

“I love the Queen”: Positioning in young British Muslim discourse

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Abstract

Stereotyping of Muslims in media and political narratives can have tangible effects on the day-to-day lives of young people. Using data from focus groups and interviews with 19 university students in London and Birmingham, UK and focusing on extracts from the data in which participants tell stories about their own experiences, this article explores how young British Muslims position themselves in response to negative media narratives about Muslims, particularly after terrorist attacks. The analysis shows that the media was seen as a driving force behind negative stereotypes about Muslims, and this resulted in pressure on Muslims to present themselves in non-threatening and welcoming ways to others, despite being subjected to covert and overt discrimination which participants felt in various contexts. Participants suggested that discrimination could be difficult to identify and quantify, and even when discrimination was overt, it could be illogical and incoherent, and therefore difficult to respond to in a meaningful way.

Keywords

positioning, narrative, Muslims, racism, news media, discrimination, terrorism

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1 Background

Negative media and political narratives about the Muslims in the West are abundant. Headlines warning about “UK Muslim ghettos” and a “nation within a nation” (Dolan, 2016) are not uncommon in sections of British media, and in the USA, President Trump has made a point of using the term “radical Islamic terrorism” to highlight the perceived threat of Muslims and Islam. Ahmed (2015) argues that since 9/11, young Muslims, particularly in Britain, have faced increasing levels of typecasting and even racism. These positionings of Muslims are often fed by Islamophobic discourse in the media, which reinforces these stereotypes (Baker, Gabrielatos, & McEnery, 2013; Saeed, 2007). For example, media coverage in 2016 of the presence of ISIS in Syria has focused on several examples of individual young British Muslims who have travelled there. The constant presence of negative stories about Muslims leads to general suspicion about young Muslims as both simultaneously vulnerable and dangerous (Dinham, 2012; Panjwani, Revell, Diboll, & Gholami, 2017; Pantazis & Pemberton, 2009), but the effects of how young Muslims understand and cope with negative media portrayals of themselves and their communities has not been adequately investigated. This article, therefore, focuses on young Muslim talk about media coverage of Muslims and Islam, and aims to understand the effect of media representation on the lived experience of young Muslims in the UK.

Stereotyping of Muslims can have tangible effects on the day-to-day lives of young people. Government reports like the UK’s “Counter-Extremism Strategy” have a clear focus on identifying and preventing radicalization among young people and communities, particularly Muslims (Home Office, 2015). These reports can create conditions in which young Muslims are seen as dangerous and recent research suggests that these policies, including their effects on education, can make it difficult for young Muslims to negotiate their identities (Gholami, 2017). Ahmed (2015), for example, found that young British Muslims often feel they are being asked to choose between being British or Muslim when they want to be both. Ahmed suggests that young Muslims struggle with the continuous questioning of their loyalty and integration in public domains – and that this is confusing for them at an age where identity formation is taking place (Ahmed, 2015). Davies (2009) has also argued that identity formation is complex for young Muslims in the current context, one in which talk about young Muslims has a negative effect on their ability for positive narratives to take hold, particularly when media sources have power in shaping how events are perceived.

Stigmatisation of Muslims may be heightened when terrorist attacks occur, particularly when perpetrators are seen as coming from communities in which young people themselves are members, as is the case of the 2017 attack outside the House of Parliament in London (Al Jazeera, 2017), which led to subsequent arrests in communities in London and Birmingham. The position of Muslim communities may be particularly brought into question in the tabloid press and media, with pressure on Muslims to further “integrate” (Dolan, 2016). These stories are regularly a part of media coverage of Muslim communities in the UK, which are consistently negative (Baker et al., 2013). This is particularly problematic when coverage of Muslims is linked consistently to terrorism, as Powell (2011) has shown is the case in coverage of Islam in the media post-9/11. The presentation of Muslim and British identities as somehow

in conflict is an issue that affects not only how Muslims are viewed in the UK, but also how they view themselves. Issues of state racism and long histories of prejudice and discrimination (Burnett, 2017). The necessity of a fluid understanding of “identity” particularly as it is related to language in use is well-established in within social psychology and discourse analysis (Benwell & Stokoe, 2006). “British Muslim” identities are also particularly problematic, as they are used to cover a wide range of different ethnicities and levels of religiosity. While the category young British Muslim represents a diverse community, identity discourses often take for granted that people from Muslim heritage always privilege the religious element of their identity, treating “Muslim” as a static, religious identity (Dehanas, 2013; Gholami, 2015; Panjwani, 2013). What this identity means for each individual, however, and how they are seen by their own communities and in their own context can differ despite similar experiences.

