulnerability

"[I would] … use whichever name suited me … if I felt like I was in a context that might be tricky I would use an English name …"

"[Having] Haj [in my name] is something that you can celebrate … but you can't do that everywhere … in other contexts it's something that I might have to conceal or play down or feel a bit uncomfortable about."

Social mobility

"I wanted [my son] to have, because I knew how racism exists in this country … more of an English name … because I thought he would be better served if he had an … English name than if he had a name like Mohammed or Husain or whatever … because … [he would be] racially abused and stuff like that … so … unbeknown to my husband, I trawled through this book of suitable Arabic names and found one that I could shorten to an English name."

Anti-Muslim stereotyping

"I think that it's going to be harder to break down the borders of expectations for people with a Muslim name in this country, I think there's enough misinformation kicking [around] about what it is to be Arab, what it is to be a Muslim … that people do sort of automatically maybe think that he's a Muslim and he beats up his wife or … something ridiculous … and … yeah, I definitely would say that there's an issue in the UK with pre-conceptions attached to names, that is without a doubt."

Policy Recommendations

The research demonstrates that name racialisation is a symptom of underlying racialised thinking i.e. the names are not the issue, but rather that people are using the names to racialise individuals.

The relationship between names, embodied racial identity, accents, religion and nationality is key to understanding how people are racialised and, also, to understanding that 'race' is still important to how people are judged.

The policy recommendations in this paper are targeted towards *tackling the drivers of racialised bias against Muslim and 'othered' identities* (which are at the heart of the problem) rather than the symptom (in this instance discrimination against names). Bridge Institute recommends that:

1. The government utilises social media and works more closely with civil society and social media companies to run counter-narrative projects including around anti-Muslim hate speech online and offline. Regarding Muslims, it seems that some members of the government and some journalists have conflated everyday interpretations of Islam with extremism, especially in the early stages of the war against terror. We urge the government to undergo extra efforts to reverse this association, as well as to combat misinformation, negative stereotyping and stigmatisation more broadly.

2. The Department for Education should include a module on the history of migration as part of the citizenship aspect of the national curriculum for Key Stages 3 and 4. In an increasingly globalised and interconnected world it is vital that students are educated about the diversity of their fellow citizens and are equipped with the necessary knowledge to understand the cultures and practices of their future colleagues and potential kin. Familiarity usually leads to a sense of security, comradeship and trust, thus enabling people to maximise upon the rich mix of language, perspectives and histories within the UK. Such talent and diversity can be utilised and harnessed in a way that students can become truly global leaders.

3. The Department for Communities and Local Government should ring-fence a proportion of its 'Community Fund' initiative budget, to fund group-discussion sessions around experiences of anti-Muslim hatred and racial discrimination. Group-discussions can serve as a sounding board for victims, thereby acting as a support system and subsequently boosting confidence and aspiration, whilst enhancing integration.

Finances can be invested into key workers with the necessary expertise to facilitate group conversations around people's experiences of racial discrimination and anti-Muslim hatred within local communities. Finances can also be utilised to equip and train members of the community to lead group discussions themselves, ensuring continued and sustainable high-quality group-discussion sessions.

4. There is no doubting that the media play a role in shaping public consciousness and informing people's views, which is currently having a disproportionate impact on the Muslim community.

Following the News International phone hacking scandal, the Leveson Inquiry concluded that press reporting on immigrants and ethnic minorities was often sensational and unbalanced. It found that certain elements of the press have a tendency to publish 'prejudicial or pejorative references to race, as well as to religion, gender, sexual orientation or physical or mental illness or disability' (Leveson, 2012).

Tell MAMA's annual 2015 report evidenced 'ample evidence to prove that Islamophobia is an ideology and disseminated through various media sources that portray Muslims in a negative light'.

Research conducted by the University of Cambridge concluded that mainstream media reporting about Muslim communities is actually *contributing* to an atmosphere of rising hostility toward Muslims in Britain.

Bridge Institute recommends:

- The board of the Independent Press Standards Organisation should ensure fair and balanced ethnic representation on its board and complaints committee.
- Corrections should take up equal space to the initial erroneous print and appear within the first four pages of the said edition. The prominence and weight of corrections / confessions in newspapers following misleading articles are currently often unbalanced.

- The Department for Culture, Media and Sport should work with IPSO to create and disseminate toolkits on how to submit press complaints so that the public can effectively and efficiently hold the press to account.

5. Whilst Bridge Institute welcomes the Government Equalities Office (GEO) Gender Pay Gap Information Regulations, we call for the GEO to legislate the same employers to make data available with regards to ethnic pay gaps by profession. We encourage employers to:

a) Publish the organisations' median ethnic pay gap figures.

b) Publish the organisations' mean ethnic pay gap figures.

c) Publish people's ethnicities in each quartile of the pay structure to show the spread of earners by ethnicity across an organisation, helping to show employers where ethnic minorities' progress might be stalling, so that they can take action to support their career development.

d) Publish pay gaps by ethnicity for any bonuses paid out during the year.

6. The McGregor-Smith Review stated that in many organisations "the well-established recruitment processes in place can act as a barrier to ethnic minorities and hinder their progress through an organisation". We call for more data to be gathered on the recruitment process, from the initial interview to employment. We recommend employers:

a) Measure the effectiveness of name-blinding CVs to see if more people from ethnic minority backgrounds are being invited to interviews and/or offered employment

b) Collate and breakdown each interview stage by ethnic participation and identify and monitor progress of ethnic minorities throughout the interview process

c) Capture and identify commonalities leading to successful employment and common reasons for rejection amongst people from ethnic minority backgrounds.

d) Utilise this data to inform government of what is needed to equip ethnic minorities with the tools to better compete in the labour market in order to create a more diverse and representative market.