SOCIAL DISTANCE OF SCHOOL-AGE NON- MUSLIM- AUSTRALIANS TOWARDS MUSLIMS AND ISLAM

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Abstract

This article examines social distance of non-Muslim Australian secondary school students towards Islam and Muslims. We find support for the contact hypothesis, such that having a friend who is Muslim is significantly associated with reduced prejudice towards Muslims. Other factors that are important predictors of increased prejudice towards Muslims are students' general social distance to others, students' perceptions of parental social distance to Muslims, gender, perception of school environment, metropolitan schools and particular states, and higher school year levels. We suggest that future research may also examine the sorts of attitudes and beliefs that students hold and in this way try to understand psychology behind prejudicial beliefs towards Muslims and Islam.

Introduction

In Australia, the Muslim community, though still small, is one of the fastest growing religious communities but so far is little studied by researchers. A sharper interest in the media and government press releases into stereotyping of Muslim communities has come into focus after the Gulf War in 1991, and especially since the World Trade Centre bombing in New York in September 2001 and bombings in Bali. The media image of the Muslim communities as a threat to the mainstream civic Australian life may have worked its way to a certain degree into the consciousness of Muslim and non-Muslim Australians alike. The Cronulla Riots of 2005 are an ugly reminder of tensions that exist in Australia. A fundamental question is raised as whether there is some form of prejudice by mainstream non-Muslim Australians towards Muslims and Islam, and if so, what might be driving such attitudes.

In the field of social psychology, Allport (1954) suggested the common sense approach that contact between members of different groups will in fact reduce prejudice between such groups. Yet, Allport indicated that contact must be made between different groups where both groups have equal status, such as in environments where people cooperate to achieve common goals. As such, mere contact alone may not be enough to reduce prejudice, and in some cases contact may indeed increase prejudice. So the *contact hypothesis* asserts that interaction with other groups can assist in correcting false assumptions and prejudices towards minority groups. According to the hypothesis, the more experiences a person shares with members of other groups, the more positive attitudes are formed towards them, leading to a greater sense of connection with other groups. Related to the contact hypothesis is the notion of *social distance*. First introduced by Bogardus (1925), *social distance* measures attitudes towards others of different social or ethnic groups, looking specifically at the way individuals stereotype members of other minority groups. A measure of social distance is therefore seen as something like a behavioural intention (or conditional behavioural intention) of discrimination and prejudice. Therefore the contact hypothesis, as a social mechanism for prejudice reduction, and social distance, as a measure prejudice towards a minority group, are related concepts when thinking about intergroup relations.

A meta-analytic study by Pettigrew and Tropp (2006) of the contact hypothesis is instructive. Their analysis of 713 independent samples from over 500 studies demonstrates that intergroup contact typically reduces prejudice. While this may hold, nonetheless Bogardus (1925) demonstrated that mainstream Americans had varying social distances to different minority ethno-cultural groups, suggesting that prejudice is not binary but varies by degree. A study by Kleg and Yamamoto (1998) suggests that in the US in 1993 such differentiation still held. In their study, one of the groups which Americans have the greatest social distance is people from the Middle East, along with 'Orientals' and African-Americans. In Australia, findings by Ray (1983) suggest that a relationship between attitudes towards others and contact with them is far from consistent, and depends considerably on the minority group in question. The variety of findings presented here suggests that the importance of context cannot be underplayed. As such, in investigating the attitudes of non-Muslim Australians towards Muslims, it is not just that the specific circumstances and local interpretations of Muslims and Islam by mainstream Australia that need to be taken into account. Further, there is a broader and global set of perceptions of Muslims and Islam that may make attitudes towards Muslims quite different from generalized conceptions of other minority groups. Therefore, it is important to tease out if there is a specific difference between the way non-Muslim Australians view Muslims and any generalized prejudice towards other minority groups.