While research has focused on the “identity” of young Muslims, Discourse Analysis from a narrative perspective may offer a richer description of how young Muslims think and speak about their position in contemporary British society. Understanding the “positions” that people take in particular contexts, oriented towards the specific categories or roles, has been a key tenet of Positioning Theory (B. Davies & Harré, 1990; Harré, 2000; Harré & van Langenhove, 1998), which sees social positions as fluid and contextual. Positioning analysis (M. Bamberg, 1997, 2004) provides a useful tool for understanding the ways in which individual narratives can be understood in relation to larger, macro-narratives in society. While “narrative” has been used in a variety of different contexts and frameworks (De Fina & Georgakopoulou, 2012), Bamberg’s (1997) model for positioning analysis starts with a Labovian (William Labov & Waletzky, 1997) notion of “narrative” as both the recounting of personal experience and accomplishing “sense-making” (p.335) in interaction.

While Labov’s notion of “narrative” focused on “small stories”, and how they “...are often employed as heuristics for the inquiry into tellers’ representations of past events and how the tellers make sense of themselves in light of these past events” (Michael Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008, p. 378), Bamberg and Georgakopoulou’s later work on positioning (2008) also includes “narratives-in-interaction” and looks at the importance of these narratives in identity work (see also De Fina & Georgakopoulou, 2012). In this sense, “narratives” are not only about sense-making and representation of events, but do important relational work in interaction. Bamberg and Georgakopoulou (2008) write, “we are interested in the social actions/functions that narratives perform in the lives of people: how people actually use stories in everyday, mundane situations in order to create (and perpetuate) a sense of who they are.” (378-379). In this understanding, narrative positioning can occur in all interaction where speakers are both positioning themselves and responding to the positionings of others in a process of story-telling (Ochs & Capps, 2011). This can include contexts where “narratives”, in a classic Labovian sense, are not present. Narratives may have one single speaker as the teller, with an audience, but they may also emerge in interaction, with speakers, both in one-to-one and group conversations, where speakers construct narratives together (De Fina & Georgakopoulou, 2012).

Bamberg (1997) sees narrative positioning as useful to describe and analyse three levels of storytelling: the interaction of characters within individual stories (Level 1), the interaction of narrators and audiences (Level 2), and a story-teller's identity in relation to the larger social environment (Level 3). By examining these different levels of positioning, how and why a certain narrative is being told becomes clearer, particularly because, as Deppermann (2013) describes, narratives are "...interactively occasioned, negotiated and designed with respect to relevancies of individual and collective action" (11-12). Harré and van Langenhove's (1998) description of positions from the narratives also fit into larger structures called "storylines", describing how positions fit into larger, generic structures of certain positions can and should operate in the social world, including moral reasoning. De Fina and Georgakopoulou's (2012) have further argued that larger structures can't necessarily be "extracted" from local storytelling contexts, but rather emerge in speakers engaging in a back and forth interaction. They suggest that positions should not be treated "...independent, pre-discursive entities that exist out there ready to be taken off the shelf and to be reproduced and revealed in discursive action" (De Fina & Georgakopoulou, 2012, p. 163). Instead, within interaction, narratives occur that are both unique and individual, and part and parcel of larger storylines, similar to Bakhtin's (1981) notion of *heteroglossia*. The analyst then must take care to consider carefully all levels of positioning involved in any individual interaction to understand how and why certain storylines are emerge in certain contexts.

