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Knowledge, False Beliefs and Fact-Driven Perceptions of Muslims in Australia

A national survey

Abe W. Ata

This research study examined what constituted negative attitudes towards Muslims that are predicted from the scale of our knowledge, fashionable or well worn. Drawing on the findings of this literature, the author set out to examine if a relationship exists between prejudice and fact-driven knowledge of other groups like Muslims. In other words, are negative attitudes towards Muslims strongly correlated with false beliefs? The research was part of a larger study examining the attitudes of 1000 non-Muslim and non-Jewish secondary school students towards Muslims and Islam. The results show that participants who spontaneously mentioned false beliefs and had a low level of knowledge reported significantly more negative attitudes to Muslims than those who did not. This is an important result because it is possible that accepting incorrect information may be shaping negative attitudes toward Muslims. On the basis of these findings the author is only able to conclude there is a bi-directional relationship between prejudice and the degree of knowledge or cultural perception of Muslims in Australian society; however there was no evidence of causation or level of significance.

Much work has been written about negative perceptions that Anglo-Australians hold towards various ethnic and religious minorities, particularly from the Middle East – Muslim and Christian (Ata, 1984, 2007a, 2007b, 2009a, 2009c, 2011; Ata, Bastian & Lusher, 2009b; Ata, Lusher & Brock, 2012; Pedersen, Attwell & Heveli, 2005; Pedersen, Dudgeon, Watt & Griffiths, 2006; and Dunn et al, 2004).

Research suggests that the media – one of several social-psychological factors influencing fact-driven attitudes – contribute in developing a negative
perception of Australian Muslims, often portraying Islam in direct conflict with the values and traditions of Western culture; that terrorism and Islam are synonymous; Australia and Islam are incompatible; and their worldviews are irreconcilable (Ata, 2009a, 2011, Aly, 2006, 2009; Dunn, Kabir, 2007).

Aside from Issues Deliberation Australia (2007), it is almost certain that there is little or no published work on the implementation of a successful strategy toward the reduction of prejudice against Muslims. Pederson et al. (2009) cites a forum to achieve such an outcome but its relevance was limited. Pederson et al., however, believe that although educational interventions on their own are not sufficient, they can yield positive outcomes as the community becomes directed to a different ways of thinking, remote from the influences of the media.

There is little published research examining the extent to which false facts relate to attitudes toward Muslims. Much less is reported on what may constitute negatives attitudes towards Muslims that could be predicted from the scale of our knowledge, fashionable or well worn. It is held that many of the false beliefs play a crucial role in perpetuating negative attitudes, legitimising social distance and justifying blatant and subtle prejudice (Pederson et al., 2005; Eagly, 1992). In other words, they interlink with generalizable attributes and stereotyping, extending portrayal and the like.

In the written discourse, one can refute empirically most of these inaccuracies. But in common daily conversations, they serve as oxygen for quibbles that win the day. By the same extension, false facts may be empirically challenged, but the attitudinal tendencies elude that.

Results from studies on anti-prejudice education showed that participants believed that factual information about out-groups is crucial in challenging negative feelings and improve positivity towards them (Pedersen et al., 2005).

Several researchers from Europe and Australia found that low and high-prejudiced people share the same knowledge of cultural and ethnic stereotypes of minority, thus signifying that the level of knowledge and depth of prejudice are independent of one another (Gordijn, Koomen & Stapel, 2001; Augustinos, Ahrens & Innes, 1994; Lepore & Brown, 1997). This could, however, relate to the validity of the test itself. Gordijn et al.
(2001, p. 157) argues that the measuring instrument may be insensitive enough to detect finer 'differences in the knowledge of cultural stereotypes as a function of level of prejudice when the free response method'.

An original study on the portrayal of Arab Muslims and Christians in the Australian press and school textbooks (Ata, 1984) marks several widespread false facts and inconsistencies in both textbooks and primary references. Some of these were incorporated in the knowledge test, one that forms the basis of this research, and as outlined in later pages. Similarly, Augoustinos and Quinn (2003) found when analysing newspaper articles that there were significantly more negative terms (e.g., 'illegal') compared with more neutral terms (e.g., 'asylum seekers').

Edmund Rice Centre (2006) listed several falsehoods held by the mainstream community about Muslims. They contend that such falsehoods have long-term implications in that they promote negative and passionate reactions. For example, words like 'jihad,' have come to overshadow what is a religion of many perspectives, Jihad does not mean 'holy war,' but refers to 'any action by which one makes sincere and conscious effort for a collective benefit'; hijab is a testimony of faith not subjugation. It is pointed out that differences of worldview between the two societies and their tradition will continue to exist. Where might false beliefs about Muslim minorities have originated? It is argued that attitudes are not only formed by the media but can also be formed by other more individual social-psychological variables. Utsey, McCarthy, Eubanks and Adrian (2002) found that people with high self-regard were more prejudiced.