In this study we are concerned with understanding what may drive negative attitudes and behaviours of non-Muslim Australians towards Muslims and Islam. We measure the attitudes of non-Muslim school age Australians towards Muslims. Specifically, we explore the link between a variety of individual-level and school attributes to social distance towards Muslims.

Methods

Participants

The participants are 1000 students at 20 secondary schools around Australia (excluding the Northern Territory and Western Australia[1]) who were administered a full-length survey[2] examining general attitudes towards Muslims and Islam. Participating students were from Years 10-12. Secondary schools of Muslim or Jewish affiliation were not approached for this survey, nor were Muslim or Jewish students. It is anticipated that differences will exist with these groups towards Muslims and Islam, and it is intended to survey these groups in subsequent surveys. But primarily, the responses of Muslim and Jewish students were likely to be unrepresentative of most Australians. The particular characteristics of our sample are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Participant characteristics by gender (N=1000)

	Female (n=655)	Male (n=340)	TOTAL
Language			
English only	518	289	807
Other/English & Other	136	50	186
TOTAL			
Religion			
Christian	490	259	749
Non-religious	152	74	226
Personal social distance to other race	2.10 (0.9)	2.48 (1.0)**	2.23 (0.9)
Perceived parental social distance to other race	2.19 (1.0)	2.34 (0.9)**	2.25 (0.9)
Personal social distance to Muslims	2.86 (1.0)	3.20 (1.0)**	2.98 (0.9)
Perceived parental social distance to Muslims	2.82 (1.0)	2.94 (1.0)	2.86 (1.0)
Do you have Muslim friends?			
Yes	171	45	216
No	482	293	775
Do you have Muslim neighbours?			
Yes	43	11	54
No	612	329	941
Knowledge of Islam	2.88 (2.4)	3.34 (2.5)**	3.03 (2.4)
Attitude of school education about Muslims	3.51 (1.0)	3.49 (1.0)	3.51 (1.0)
Location			
Metropolitan	256	46	302
Non-metropolitan	399	294	693

[1] These locations were excluded as it would have been costly to survey them for logistical reasons; and in any case it was thought they would not contribute to survey accuracy as there was no reason to suppose their responses would differ from those in other states.

[2] A Pilot Study was conducted at 9 schools with 552 students, and a Short Form survey was conducted at 13 schools with 682 students.

School Type			
Private	569	311	880
State	86	29	115
School Type			
Coeducational	385	320	705
Girls only	270	0	270
Boys only	0	20	20
Year Level			
10	21	11	33
11	329	219	548
12	295	107	402
State			
NSW/ACT	292	181	473
VIC	119	82	201
QLD	31	0	31
SA	90	18	108
TAS	123	59	182

*$p<.05$ for gender comparison, **$p<.01$ for gender comparison

Measures

The overall research instrument was a structured questionnaire comprising 90 variables, though not all questions are relevant to this analysis. The key issue in this research is social distance. Items for social distance are designed to follow the Guttman scale form. That is, statements are ordered such that if you agree with, for instance, statement 3 that you would also agree with statements 1 and 2. For instance, asking three questions regarding if you are over (1) 140cm tall, (2) 150cm, and (3) 160cm, agreeing to the third question necessarily means agreeing to the previous two. The items for the social distance measure for this research were designed in this way, and consisted of a 3-item scale. Further, we measured social distance in four ways: personal attitudes towards another race, personal attitudes towards Muslims, perceived parental attitudes towards another race, and perceived parental attitudes towards Muslims (for exact questions, see Appendix 1). It is very useful to create a general measure of social distance because this permits us to control for a tendency of people to be distant from other people. Controlling for this effect we can examine what specifically prompts social distance to Muslims in Australia. The importance of the perceptions of the beliefs of others to behaviour is shown by Lusher and Robins (2007) who demonstrate that social behaviours can be motivated by beliefs about social norms, not just personal beliefs. This justifies our use of parental perceptions of other groups. Social distance scores are calculated by averaging across the three items of these four measures to produce a continuous measure score for each of the four measures.