Positioning can also be used in negative ways, particularly in discourse about minority communities. Malignant positioning describes positioning wherein certain rights — and particularly the ability to position oneself — is deleted (Sabat, 2003). Malignant positioning is particularly important in racist narratives or stereotyping where the voice of the positioned must necessarily be excluded to maintain an incomplete or false narrative. This can be seen in reporting on terrorism and the positioning of Muslims. Baker et al. (2013), for example, show the ways in which media portrayals of Muslims can position commitment to Islam in a negative way, forcing Muslims into categories of "moderate" or "fundamentalist". This positioning does not allow for a storyline in which devout religious expression by Muslims is positioned positively. This positioning has the potential to create incongruity in the lives of young Muslims in particular, which may aspire to greater piety in their religious expression, but are forced into negative positions by dominant narratives about themselves. Close analysis of specific narratives of lived experience, as well as commentary on these experiences, is likely to provide insight into how these experiences are constructed, particularly in a discursive context where narratives are being told with peers. The analysis will include both narratives that fit a strict Labovian notion of narrative (with narrative elements, temporal ordering, and evaluation as a mechanism to guide interpretation) (W. Labov & Waletzky, 1967 cited in De Fina 2009: 235) and narratives-in-interaction among young Muslims, to investigate the ways in which media coverage impacts on how they act and position themselves in this context.

2 Methods

The data for this article is taken from interviews and focus groups with 19 Muslim university students from Birmingham and London in the UK, funded through a small grant by the

Department of Mental Health, Social Work and Integrative Medicine at Middlesex University to gather young Muslims' perspectives on their own position in British society, particularly as it related to media coverage of radicalisation. The focus group was chosen as mechanism for collecting narratives of day-to-day experience, because it allowed participants to interact with one another and contribute to and comment on what each other had said, rather answer questions in a one-to-one interview. The data was collected in five focus groups, with the focus groups being recruited from friendship groups. Although the initial goal of the research was to only hold focus groups and recruit both male and female participants, following friendship groups, we ultimately recruited mostly young women, specifically one male and 18 females.. Also, dealing with two occasions where only one participant attended, we chose to include these instances as two interviews rather than excluding them, particularly as they included similar narratives to those gathered in the focus groups.

The focus groups were conducted from March to June of 2016. The participants were from African and Asian backgrounds and mixed in focus groups, and were studying on a variety of degree courses. The research was approved through ethical procedures at both Middlesex University and Newman University, Birmingham, and participants were briefed on the focus and aims of the research as well as provided with an information sheet about the project with the freedom to withdraw at any time. The focus groups were led by the authors, and included participants that were both known by the authors in teaching capacities, and students who had not previously met them. The focus group format was chosen to create an environment wherein the participants would be able to speak together and share experiences. Researchers were chosen to lead the groups rather than the peers, given the sensitivity of the topic and following previous models of focus groups that might touch on terrorism and violence (Lynne Cameron, 2012; L. Cameron, Maslen, Maule, Stratton, & Stanley, 2009). The questions focused on encouraging participants to consider how they viewed themselves and how they felt they were viewed by others, including an ice-breaking activity in which participants considered labels which they felt they applied to themselves and those which they felt were applied to them by others. Participants were also asked about experiences of inclusion and exclusion in different social contexts, particularly the national UK context, and were encouraged to share their own experiences. Participant responses to the questions included both the sharing of their own opinions and experiences, and stories that included their own and family and friends' experiences. Each of the focus groups lasted between 40 minutes and one hour for a total of 34,887 words of transcribed talk.

While the focus groups generally followed the same structure, the moderators allowed for conversations to develop without intervention, particularly when the participant answers were leading to participants sharing related narratives. Given the limitation of the groups at one hour, different groups focused on different kinds of stories. For example, some groups spent more time talking about ethnic identity while others spent more time talking about media representations. The moderators, guiding the discussions and keeping time, worked to ensure that each participant was encouraged to speak and given the chance to complete any narratives they told. Participants were also explicitly instructed to allow others to speak and complete

their thoughts whenever others were talking. Ultimately, this led to little overlapping talk occurred in the groups and whole word transcripts were produced. All the participants were anonymised and have been given pseudonyms in this article.