Walker (1994) found the same individuals often have varying prejudiced views depending on the target group whereby Indigenous Australians were at the bottom of the pecking order, followed by Asian Australians. Another variable relates to perceived consensus in the community, i.e., how widely people believe that their opinions are shared -- a term which Pederson (2004) ascribes as 'equal opportunity bigots'. See also Hartley & Pedersen (in press).

Drawing on the findings of the literature, the author set out to examine if a relationship exists between prejudice and fact-driven knowledge of other groups like Muslims. In other words, are negative attitudes towards Muslims strongly correlated with false beliefs?
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Batterham (2001), for example, found that giving accurate information about false beliefs about Indigenous Australians reduced prejudice scores. Like this group, if attitudes toward Muslims are to be modified, relevant false beliefs are shown for what they are.

Jones (1997) and Sidanius, Levin, Federico, and Pratto (2001) believed that legitimising myths—such as Muslims are a threat to Western values and the like—has practical consequences in that they create, maintain, and enhance social inequality and play a role in either the justification or opposition of social policies.

A study by the Pew Research Centre (2006) showed that those who are more knowledgeable about Muslims express favourable opinions of Muslims and Islam. It was noted that, through knowledge, greater levels of awareness come from equal status interaction between the learner and individuals of Muslim background. The study showed that the ability to identify both Allah and the Koran correctly correlates with holding a favourable view of Islam. Being informed about Islam prompts people to think that Islam and their own religion have a lot in common. Similarly being knowledgeable about Islam makes one more likely to see recent terrorist attacks as part of a conflict.

To identify the level of knowledge, six statements were developed by the author. Another four were adapted from the Pew Research Center's European survey (2006):

- All Arabs are Muslims.
- All Muslims are Arabs.
- Some Palestinians are Christian.
- Iran is an Arab country.
- Egypt is an Arab country.
- Turkey is an Arab country.
- Muslims believe that Jesus was a prophet.
- Muslims believe that Abraham was a prophet.
- Jerusalem is a holy city for Muslims.
- Muslims believe that the Prophet Muhammad is the son of God.
Table 1: Participant characteristics (N=980)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sex</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>320</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>655</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>School gender composition</strong></td>
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<td>Coeducational school</td>
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<tr>
<td>Girls only school</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>School type</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Catholic schools</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent schools</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State schools</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Christian schools</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Language</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Language other than English</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Religion</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Christian</td>
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<tr>
<td>Non-Christian</td>
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<td><strong>Parental background</strong></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents Born in elsewhere</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Metropolitan</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Urban</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural</td>
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</tr>
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<td><strong>Muslim friend (direct contact)</strong></td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>216</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>758</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Muslim neighbour (indirect contact)</strong></td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>924</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Parental social distance</strong></td>
<td>2.9 (1.0)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ethnocentrism</strong></td>
<td>2.2 (0.9)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>School culture supportive of Muslims</strong></td>
<td>3.5 (1.0)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Belief in education</strong></td>
<td>2.8 (0.9)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Knowledge of Islam</strong></td>
<td>3.0 (2.4)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Threat from Muslims</strong></td>
<td>1.6 (1.1)</td>
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<td><strong>Intergroup relations</strong></td>
<td>1.2 (0.3)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Integration potential</strong></td>
<td>0.9 (0.4)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Method**

An initial group of 1000 students from 20 secondary schools around Australia\(^1\)

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\(^1\) This excludes the Northern Territory and the state of Western Australia. These locations were excluded as it would have been costly to survey them for logistical reasons. There was no reason to suppose their responses would differ from those in other states.
was administered a survey\(^2\) examining attitudes towards Muslims and Islam in February to July 2006. The research was part of a larger study examining the attitudes of non-Muslim and non-Jewish secondary school students towards Muslims and Islam (Ata, 2007b). Participating schools were either Christian (13 Catholic, 1 ‘other’ Christian school) or non-religious (3 independent, 2 government schools). Participating students were from Years 10-12, where in Year 10 pupils were typically between 14 and 16 years of age; in Year 11, between 15-17; and in Year 12 between 16-18.

Exploratory statistics found that one school had extreme values with regard to the independent variables, demographics and prejudice against Muslims. As the unique characteristics of this school contribute to giving it unwarrantedly large influence on the results, it was discarded from the sample (the robustness of the results is investigated later on). As a result there were 980 participating students representing 19 schools. Excluding missing data, the number of observations ranges from 972 in the simplest model to 876 in the most complex model.

**Findings**

**Knowledge score (method 1)**

Respondents were presented with statements concerning objectively verifiable facts about Islam and Muslims, and requested to rate their agreement on a five-point scale from ‘Strongly agree’ through ‘Neutral’ to ‘Strongly disagree’. Responses were tabulated for each question and aggregated into a score representing each respondent's knowledge. To avoid bias, questions were worded so that half had ‘Agree’ as the correct response, and half ‘Disagree’.

