

Title

The Myth of British Identity and the Failure of Multiculturalism?: From hijab to jilbab

What this Study Contributes

A study of the shifting identities of British Muslims based on research carried out with young British Muslim women over a decade ago, the research explores how the women who had taken part in a previous research project whilst still school children have since constructed their identities now they are adults, many with their own children, and in employment. It highlights the influence of the media and multicultural policies in the social construction of them as British Muslims.

It will also result in the production of a DVD that can be used in formal and informal educational settings that enable young people to reflect critically on themselves and their attitudes to the issues around multiculturalism in general, Muslim communities in particular and Islam by promoting the importance of cultural and religious literacy and sensitivity.

Team

Principal Investigator: Dr Kaye Haw (Nottingham)

Research Fellows: Samina Din (Nottingham), Shazia Khan (Nottingham)

University

University of Nottingham

Award

Phase 1 Small Grant £82,863

Research Partners

n/a

Approach

The research involved individual and group interviews with the young women, participants making of video diaries, observation at events and the compilation of a DVD plus dissemination events.

Findings

Project finished 30th September 2008.

These women form part of an 'in-between generation' who visibly mark a moment within British multicultural society in terms of being British, being Muslim and being British Muslims. They are an in-between generation in the sense that their identity is in part defined by their active re-constructing and re-evaluating of the relationship between the traditions they inherited from their parents and the role of religion within that and the relationship of those traditions and religious beliefs with British culture and identity.

As young people they were provided with a strong sense of British identity via their parents' moral discourses: a notion of Britishness often based on espoused ideals of tolerance and fairness. Prepared by their parents to live within this idealised society, and educate their children in its values, as parents themselves they have instead been presented with the rise of the 'lad' and 'ladette' culture. Their felt contradictions between contemporary and traditional moral views of Britishness have been played out against a backdrop of a globalised youth and media culture. They have been faced with an emergent British identity now less based on their parents' traditional notions of tolerance and fairness, but rather increasingly based on normalising difference (what it is to be British) and problematising the 'difficult' (increasing intolerance to that which is seen as non-British).

This generation is in the process of re-constructing and re-integrating both their parent's traditional and cultural notions of being Muslim, and their idealisation of British identity. This has led to the partial rejection of some traditional values running in parallel with the re-assertion of other religious values. As such they have become 'more confident to be seen as Muslim', but are often in a dialogue with their own children and parents, as to what constitutes being Muslim in Britain. It is simplistic to attribute the more fragmented but assertive identities that have emerged from this process as a 'failure' of multiculturalism.

As an 'in-between' generation these young women have experienced unprecedented change within their own communities in terms of a broadening of attitudes to education, work, marriage and the role of women. As these communities have gained confidence in living, working and actively participating in a British multicultural society they have experienced an intense mixture of increased personal confidence of being Muslim with a heightened social sense of how Muslims are constructed in the media and their own communities.

In part they have been socially constructed as becoming 'more Muslim' and this has further intensified their reflections on their identity and how prevalent social constructions impact upon them and their families. Many are now part of communities who are beginning to draw back into themselves in response to living in a society where

fear of 'the other' is widespread. Therefore it is perhaps unsurprising if that ten years on this research has revealed young women with fragmented but strong identities shaped in equal parts though a process of 'resistance' to social constructions of Muslims, Muslim communities and Islam filtered through the media, and a re-positioning of many of the traditions of their parents.

Activities and Outcomes

- DVD in production, presentations in academic and non-academic contexts and a piece appeared in the local newspaper January 2008.
- Discussion of wider research on BBC Radio 4's Thinking Allowed on Monday 21st June 2010:
http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/publications/radio_television

Further Information

Listen to podcasts about this project here:

http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/publications/podcasts/show/being_british_and_being_muslim.