We then identified occasions in which participants spoke about their own or others lived experiences, particularly as it related to their own positioning. To describe and analyse these narratives, we employed positioning analysis (M. Bamberg, 1997) for each narrative, with a focus on the ways in which the positioning related each of Bamberg's three levels, taking into account the focus group itself as an occasion for the narrative and the effects of the presence of the moderators as well as the research agenda on the narratives that the participants chose to share. Following this analysis, we grouped together narratives to present exemplar extracts below. These narratives occurred both in direct response to specific questions, as well as part of longer conversations where participants were adding on to a previous participant's response. The extracts below include, therefore, relevant information about the context of the narratives, particularly when the extract follows directly from a question by the moderator. However, given that the focus groups often included students speaking after much longer responses, including all the relevant preceding is not possible in this article. All participant names have been changed to pseudonyms.

3 Analysis

In accordance with previous research showing the effects of media portrayal of Muslims following the terrorist acts of 9/11 (Ahmed, 2015), media narratives, and particularly the use of extremists to stereotype all Muslims, were identified by participants as playing an important role in positioning Muslims in negative storylines. In response to the question, "Can you think about people who speak for Muslims in the media?" Bahira says,

I think in terms of media, like you hear like one person who is apparently like a really big person, like a big person in their community and they will say something that is completely horrible and everyone will think, "Oh, all Muslims think like that." So like one of the sheiks said something about the Queen and it was like "Oh all Muslims hate the Queen" and it's like, I love the Queen (general laughter) and they sort of have that assumption because one person has said something completely wrong and they will think "Oh those people in that community sort of agree with that person." Even though it is like wait a second ask the person what they think. But they think because we are Muslims we have the exact same sort of thinking whereas obviously we are all modern, we sort of accept things differently to how, sort of like our parents see things.

In this extract, Bahira describes the media as having power in using particular Muslims to position all Muslims in a negative storyline about Muslims, a claim which comports with previous studies showing negative news reporting about Muslims in the UK (Baker et al., 2013). The description of the hypothetical person used in news coverage as being "apparently like a really big person" suggests that the decision of who to identify as a "big person" in a community is not necessarily a recognised leader and not someone that she would recognise as having

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influence in the community. The storyline of terrorism is also presented as being told in the voice of the media, where Muslims are being positioned as “hating the Queen” and using one Muslim’s position to present the strong as a larger struggle between cultures. These storylines of conflict are often seen in discussions about terrorism (Harré, 2000) and about Muslim women (Sheikh, 2007). The story shows how negative storylines can be tied to narratives which position Muslims as being opposed to traditional British values and symbols. Bahira also positions herself to the group as being personally resistant to this storyline, stating, “I love the Queen,” and positioning herself as not falling into the implicit storyline of conflict between Muslims and the West. Importantly, the news media was equated with what “everyone will think”. Bahira’s talk suggests that she views the media as having an important impact on the views of the general public, driving how Muslims are viewed.

The effects of negative media portrayal of Muslims in the news were clearly felt on an individual level. Khatira, responding to the question “Do you feel like you are part of a community? Or at times do you feel like [you’re] outside?” explains:

We would hear stuff on the news and it is not a personal attack on you but sometimes it feels that way. Because, it is just like you said, people will generalise and if you do sympathise with what’s going on it is automatically, “Oh its ISIS, this and that.” People just like really jump from one thing to another so any mention on Syria because ISIS is like — Syria is part of the name, I can’t remember what it stands for but people would just jump to conclusions and like “Oh, IS sympathisers” and what you are really doing is defending your religion against other people who, like ISIS say they identify with Muslims but I think I can probably speak for all of us when I say, we don’t follow the same thing we are not part of it, but because it is so highly publicised and people will think that way and I think in some situations like that you do sort of get a sense of it, like you can’t be both. You can’t sympathise with innocent people getting killed without having to think of ISIS in the background.