Under this scoring method, wrong answers were penalized (Figure 1). Respondents who got many questions wrong could receive a negative score. Hence, it revealed the degree of misinformation as well as correct knowledge. Some 20% of respondents received a negative score, meaning they got more questions wrong than right; 28% scored zero, meaning that on balance they got as many questions wrong as right, or alternatively did not know; and 52% received a positive score, meaning that they got more questions right than wrong. It is concluded that although ignorance of Islam is widespread, those

\(^2\) A pilot study was conducted at nine schools with 552 students, and a short form survey was conducted at 13 schools with 682 students.
who are on balance correctly informed outnumber the incorrectly informed in the ratio of 2.5 to one.

**Figure 1. Proportion of respondents by knowledge score (method 1) (N=970).**

![Bar chart showing the proportion of respondents by knowledge score (method 1) (N=970).]

**Figure 2. Proportion of respondents by knowledge score (method 2) (N=970).**

![Bar chart showing the proportion of respondents by knowledge score (method 2) (N=970).]

**Knowledge score (method 2)**

Under this method of scoring, wrong answers were not penalized (figure 2). Some 22% of respondents scored zero, meaning that they got no questions right. The rest got at least some right, with a mode of four correct.

No significant difference was found between the mean knowledge scores
Knowledge, False Beliefs and Fact-Driven Perceptions of Muslims — 17 of boys and girls ($F(1,984) = 2.457, p = \text{n.s.}$). However, a significant difference was found between the mean knowledge scores of religious affiliations ($F(2,948) = 13.036, p < .001$). Post hoc tests (Student-Newman-Keuls, $p < .05$) showed non-religious to be the most knowledgeable (mean score 1.54), followed by Other Christians (1.45) and Catholics (0.68). Non-religious students were more knowledgeable of Muslims and Islam than were Christian students (though there was considerable ignorance among all groups).

The survey revealed a great lack of knowledge of Islam. On all questions, about half the sample recorded a 'don’t know' response (figure 5.1). The proportion of correct responses varied from a high of 49% for Some Palestinians are Christian, to a low of 6% for Iran is an Arab country.

**Figure 3: Level of knowledge by attitudinal tendencies**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level of knowledge by attitudinal tendencies</th>
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<tr>
<td><img src="image" alt="Graph showing level of knowledge by attitudinal tendencies" /></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**Discussion**

The assumption behind cross tabulating the two variables was that a knowledgeable person will answer in one way and those with little knowledge
will answer in another. More to the point: If a person is knowledgeable about Islam, she or he won’t be bigoted (a reasonable assumption). It is possible, though, that people can dislike Muslims and be knowledgeable, because of national interest; that is one is swayed to express tendencies that they believe share with the rest of the community.

Figure 3 shows that those who know more about Islam are at a high ranking of 2.5 and above generally. It is shown in particular that the two statements: *Muslims have made a major contribution to world civilization,* and, *Muslims have made a major contribution to Australia* ranked highest at the knowledge scale with 3.2 and 3.65, respectively. *A person could be both a good Muslim and a loyal Australian* showed the lowest ranking, at 2.4. This result is likely due to a ‘wait and see predisposition’ until Muslims overcome an unparalleled difficulty of integrating two distant but evolving identities.

Given the high bi-directional relation between the two variables, surprising no group is found to fall in the middle, i.e., one showing a flat lining. That is expected in that a knowledgeable person will answer in one way and others with little knowledge answer in another. It is clear that the hypothesis is corroborated by evidence— one that suggests bigots to be ignorant but those who have a high level of knowledge are not.

These statements do not show causality; only three did but were not included in this chart. These are:

1. *Muslims find it hard to integrate.*
2. *If I saw a Muslim student being attacked I would come to the rescue.*
3. *Australian TV and newspapers show Muslims in a fair way.*

One could say that being pre-disposed about knowledge of other cultures, and by extension Islam would show a positive movement/attitudes on average towards the group in focus. Three false beliefs were particularly prevalent. These were *All Arabs are Muslims; Some Palestinians are Christians;* and, *Turkey is an Arab country.*

It is understood that if participants were given the opportunity to express all the reasons behind their attitudes, more false beliefs are likely to have emerged.

The results show that participants who spontaneously mentioned false beliefs and had low levels of knowledge reported significantly more negative
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attitudes to Muslims than those who did not. This is an important result because it is possible that accepting incorrect information may be shaping negative attitudes toward Muslims.

On the basis of the research analysed, the results show that there is no conclusive relationship between prejudice and the degree of knowledge, or cultural perception, of Muslims in the Australian society.

The fact that education was so strongly linked with attitudes toward Muslims, and certain minority groups supports the prejudiced literature regarding other cultural groups as discussed in the introduction.

Educating people to reduce prejudice levels may be seen as an agenda flagged by some interest groups. The agenda behind this research is to present new findings that will generate alternate ways of thinking and educational interventions.

References


Pedersen, A., Beven, J., Walker, I., & Griffiths, B. (2004). Attitudes toward
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