We include a number of other important measures. As an indicator of ethno-cultural background we use English usage at home, dichotomizing along the lines of students who only speak English at home to those who speak English and another language, or another language only. There are many possible ways to measure ethno-cultural background but we feel this one is a good indicator of engagement in mainstream Australia. Religion is examined as a binary variable, comparing Christian with non-religious students. Other binary variables include whether students had Muslim friends or Muslims neighbours, whether they belonged to private or state schools, and whether the school was in a metropolitan or non-metropolitan area. We controlled for state level effects by using dummy binary variables. Additionally, we controlled for whether schools were co-educational or single sex, incorporating dummy binary variables for boys only and girls only schools (the default being co-educational schools).

Some continuous measure variables are also included. Knowledge of Islam was calculated by

compiling a score of correct responses to 10 items. Further, a 2-item scale measuring how well the students thought that their school had provided information on Muslims was included.

Procedure

In each selected school, the survey was administered to all eligible students present on the day of the survey. Schools were requested to survey year-11 students, these being considered mature enough to give informed answers, yet unencumbered by year-12 exams. Even so, many schools chose to administer the survey to Years 12 and 10. This was an unplanned bonus, as it allowed us to test the impact of another demographic variable. Schools were selected by first seeking permission from the following school agencies in the relevant states and territory: state government departments dealing with education, Catholic Education Offices, and Independent School Councils.

Results

It is first important to examine the social distance measures. Analyses indicate that the three items, for which a mean social distance score was calculated, that comprised each of the four measures demonstrated significant reliability: personal attitudes towards another race ($\alpha = .87$), personal attitudes towards Muslims ($\alpha = .88$), perceived parental attitudes towards another race ($\alpha = .87$), and perceived parental attitudes towards Muslims ($\alpha = .92$). We did find general support for the construction of the social distance measure as a Guttman type scale. For social distance to other race, responses demonstrated that answers to question 1 (i.e. being friends with), 98% responded for question 2 (i.e. go out with) and for question 3 (i.e. marry) in a manner consistent with a Guttman scale. For social distance to Muslims, the percentage was 98% who responded in a manner typical of a Guttman scale. This suggests that the responses to the scale may have some element of error or that there is some particularities regarding the items that cause people not respond in an unanticipated manner. However, this was certainly less of an issue for attitudes towards Muslims, and by and large our results are consistent with other social distance scales. In a final check, we computed a measure of how well students thought that their school had provided information about Muslims and Islam, and the reliability coefficient was also very good for these two items ($\alpha = .82$).

Having examined the reliability of some of our measures, analyses on predictors of social distance were conducted. Linear regression analysis is utilised because it permits us to examine the possibility of competing explanations for social distance, and to test such explanations empirically against one another. If a variable included in the analysis is statistically significant, we can infer that it has independent predictive value of social distance, even given, or controlling for, the other effects in the model. Results for a linear regression analysis of non-Muslim Australians' social distance towards Muslims with regard to our variables of interest are presented in Table 2. The naming of binary variables is after what a score of one represents, and names in parentheses indicating a score of zero for that variables. Otherwise, variables are continuous.

Table 2: Regression model coefficients for 'social distance to Muslims' (dependent variable)

Model	Dependent variable: *'social distance to Muslims'*	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta	B	Std. Error
1	(Constant)	-.138	.201		-.686	.493
	Gender	.120	.046	.058	2.612	.009
	Years Level	.083	.038	.046	2.211	.027
	English only (other)	.083	.052	.034	1.614	.107
	Christian (non-religious)	.086	.047	.037	1.840	.066
	Personal social distance to 'other race'	.316	.025	.297	12.708	.000
	Perceived parental social distance to Muslims	.560	.022	.581	25.347	.000
	Muslim friends (no MF)	-.172	.050	-.073	-3.457	.001
	Muslim neighbours (no MN)	-.016	.083	-.004	-.193	.847
	Knowledge of Islam	-.005	.008	-.013	-.615	.539
	School education about Muslims	.050	.020	.050	2.504	.012
	Metropolitan (non-metro)	.163	.075	.077	2.167	.030
	Private (state) school	.179	.095	.057	1.889	.059
	Boys only school	.272	.144	.038	1.887	.059
	Girls only school	-.090	.067	-.041	-1.343	.180
	NSW School	.162	.075	.083	2.167	.031
	VIC School	.087	.095	.036	.921	.357
	QLD School	.206	.121	.037	1.700	.089
	TAS School	.169	.109	.065	1.547	.122