In this response, “the news” plays an important role in how the participant experiences how a the larger community’s views of her. Khatira describes a context in which the position of all Muslims is conflated with the actions of ISIS, saying of the media, “We would hear stuff on the news and it is not a personal attack on you but sometimes it feels that way.” Although she is careful to recognise that the positioning is not of her personally, the malignant positioning of Muslims as “ISIS” or “IS sympathisers” deletes her own ability to position herself and accomplish certain actions like “defend [her] religion”. Khatira’s use of vague language, such as describing that one can’t “sympathise with what’s going on” and “sympathise with innocent people getting killed”, embodies the cautious positioning around the topic of terrorism. She states, “But I think I can probably speak for all of us when I say, we don’t follow the same thing we are not part of it” when describing ISIS, making sure to position herself repeatedly as not sympathetic to terrorism while protesting the need to do so. Even while describing and opposing the media storyline, which she identifies as “stuff on the news” about Muslims and terrorism, she is careful to speak in a way that is not seen as being directly critical of anyone.

Khatira shows the perception that news media plays an important role not only in affecting how Muslims are viewed, but what possible positions are available to them. Whether or not this description of media coverage is entirely accurate, it is felt by Muslims, placing them in a difficult position in understanding their position as British Muslims, a finding which previous studies have also shown (Abbas & Awan, 2015). The result of positioning Muslims as “ISIS sympathisers” is an inability for Khatira to hold a nuanced opinion. Because her position will be interpreted in a negative way, one that fits a storyline of young Muslims supporting terrorism, she must be cautious about what she says. The use of “you” emphasises the caution she takes in positioning herself, implying that she is expressing concern for others and their ability to act, not her own. The news media is not presented as an actor and the construction of news media reporting about Muslims as “it is not a personal attack” removes agency from the reporting. Instead, the “news” is not necessarily responsible for propagating a negative view of Muslims as “terrorist sympathisers”, but it does lead to a context in which the participants feel as though they cannot even express sympathy for the victims of injustice.

Participants also told stories of resistance to media stereotyping, seen here when the conversation turned to how participants felt pressure to represent Islam in a positive way. Faizah had previously mentioned feeling pressure to be a positive representation of Muslims and the moderator asks, “How about you Faizah in terms of ... how you were talking about explicitly having a positive representation of Islam. That sort of assumes that there is [also] a negative [media representation].” Faizah responds,

I think what shocked me was like last week when I was in a lecture and erm we were doing group work and partly for me I think it was my own fault, for not speaking to everyone in the classroom because we tend to sit on our own table where it is all, we don't consciously do it but it is just like there is Asians and then there is whites and then there is, we don't consciously do it but it just happens that is the way this classroom setting is, and the lecturer split us up and as she split us up we, I was, happened to have a white girl sit next to me and she, we were just talking and then we kind of just went off on a tangent and for me, I kind of like felt it was an easy conversation, very relaxed and she was very nice and the thing that threw me the most that came out of nowhere it was like random she said, “Do you feel oppressed?” and I was just like “whoa” (general group laughter) that was like my first reaction like, “whoa where did that come from” (general group laughter) because like we were having a conversation about the Renaissance and the English and all that and it just came out like, “do you feel oppressed?” And I was like where does the association of me being oppressed, like if I were oppressed I wouldn't be at University, if I were oppressed I wouldn't be allowed outside my house there were so many things I said to her. I actually feel more liberated and more, like you were saying you feel more liberated in terms of to wear what you want, I dress, like my attire is I wear a long dress, I wear a hijab and I feel more comfortable wearing that.

Faizah describes a classroom context in which the “Asians” and the “whites” tend to sit separately, although she is quick to clarify that the segregation is not done “consciously”. Faizah is then asked by a white student: “Do you feel oppressed?” While the white student is not positioned as an antagonist in the story, nor in a particularly negative way, the white student does force a conversation in which Faizah must respond to this positioning by asserting her own independence. The classmate’s positioning of Faizah fits into a larger storyline in which young Muslim women are seen as opposed by men and under compulsion to act and dress the way they are, a storyline that Faizah recognises. She goes on to say, that if she were oppressed “...I wouldn’t be in uni, I would be back home probably tied to a cooker and married because that is what the typical stereotype is...” Faizah’s counters this positioning and is a part of a storyline of liberation, where she acts and dresses as she wishes and is comfortable with who she is.

The group laughter also draws attention to the second and third levels of positioning. Faizah is speaking to a group of peers, but also with the presence of the moderator in the context of research. The laughter by the other participants with the speaker reduces the tension of the moment, positioning Faizah and the other participants as not taking offense at the comment, but rather dealing happily and patiently with the aggression of the “white girl”. In terms of positioning Muslims in a larger social context, the context of the narrative is one that is not sympathetic to young Muslims. Faizah’s telling of her experiences reflects a belief that society at large misunderstands the position of Muslim women in particular, and Faizah, along with her peers, must work patiently to help others understand their religious beliefs and practices.

Faizah clarifies, however, following up the pressure she feels to present a positive representation of Islam after describing the negative interaction with the white student. Faizah says that she felt as though it was her “fault” for not having spoken to the white students before. The moderator seeks clarification asking, “Ok, but why is it your fault?” and Faizah says:

But I felt like it was my fault in a sense like I didn’t, I didn’t like kind of put myself forward and for her to have this automatic assumption of me being oppressed and my initial reaction was where did you get that terminology from because you wouldn’t know that terminology if the media didn’t put it there in the first place.

Here, Faizah positions herself as responsible for needing to present herself in a positive way to other classmates and work to actively oppose a media storyline about the “oppression” of Muslim women, something she claims the white student wouldn’t know “if the media didn’t put it there in the first place”. Faizah places the responsibility of positive representation on herself and other Muslims to counteract negative media coverage of Muslims. She absolves the classmate of responsibility for what the classmate has said because the assumption is “automatic” and the “terminology”, particularly the word “oppressed”, is something that Faizah believes the classmate would not know by herself, implying that it has come from a media representation of Muslim women. Faizah does not present herself as seeing the classmate in a negative light or assuming that the classmate is intentionally making a prejudiced statement. Instead, the narrative is about the responsibility of the media and the interaction is ultimately framed in a

positive way because Faizah sees it as an opportunity to speak openly about her own beliefs and experiences and to clarify her position.

The interaction highlights the competing pressures that young Muslim women in particular feel being positioned in a negative way by society and the media (Sheikh, 2007; Yilmaz, 2009), resulting in a need to be careful about what they say, but also needing to oppose negative stereotypes and position themselves in a positive way. Faizah's narrative suggests she is aware of storylines about Muslim women as subservient and oppressed, but doesn't identify where they originate specifically. Instead, Faizah describes attempts to show kindness to strangers. Rather than position herself as angry about the stereotypes, Faizah positions herself as finding them to be in some way understandable. She does not position herself as responding in a negative or angry way. She positions herself as having an active responsibility to "integrate" with other students and accepts responsibility when she feels she has not been successful.

Terrorist events and the effect of subsequent negative media coverage also occurred regularly as a topic in the data. In one particular group in Birmingham, the participants spoke at length about the "Paris strikes", referring to the terrorist attacks in November 2015 which killed more than 130 people and was the focus of extensive media coverage. As the focus groups occurred in March and April of 2016, the news story was still recent and mention of the attacks re-occurred in the data as a flashpoint for being positioned as a potential perpetrator in a storyline of terrorism. After an extended discussion of how the participants don't feel particularly British, the moderator asks, "Do you feel in any way British? I mean is there a time you can think of when you have felt 'Ok I am British?'" Faizah says, "I think it is general every day following the law and everything we are British... people should see it like as a diverse concept but that's not [it] is it?" and Rida follows on, saying:

No, because like...when the Paris strikes happened I was working the next day at Lidl and I remember when I went to work and they were talking about what's happened like it was really bad, and like my first thoughts that were in my head was I don't know what's going to happen now like whatever happens from this moment is going to be crucial for us Muslims in Britain and in Europe and as soon as the doors open you know at 8:00 in the morning we always get loads of customers, nearly every single one of them, they just stared at you, they just gave you this look like, we are ashamed of you...