The results from the analyses in Table 2 suggest the following. We remind the reader that a high social distance score indicates greater social distance to, and thus prejudice against, Muslims. Firstly, gender is significant predictor of social distance such that males are more likely to be socially distant from Muslims. In addition, students in higher year levels are significantly more likely to be socially distant from Muslims. Neither having a mainstream English-speaking Australian background nor a Christian (as opposed to non-religious) background is significantly predictive of social distance. Not surprisingly, social distance to another race is significantly predictive of social distance to Muslims, but more so perceived parental social distance to Muslims is strongly predictive of students' personal social distance to Muslims. Perhaps most importantly regarding the notion of the contact hypothesis, having a Muslim friend was significantly predictive of having less social distance to Muslims. However, having a Muslim neighbour had no such association with social distance. Interestingly, students' knowledge of Islam was not associated with social distance, but students' perceptions of how well their school was educative of Muslims and Islam was significantly predictive of social distance.

The remaining variables were higher level variables that measured characteristics of the school. Students from metropolitan schools were significantly more likely to be socially distant from Muslims than non-metropolitan based school students. There is a tendency towards significance for private schools (p = .059) and boys-only schools (p = .059) to be more socially distant to Muslims. Finally, comparing across states in Australia, students from NSW were significantly more likely to be socially distant from Muslim students than all other states.

The above regression analyses pinpoint some of the underlying individual factors that are implicated in affecting social distance between non-Muslim Australian school students and Muslims and Islam. We made some further paired-sample *t*-test comparisons and found that there was a significant difference between the desired social distance from Muslims and that from persons of 'another race'. In respect of social distance from Muslims, surprisingly students had significantly greater social distance from Muslims than they perceived their parents did ($t(985) = 5.272$, $p<001$).

Discussion & Conclusions

Importantly, in our analyses we have controlled for a generalized tendency to be socially distant to others of different backgrounds to ourselves. Having controlled for this, the other variables in the linear regression model predict what is specific to social distance, and thus prejudice, to Muslims. A criticism can be made that by comparing 'other race' with Muslims we are not comparing like with like. Muslims and Islam constitute a religious group, not a race. However, in the context of mainstream Anglo-Australia, it is reasonable to suggest that most, though certainly not all, Muslims are from an ethno-cultural background distinct from the mainstream.

The results of our study of non-Muslim secondary school students towards Muslims indicates first and foremost that having Muslim friends is significantly related to less social distance, and thus less prejudice towards Muslims. We cannot say that contact with Muslims reduces prejudice – merely that it is associated with reduced prejudice. It may be that people with reduced prejudice seek out Muslim friends. This issue would need to be disentangled with longitudinal analyses if we are to discover causality, though we suggest that the two may work in tandem. This supports a basic notion of the contact hypothesis which suggests that having some contact with others decreases prejudice. Interestingly, having a Muslim neighbour is not associated with less or more social distance. This would indicate that it may not just be a matter of a general exposure to others, but that it is engagement with them on a personal level that is important. In this respect, Allport's notion of equal status seems to be supported here because we would anticipate a reasonably equal relationship between friends, as opposed to neighbours.