Here, the anger of others about the attacks is not something that is explicitly voiced, but something that is felt. Exclusion and negativity is perceived as a direct response to a very specific context: the attacks in Paris. Rida places a large amount of significance on the particular context saying, "Whatever happens from this moment is going to be crucial for us Muslims in Britain and in Europe." There is no explicitly stated discriminatory comment or attack, but rather an experience of exclusion that Rida feels in the "stares" of the customers. Rida positions the customers as acting in a way that is the direct result of the terrorism and further attaches a semantic value to the stares saying, in the voice of the customers, "We are ashamed of you,"

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despite no explicit interaction. For Rida, the attacks (and implicitly, the reporting of the attacks in the media) create a negative perception of her as an individual. It is a clear effect of storylines which position Muslims as members of suspect communities, something found by numerous researchers (Dinham, 2012; Panjwani et al., 2017; Pantazis & Pemberton, 2009). Rida has no connection to the terrorist attack, but feels as though she has been implicated in it.

The story highlights the importance of media storylines and how she is positioning herself in relation to them, in recounting her actions to others. Rida expects a negative reaction to her because of her understanding of the implicit storyline of terrorism wherein she is positioned as complicit with terrorists who also claim to be Muslims. The experiences and narratives of others who felt direct discrimination as the result of an event was also present in the narratives, where participants told second-hand stories of discrimination. Still following on the question if the participants could recall a specific time if they felt British, Shamara describes the story of a friend who experienced a stranger speaking to her directly after the terrorist attack in Paris in November 2015.

I think you know with the Paris attacks, I had a friend who was telling me something she experienced. She was on the bus where there were no seats and there was only one that was next to a white woman and she had put her bag on that seat and my friend went over to sit on that seat but she was standing there and she wouldn't move her bag and then she, the white woman said it was because of her this had all happened, and I think the bus driver was a Muslim and he just stopped the bus and said "Look I am a Muslim too." Even though that didn't happen directly to me I felt we are getting discriminated against and that is such an unfair thing to say. If these attacks were caused just by say Christians or someone from another religion it wouldn't matter and they wouldn't pick on that but if it was a Muslim that is the first thing they look at. I think it is just sad really that they pick that identity.

This narrative occurs on public transportation and the Muslim woman in the story is the subject of a negative comment by a "white woman" who won't move her bag off a seat and says that "it is because of her this had all happened". The highlighting of the woman as "white" also makes ethnicity relevant in the interaction and the "white woman" is positioned negatively, as the antagonist in the story, by acting in a rude and discriminatory way while the friend is simply trying to sit down. Like other places in the narratives, euphemism is used to refer to a terrorist act. The narrative develops without many details, moving instead to the main reason for the telling: that Muslims are discriminated against specifically and the same treatment of terrorism would happen if the perpetrators were Christians. Shamara says "they pick that identity" and the subsequent turns in the conversation by other participants included agreement with Shamara and suggesting that perpetrators of violent acts are categorised when they are "black [or] a Muslim or a coloured person". Shamara follows up her story by saying, "my question always is why do the media constantly pinpoint not just black coloured people but also Muslims in general like they love making a scoop out of us," showing that she sees the media as "they" in statement "but if it was a Muslim that is the first thing they look at."

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The narrative and the response by the participants again highlights the perception that there is discrimination against Muslims in society and, as Shamara says in response to the story of the woman being denied a seat on the bus, “Even though that didn’t happen directly to me I felt we are getting discriminated against.” The stories provide clear and tangible evidence for the day-to-day experiences of unspoken discrimination, the “stares” that Rida describes experiencing and the avoidance of other travellers on the bus that Jamila perceives. This discrimination, in the cases we have looked at in the article, is not presented as the result of racism of individuals within the stories, but rather as the result of coverage of Muslims in the media, which highlight Muslim identity when reporting on terrorism while downplaying the religious and ethnic identities of white criminals. Shamara refers to this in discussing a shooting at a black church in the USA committed by a white man. For the participants, the negative coverage of Muslims and other minorities in the media is clear and feeds discriminatory practices in their day-to-day experiences, but importantly, the participants were not reticent to assign blame for the discrimination to the perpetrators.

This often implicit blaming of the media downplays the role of individual personal responsibility within narratives about racist or Islamophobic because the media can be blamed for negativity rather than the individuals whom one experiences every day. Nowhere in the data was any individual directly named as a bigot or someone who hated Muslims. Similarly, nowhere in the data was any specific media story or tabloid headline discussed. Instead, the media was positioned as a consistently negative source of information about Muslims, that influenced bad behaviour, without the perpetrators of the bad behaviour being held to account.

4 Conclusion

This analysis has made several observations about the relationship of media and context to the discourse of young British Muslims and highlighted the identity work that is done in narrative story-telling. First, among the participants in the study, the media was seen as a driving force behind negative stereotypes about Muslims, and that there was pressure on them as Muslims to present themselves in non-threatening and welcoming ways to others. Second, the participants felt discrimination and exclusion in various contexts, but that discrimination was often difficult to identify and quantify. Third, when discrimination was overt, it could be difficult to respond to in a meaningful way. The analysis shows the difficult positioning of young Muslims in the UK, one in which they feel they are the subject of discrimination and suspicion, but often in ways that not explicitly stated. At the same time, the participants in the study did not place responsibility for this exclusion on the people enacting the discrimination. Rather, they were quick to blame the media instead for the perception of Muslims as dangerous.

The context of the focus group as a mechanism for collecting narratives of day-to-day experiences should be considered, particularly as it relates to the second level of positioning, the narrator and the hearers, the conversations were oriented to the questions of the moderators. While the participants did speak among themselves, the presence of moderators and the explicit focus on British identity and assimilation likely did have an impact on how participants presented themselves. Where young Muslims are the object of study, there is likely to be

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particular pressures to position themselves in ways that are not perceived as “sympathetic” to terrorists, a point made above, but which also relates to the research setting. This might lead to stories that are not seen as being “sympathetic” to explicitly reject extreme belief extremism, a point that the participants themselves explicitly made. The research setting highlights the ways in which Muslims as story-tellers must take care to present themselves in ways that can’t be heard as “extreme” or “radical” in any way. The context doesn’t invalidate the findings, but does highlight shows the need to take the context of the research and the position of the moderators into account.

The context of the focus group as a mechanism for collecting narratives of day-to-day should be considered, particularly as it relates to the second level of positioning, the narrator and the hearers, the conversations were oriented to the questions of the moderators. While the participants did speak among themselves, the presence of moderators and the explicit focus on British identity and assimilation likely did have an impact on how participants presented themselves. Where young Muslims are the object of study, there is likely to be particular pressures to position themselves in ways that are not perceived as “sympathetic” to terrorists, a point made above, but which also relates to the research setting. This might lead to stories that explicitly reject extremism, a point that the participants themselves explicitly made. The research setting highlights the ways in which Muslims as story-tellers must take care to present themselves in ways that can’t be heard as “radical” in any way. The context doesn’t invalidate the findings, but shows the need to take the context of the research and the position of the moderators into account.

The negative effects of negative media stories about Muslims are generally recognised within academic research about young Muslims. This article has highlighted the specific ways in which young Muslims, particularly women, respond to and feel silenced by narratives about themselves. The analysis of positioning in stories shows how individual experiences are related both implicitly and explicitly to larger narratives about Muslims in the UK. Media storylines were strongly felt by the participants in the study and how they were positioned in these larger narratives played a role in how they understood their day-to-day interaction with others, particularly when they were the object of discrimination or heard stories of discrimination of others. While these stories of discrimination were felt in negative ways, the participants were quick to attempt to understand why others held the opinions that they did and offer reasoning for why particular positions should not be taken seriously in terms of what other individuals truly believed.

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