Perceived parental attitudes are a strong predictor of students' own attitudes, indicating that family interactions have a strong impact on prejudice. A very surprising finding is that students perceived their parents to be less socially distant to Muslims than themselves, especially given that older generations are usually perceived to be socially more conservative than the younger generation. For instance, Lusher (2006) found that university students had significantly less conservative attitudes towards gender than they perceived their parents had, yet our results here contradict this for students and perceived parental social distance attitudes towards Muslims. More generally, Lusher and Robins (2007) have found differences between personal attitudes and the perceived beliefs of others around them regarding masculinity in both schools and Australian Football League (AFL) players. In both contexts, Lusher and Robins (2007) found that individuals perceived others to have significantly more conservative attitudes than themselves. What this means regarding the students of this study is not clear. Does it reflect a notion that students are less tolerant than their parents and a potential for growing prejudice towards Muslims? The implications of this result require further deliberation.

Regarding gender, boys are more likely to be socially distant from Muslims than girls. Further, the trend for social distance of boys-only schools indicates a further potential gender effect. Theorizing by

Connell (1987; 1995; 2000) and support by others (Frosh, Phoenix, & Pattman, 2001; Lusher, 2006; Mac an Ghaill, 1994; Messner, 1996) suggests that masculinities can be racialized, with a white masculinity valued more in Western cultures than other masculinities.

The degree to which students feel that their school is educative about Muslims and Islam is an important predictor of social distance. Importantly, for social distance specific to Muslims, actual knowledge of Islam turns out not to predict prejudice. This suggests that it is the atmosphere created by the school that is supportive and educative of Muslims and Islam, rather than the level of knowledge that is important regarding prejudice. Therefore, it is not just a matter of knowing more facts about Muslims and Islam but perceiving that the school cares enough to educate students on these issues that is important. There was also further social distance for students of older year levels, indicating that prejudice may increase with age. However, this is a complex result given that students perceived their parents to be less socially distant to Muslims.

Some further findings indicate that students from metropolitan areas desire more social distance than non-metropolitan students. Further, students from NSW are more socially distant to Muslims than students from other states. Taken together, these results suggest that non-Muslim students from Sydney may be more socially distant to Muslims than other students, given the all of the other effects in the model, such as gender and contact. Also, private schools have a tendency to desire more social distance from Muslims than did those at state schools, again, given the other effects in the model. This may be explainable as a function of school dynamics or more generally interpreted as a socio-economic status distinction for it is well documented that ethno-cultural background and socio-economic status are difficult to disentangle.

Finally, there are a number of other psychological factors that were measured in the survey that are not examined here with regard to social distance. The notion of schools being educative about Muslims does tap into such questions, and they appear important regarding prejudice attitudes. Future research may look at these specific questions in more detail regarding Muslims in Australia (e.g. *A person can be both a good Muslim and a loyal Australian*). We suggest that structural equation modelling (Jöreskog & Lawley, 1968) may be useful in determining the structure of these psychological components and how they may be related to prejudice.

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APPENDIX 1

		Strongly agree	**Agree**	**Neutral**	**Disagree**	**Strongly disagree**
1	I would enjoy having a close friend of another race.	1	2	3	4	5
2	I would go out with someone of another race.	1	2	3	4	5
3	I would marry someone of another race.	1	2	3	4	5
4	My parents would be happy if I had a close friend of another race.	1	2	3	4	5
5	My parents would be happy if I went out with someone of another race.	1	2	3	4	5
6	My parents would be happy if I married someone of another race.	1	2	3	4	5
7	I would enjoy having a close Muslim friend.	1	2	3	4	5
8	I would go out with a Muslim.	1	2	3	4	5
9	I would marry a Muslim.	1	2	3	4	5
10	My parents would be happy if I had a close Muslim friend.	1	2	3	4	5
11	My parents would be happy if I went out with a Muslim.	1	2	3	4	5
12	My parents would be happy if I married a Muslim.	1	2	3	4	5

APPENDIX 2

		Strongly agree	**Agree**	**Neutral**	**Disagree**	**Strongly disagree**
1	I have learnt a lot about Muslims at this school.	1	2	3	4	5
2	Since being at this school I understand Muslims better.	1	2	3	4	5